



FROM GUNS FOR HIRE TO
MILITARY DOCTRINE:

**RUSSIA'S INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF
INFLUENCE IN AFRICA—IMPLICATIONS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES**

On the cover: Russia's expanding irregular warfare model is reshaping the security landscape across Africa, leveraging proxies like the Africa Corps to exploit regional instability. As Western forces withdraw, U.S. Africa Command and Special Operations Forces remain vital in countering hostile influence and securing critical domains. Understanding Moscow's evolving hybrid tactics is now essential for maintaining regional stability and strategic access. (AI-generated Adobe Stock image by leestat, accessed November 10, 2025)

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U.S. Special Operations Forces**

NADINA RONG



JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY

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About the Author

NADINA RONC is an independent geopolitical analyst and author specializing in Russian foreign policy, hybrid warfare, and influence operations. Her work examines how the Kremlin integrates military posture, economic leverage, and non-kinetic tools to shape regional security environments.



She was awarded a research grant by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College to conduct a comprehensive threat assessment of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans, analyzing the implications for U.S. land power and the European Union's strategic posture. Her research contributes to policy-relevant understanding of irregular warfare, influence campaigns, and the vulnerabilities of post-conflict societies.

Her analysis has appeared in international media and academic publications, and she has contributed expert commentary on Russia, Ukraine, and post-conflict security dynamics.

Her work bridges lived experience and strategic analysis, with a focus on evidence-based policy insight.

Introduction

Since 2017, Russia's method of irregular warfare (IW) and its operations in Africa have changed the security landscape. By sending proxies, like Wagner and its successor, the Africa Corps, Moscow has combined military support, economic exploitation, and political influence to gain a foothold in the Sahel, North Africa, and beyond.¹ This reflects a deliberate approach designed to exploit security gaps, counter Western influence, and secure critical resources.

For U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM), which provides the overarching strategic direction for U.S. forces in the region, Russia's expanding role represents a significant threat to regional stability. Coups are occurring rapidly, and Western forces are pulling back, which is changing the nature of interactions between African juntas and Russian forces amid a shifting threat environment.² Whereas U.S., French, and the United Nations personnel once held adviser, trainer, and security contractor roles, assistance on the ground had to be adapted accordingly, while the local force was hardened and local access to strategic infrastructure modified. Within this environment, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) play a pivotal role in operational planning and execution. SOF components, including U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Naval Special Warfare Command, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Marine Special Operations Command, are tasked with complex missions: intelligence collection, partner force engagement, countering hostile influence, and security access to key domains. Understanding Russia's changing hybrid model is crucial for operational-level SOF and planning that supports AFRICOM's strategic goals.

The regions of Africa in which Russia is currently having the largest degree of influence are Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya, Sudan, and Niger. The Moscow hybrid model combines part kinetic support (like in Ukraine and Syria), part regime protection

(as in Belarus), and part resource deals (as with Kyrgyzstan), shaping outcomes for African partners and U.S. access.

The challenges encountered by special operators draw attention to how intelligence collection, partner force engagement, activities to counter hostile influence, and securing entry to priority operational domains are driven by a range of technology and system-level trends within and outside the U.S.

A thorough understanding of the operational logic associated with the Russian irregular model of power projection in Africa provides SOF operators, planners, and policymakers with practical findings tailored to SOF communities. A clear understanding of Russian operational methods in Africa enables key decision-makers to anticipate and prepare for the cycle of adaptation by Moscow, to



U.S. Air Force Gen. Dagvin Anderson, commander, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), meets with President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, president of Somaliland, in Hargeisa, Somaliland, Nov. 26, 2025. Anderson, along with AFRICOM senior leaders, conducted a high-level meeting with Somaliland government and military leadership to discuss AFRICOM's focus on building partner capacity amongst regional threats. (U.S. Army photo by Cpt. Ubon Mendie)

identify priority engagements that will support resilient partners, and to develop strategies for maintaining U.S. equities in contested African environments. The information gained from understanding Russian irregular operations in Africa will assist all interagency representatives in developing unified and synchronized guidance as well as risk mitigation plans for effective competition management across Africa's most contested spaces.

SOVIET DECOLONIZATION POLICY AND ITS IMPACT ON RUSSIA'S POST-COLD WAR DIPLOMACY IN AFRICA

The Soviet Union's involvement with Africa during decolonization shaped both political and diplomatic developments on the continent, which influenced their future diplomatic strategies. In the decades after World War II, Soviet policy toward Africa was motivated by two

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principal motives: a profound ideological commitment to anti-colonialism and socialist solidarity, and a strategic imperative to challenge Western, particularly American and French, influence in the developing world.³

The Soviet Union assisted African liberation movements and newly independent African states with resources, arms, military training, and diplomatic support, then as did (and on a smaller scale, does) the U.S. and France. Beyond rhetoric, Soviet influence on the development of elite Africans and their ability to defend and govern themselves stems from their education through Soviet university systems, military training through Soviet advisers, and financial support for self-determination by way of Soviet resources.⁴

This tradition of solidarity with African self-determination became important in Soviet-African relations, creating networks, stories, and institutional memories that went far beyond the collapse of the Union

of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).⁵ The Soviet Union's willingness to support anti-colonial movements and to be seen as a comrade in the struggle against imperialism earned considerable goodwill in the eyes of African leaders and peoples, especially in Francophone Africa, where bitterness and resentment toward former colonial powers still ran high.⁶

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia significantly reduced its interactions with Africa as it looked inward to solve internal problems and recast its foreign policy priorities. Yet as Russia resumed its function as an international player in the early 21st century, it discovered that the memory of Soviet decolonization remained alive and kicking in Africa.⁷

One of the most striking continuities connecting Soviet with post-Soviet policies has been Russia's "memory diplomacy." Emulating the USSR's backing for African decolonization has become a frequent feature of Russian official speeches and diplomatic contact in which Russia casts itself as a "special partner" that recognizes and respects African independence.⁸ This rhetorical approach is more than backward looking; it is a considered attempt to differentiate

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Russia from Western states whose interventions in Africa are frequently decried as neocolonial or paternalistic. By appealing to this historical legacy, Russia is attempting to win trust and recognition, particularly in areas where distrust of the West is particularly high.⁹

Another key element of this legacy is the priority given by Russia to the principle of non-intervention.¹⁰ Tapping into the Soviet legacy of propping up national sovereignty, Russia casts itself as a pragmatic, dependable

partner providing security cooperation, weapons sales, and diplomatic support without strings attached that frequently accompany Western offers of assistance. This approach plays well with African leaders reluctant to be pressured into political reforms or better human rights records by the international community and allows Moscow to build bonds with all manner of regimes.

Russia's post-Cold War security and military cooperation policies are also based on Soviet behavior. The provision of integrated campaign and enabling support remains a crucial aspect of the Russian operating model, supported by the use of private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group. Whereas the Soviet Union sought to constrain its support to state-to-state relationships, the Russian activity of today is more adaptive and more in keeping with the complex and ambiguous realities of contemporary Africa.¹¹

The Soviet vision for a multipolar international system, and the part African states played in resisting Western hegemony within it, registers in Russian diplomacy today. Moscow is also eager to win the backing of Africa in multilateral organizations, including the UN, as it seeks political legitimacy worldwide. This is backed up by high-level summits, bilateral agreements, and participation in new organizations such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) that offer an alternative to predominantly Western-led institutions.

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RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC SWIVEL: FROM WAGNER TO THE AFRICA CORPS

By the 2010s and early 2020s, the Wagner Group was a leading figure in Moscow's playbook. It was an offhand, inexpensive way of

extending leverage with corrupt African regimes like Libya, CAR, and Sudan, where Wagner provided elite protection forces and counterinsurgency patrols for mining rights and political influence.

Since the 1980s, as peace and development moved to the center stage, humanitarian organizations have been drawn into the maelstrom of wars, political movements, and peace agreements. But Wagner's own deficiencies in in-house management were kept at bay. Intent on protecting the organization and its senior leadership led to such abuse without effective supervision of staff by executives, or of units who command them. War crimes, human rights violations,¹² and Prigozhin's 2023 abortive rebellion against Russian military leadership were reminders of an unwanted re-projecting of subordination state tactics to warlords the world over.

Its uprising by the Wagner Group humiliated Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹³ To counter this threat, the national defense ministry cut away Wagner's independent chain of command and fused it instead into a new formation: the Africa Corps. This was an official acknowledgment that the fight would no longer be one of shadow, but that the Russian state would go official on "state building."

The organization and leadership of Russia's Africa Corps focus on strategic military and political prospects synchronized with larger Kremlin and *Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noe Upravlenie* (GRU) interests, while incorporated directly within the chain-of-command of the Russian Ministry of Défense, comprising a formal, state-recognized Russian military presence in Africa. The Corps is jointly run by Deputy Défense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and General Andrei Averyanov, a high-ranking GRU officer who is a key figure behind the creation and leadership of the Africa Corps, which was created in late 2023.¹⁴ Yevkurov's main responsibility is strategic and diplomatic: to keep the agenda of the Africa Corps in line with Kremlin interests, oversee top political and military dealings with African governments, and ensure that Russia maintains a long-term foothold on the continent. Yevkurov went so far as to personally visit Wagner outposts during the transfer of control from Wagner to the Ministry of Défense to tell fighters and

local partners that the Russian state would now directly run things. His job is also to discuss basing rights, military aid, and weapons sales, all of which are intended to help Moscow's formalize Russia's presence across vital African nations within the Sahel region and further afield. This political-military guidance serves to reinforce Russia's aims in the region: to increase its geo-political leverage, reduce Western footprint, and ensure access to critical resources.¹⁵

On the operations side, Averyanov, a specialist in the GRU's special operations and clandestine sabotage divisions, commands the tactical implementation of the Africa Corps' mission.¹⁶ He leads the so-called high-readiness units, responsible for carrying out paramilitary operations, training local forces, and protecting important facilities on the ground. His leadership highlights military and covert capabilities to

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ensure Russia is always known to have a capable tactical presence. The operational control exercised by Averyanov complies with the GRU's established practice of combining special operations and intelligence-heavy military intercession to maintain Russia's broader, all-encompassing hybrid warfare globally. The architecture removes the semi-autonomous power that defined the Corps' predecessor, replacing it with a command that guarantees tighter Kremlin control and accountability. This transition serves to make the Corps' activities equally attributable to the Russian state, increase Moscow's diplomatic

bargaining power, and transform military/paramilitary operations into an instrument of official foreign policy. This new model of organization also enables an ability to move better, produce everywhere, and,

over time, sustain operations both through logistics (better supply lines) and infrastructure development (from airlift capabilities to base construction across Africa). It is a mix of a political-exercising body and military force with the purpose of ensuring Russia's presence and power projection throughout Africa as part of a strategical game played by both sides against Western interests. The Russia model in Africa is now very much state driven as opposed to private mercenary engagements, indicating Moscow's intent to have a permanent and recognized military presence on the continent.¹⁷

Yevkurov's regular visits to Mali, CAR, and Libya continue to make their mark, invoking permanence and stacking up more new achievements. Some Wagner soldiers still serve with the Africa Corps, mostly because of their specific knowledge of desert battlefields and irreplaceable government contacts. At the same time, under these command structures, Wagner owes its existence not only to the Africa Corps but is able also to draw on recognized diplomatic cover for protection abroad. This allows Moscow to play the role of a security partner without carrying the reputation risk that came with Wagner's rebel mercenaries.

Officially, Wagner's institutions and people have been integrated into the same mission, but in practice, the "transition" is often more symbolic than real. Yet some Wagner companies are also part of the Africa Corps. It is an extra layer of complexity in the calculus for calling something a state actor and therefore stretching liability.¹⁸

When Western powers withdrew from Africa, it left a vacuum for Russia to fill. The U.S. and France, which have long maintained dominant military roles in places like the Sahel, have reduced their military operations under domestic political pressure and strategic weariness.¹⁹ Meanwhile, coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have added to the confusion of Western engagement, opening the way for new entrants.

Moscow has used this opportunity to present itself as a true partner, one that advocates for neither democracy nor human rights violations. But what the military juntas, weak states, and regimes

get from the Soviet Union is that the partnership comes with much fewer strings attached. The Africa Corps provides governments not only with military hardware but also with security services, effectively establishing a sphere of influence that is difficult to resist.

However, disciplined organization and relatively high per capita income of student officers would seem to ensure that training benefits the state rather than shadow forces—yet Africa Corps keeps falling short in terms of security outcomes or worse.

Another aspect of this institutionalization is the role Russian military academies play in training African officers.²⁰ Usually based in Russia, these courses have a dual purpose: to improve the professional standards of Russia's partners' armies and to bring about ideological



To effectively counter the Russian Africa Corps, U.S. Special Operations Forces must transition from traditional counterterrorism to a proactive, networked framework. By embedding early in contested spaces and leveraging tactical influence, SOF can move beyond reactive support to actively shape the environment. This shift toward multidomain operations is essential for out-maneuvering hybrid threats in vulnerable regions. (AI-generated image generated by Perplexity AI, October 25, 2025)

convergence. Personal ties forged through these efforts bring loyalty and a geostrategic allegiance over the long haul, which in turn cements the individuals and groups involved more firmly within Russia's orbit.

BEYOND WAGNER: THE INSTITUTIONAL EXPANSION OF RUSSIAN IRREGULAR FORCES

While the Wagner Group became the most visible face of Russian IW abroad, it never existed as the sole instrument of Kremlin authority. Moscow has deliberately diversified its private military and security infrastructure in a way that would enable support for global operations under conditions of potential deniability. With these forces, the Kremlin wages hybrid campaigns unattributed at a formal state level, therefore seeding and stewarding contests in the areas where overt Russian action would otherwise bring on international sanction.²¹

This is diversification into a networked world of proxy actors who are part corporate, part paramilitary, whose doubtful legal status allows fluid, deniable operations between conflict and gray areas. The final target is two-faceted: to transfer reputational and operational risk following Wagner's failures and render Russian involvement in Africa's resource, political, and security spaces institutionalized through overlapping military-commercial structures.²² The following are other PMCs with links to Africa Corps:

Redut

Run by Konstantin Mirzayants, a former Russian paratrooper, Redut is known as Wagner's institutional heir whose security officers protect mining and energy activities in Syria, Sudan, and Libya. Its operation integrates covert intelligence activities with contracting business for security services, often serving as an operational cover for GRU deployments. Redut troops under Africa Corps command have been stationed in Burkina Faso and Mali. On paper, they are a corporate company for contracts and logistics, but operationally, they report to Averyanov's GRU chain of command through Africa Corps.²³

Redut's financing shows the crossover between private capital and state power: sanctioned oligarch Oleg Deripaska is said to have

financed Redut, mostly to protect Russian corporate assets like Gazprom and aluminum value chains, and because his company Rusal, has major business interests in Africa as well as ownership of the largest bauxite mining and refining operations in Guinea. The remaining PMCs and private security companies (PSCs) receive twin financing from the Ministry of Defense, *Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (FSB), and state corporations, creating a hybridized financing arrangement that obfuscates the dividing line between public and private warfighting.²⁴

Patriot

Founded in 2018, Patriot was commissioned to guard high-ranking officials and key buildings, such as power and mining installations, in Syria and Africa. Unlike Wagner, Patriot operates under Ministry of Defense and GRU while former Russian Defense Minister General Sergei Shoigu is believed to have strong influence of the company. Patriot enlists fighters largely from *Vozdushno-desantnye voyska Rossii* (VDV) airborne and Spetsnaz units under GRU vetting. The group, which is a rival to Wagner, has been deployed near Vuhledar in the Donetsk region by Shoigu.²⁵ Since 2023, it has provided training, security, and logistics support across the Sahel. Current deployments are in Sudan, securing Red Sea logistic corridors; in CAR, as presidential guard unit support; and in Niger, as part of post-2023 junta stabilization support.

Konvoy Private Military Company

Konvoy's founder and leader is Konstantin Pikalov, who was previously a Cossack activist and security contractor. His PMC has been active in countries such as the CAR and Sahel since around 2018, providing security instructors and supporting Russian private military activities. Multiple reports suggest that Russian oligarch Arkady Rotenberg, a close ally of Vladimir Putin's, is the group's financier. Due to financial backing, Konvoy's recruitment grew significantly during the Ukraine war when the PMC had a manpower shortage. The group

has been linked to Africa Corps as a recruiter, trainer, and personnel integrator, acting as a bridge between Wagner and Africa Corps.²⁶

Bears Brigade

Bears Brigade is a paramilitary group with paramilitary and security functions activated after Prigozhin's death. The group is linked to the Kremlin and is thought to be staffed by Chechen fighters and former special forces. It provides direct support to Russian interests and African governments.²⁷ Bears Brigade reportedly works alongside Africa Corps forces in Africa, contributing to regime security, combat operations, and training missions and protecting ruling juntas and strategic infrastructure. It was also said to be protecting senior Burkinabè officials as well as Burkina Faso President Ibrahim Traoré.²⁸ But, unlike other PMCs, Bears Brigade is considered more closely integrated with state military and intelligence services operating under formal mandates.

Staf-Alliance - Gazprom Professional Military Company

In 1992, former KGB officers Andrey Kuratov, Andrey Timofeev, and Andrey Gavrilov established Staf-Alliance. Gazprom PMC was created in 2023 and is co-owned by Russia's oil company Gazprom as well as Staf-Alliance.²⁹ Gazprom PMC leans on Staf-Alliance leadership, staffing, and expertise, all while securing Gazprom's strategic interests at home and abroad, including active military and hybrid operations.

Gazprom also has three further PMCs, which were sent to fight in Ukraine—Fakel, Potok, and Redut. They are in Ukraine to protect assets and further Russia's geopolitical interests. Only Redut is linked to activities in Africa via Africa Corps; the other two are solely operating in Ukraine.

Storm-Z

Storm-Z is a penal military unit, not a PMC or PSC. It was established in April 2023 by the Ministry of Defense and modelled on Wagner's structure, which, during its deployments, recruited prisoners. But unlike recruitment by Wagner under Prigozhin, Storm-Z units were directly

subordinated to the Ministry of Defense, serving as disposable, high-risk shock troops in Ukraine's south zone. However, in June 2023, Putin dismantled Storm-Z and replaced it with Storm-V units.³⁰ Both are recruited from penal colonies, and the difference between the two is that Storm-Z are pardoned at the end of their deployment, while Storm-V units are not. After receiving 10-15 days of military training, many are killed in their first deployment in Ukraine, where they predominantly operate.

These operations have two functions: first, to provide manpower support to Russia's expeditionary presence at minimal economic cost; second, to embed coercive recruitment practices in permissive environments, allowing Moscow to scale manpower generation where legal, political, or ethical constraints are minimal. Storm-Z's deployment serves to highlight Moscow's enthusiasm for reusing penal labor as a hybrid warfare tool, revisiting Soviet practices in a new form.

Chapter 1: The Bigger Picture: Russia's Africa Corps and a New Security Landscape

Russia's resurgence in Africa reflects a broader pattern of strategic competition aimed at undermining Western influence, particularly the longstanding presence of the U.S. and France. As French soldiers began to leave the Sahel and American counterterrorism (CT) changed direction, a security gap emerged. Complicating matters were coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger that undermined Western influence and cultivated the conditions for new entrants.

Moscow used the turmoil to present itself as a pragmatic, impartial partner that provides security support but does not ask for political strings attached like, for instance, improvements in the human rights record.

This is the same with Africa Corps, whom the Kremlin does not want to present only as a military aid provider but also as an economic and diplomatic tool for continued partnership. This method is popular with juntas and weak governments that only hang on narrowly to power. The following countries fit that pattern:

LIBYA: PROXY WAR AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONSOLIDATION

As Libya's internal conflict escalated from civil war to proxy war in 2019, Wagner supported self-declared General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army as it approached Tripoli. The PMC's participation consisted of Russian fighter planes, attack helicopters, and state-of-the-art drones reinforcing a logistics network that gave Haftar the upper hand. The arrival of these weapons and drones changed the calculus in Tripoli.³¹ Fighters went from a position of offense to a defensive posturing, allowing Moscow to ramp up its activity.

In exchange for battlefield assistance, companies tied to Wagner had exclusive access to Libyan oil facilities, particularly in the oil-rich Sirte Basin—critical to Libya's oil exports.³² The Wagner Group

enhanced its involvement by acquiring control of numerous key airbases, including Al Jufra, which functioned as logistics hubs; power projection sites; and intelligence nodes.³³ Through airbases, Moscow was able to project influence over events far beyond the battlefield.

Once Haftar's advance stalled in early 2020, Wagner quickly transitioned from a frontline force to a key negotiator. The fighting forces, some led by Wagner and funded by the group, facilitated the withdrawal of heavy armaments, which set the stage for internationally brokered talks toward a ceasefire.³⁴ This seemingly self-directed operation by Wagner served as leverage, providing Moscow with new ways to execute diplomatic pressure and secure strategic interests in African states.³⁵

Throughout 2021 and into 2022, Wagner ensured that Russian interests in the energy and security sectors wouldn't be compromised

The problem for U.S. and allied special operations is clear: Adversaries, such as Wagner and today's Africa Corps, operate along this continuum and use ratcheted-up approach maneuvers to obtain control over influence in contested space. This approach embeds itself into local power dynamics and manages control over critical infrastructure, using a coercive and diplomatic approach.

in the ever-chaotic situation in Tripoli. Wagner was successful largely because they located and maintained themselves in the eastern area of Libya, maintaining bases for the loyalists of Haftar, therefore solidifying their position.³⁶ Relative to other competing factions, Wagner was merely behind the government of national unity, which further complicated the dynamics of Western and regional powers' attempts to influence the dynamic on the ground.

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control over influence in contested space. This approach embeds itself into local power dynamics and manages control over critical infrastructure, using a coercive and diplomatic approach.

SUDAN: RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICS AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Since 2017, Russia has continuously entangled itself in Sudan's security and economy and adjusted its approach as Sudan's politics shifted. Wagner mercenaries first came to Sudan as "military advisers" and quickly established worth and presence at gold-mining sites around the Nile and in Darfur. Meroe Gold was created to facilitate the extraction of a surplus that filled the vacuum created by the political instability: Sudanese gold was extracted on an industrial scale and sent straight to Russian refineries—a high-visibility benefit for the Russian state and hard currency for Moscow to escape the trappings of the West.³⁷

The ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 was a tipping point. The transitional military rulers of Sudan, faced with mass protests and instability of their own, deployed Wagner operatives to crush dissent and protect critical mining infrastructure. This arrangement served the regime and Russia's economic interests, ensuring both parties continued their control of the gold sector in Sudan.

By early 2024, that association would deepen. The transitional sovereign council in Sudan, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, issued a public formal invite for Russia's Africa Corps to assist with counterinsurgency operations in Darfur. Russian instructors are even now training Sudanese special forces to enforce the ceasefire provisions required by the UN. Unofficially, they also engaged in a combined security operation on gold mines while they worked with Rosatom to create what could have become Sudan's first nuclear research reactor located near Khartoum.³⁸ However, construction of the nuclear research reactor stalled with no progress since 2017–2018 due to political instability in Sudan. Rosatom, instead, shifted focus to Egypt (El Dabaa), Ethiopia, and Niger—all who signed or extended deals with Moscow.³⁹

On an unofficial basis, Russia has also explored access to Port Sudan as a possible Red Sea base for its small naval forces.⁴⁰ Moscow's naval forces are present in the Mediterranean following its military intervention in Syria in 2015. A formal base agreement has been suspended due to international pressure, but the mere prospect represents substantial leverage for Moscow. For SOF and coalition partners, Sudan serves as the quintessential instance of Russia's hybrid playbook, a mix of military advisory roles, economic extraction, and strategic haggling to achieve enduring effects. Countering this strategy is expensive, requiring both sustained operational efforts and the ability to let intelligence drive the interaction, while at the same time being mindful of the ways an adversary could take advantage of the challenges of open conflict.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: THE GEOPOLITICS AND RESOURCE SECURITY

The task of the Africa Corps in the CAR is to defend the regime and make sure that the rebel threats do not overthrow the presidency of Faustin-Archange Touadéra.⁴¹ There are plans for a permanent base in Berengo as the Russian forces train the presidential guard, protect government agencies, and watch over supply lines to areas rich in resources.

The Russian-owned firms Diamville and Midas Resource have violently controlled the gold and diamond markets, ruthlessly pushing local mining businesses out. The trade that supports those plants is commercial and, in terms of volume, comes second only to proceeds from the Russian government's interest in foreign markets (which includes the war in Ukraine).⁴² The CAR has essentially given away mineral mines as a contractual commodity, balancing security while propping up the Russian economy.

On the ground, security remains tenuous even if there are statements about the country being stabilized. Reports by many international organizations and media show that Wagner and members of the Africa Corps are implicated in widespread human rights abuses, including forced displacement and assaults on civilians.⁴³ These acts have caused

international condemnation of Russian actions and prompted some debate about the true price of Russia's involvement.

THE SAHEL: REGIONAL TRENDS AND RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT IN A COUP-PRONE ENVIRONMENT

Combined, Libya, Sudan, and the CAR act as evidence of Russia's ability to blend military presence through its mercenary forces, extract resources, and conduct political bargaining or negotiation with fragile states to establish a marketplace for its marketable skills. However, these three countries do not provide the complete picture. The most significant regional change, and the change that will have the greatest implications for the security of both the West and Africa, has taken place within the Sahel region of Africa, where multiple successful coups, strong anti-French sentiments, and the creation of a security vacuum resulted in conditions that were conducive to Russia's transactional style of relationship building with countries. Russia has been able to utilize this opportunity to create a cohesive strategic corridor connecting Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger by using country-specific agreements, thus expanding its influence throughout the entire sub-region.

Mali

After the coup in 2020 that removed incumbent President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, the transitional government in Mali began looking for ways to secure its country without relying on French and UN assistance. The Africa Corps established its presence with a Défense Cooperation Act, a five-year agreement to train Mali's special forces, to deliver air-surveillance capabilities with drones, and to provide technical support for Mi-24 helicopters. Although publicly Russia denies that it has troops and is fighting, multiple accounts on the ground share evidence of joint patrols with commandos in contested areas like Mopti and Gao.⁴⁴ There are estimated to be roughly 2,000 Africa Corps personnel in Mali.⁴⁵ This arrangement has facilitated Russia's opportunity to leverage the lack of a Western military presence by inserting advisers and formatting local counterinsurgency.

Burkina Faso

In September 2022, following its second coup of the year, Burkina Faso fell into a comparable agreement, just like Mali, and switched allegiance to Russia. An agreement in 2024 established a mission for the Africa Corps in Burkina Faso to assist the Burkinabè armed forces, supply weapons and ammunition, and conduct joint readiness exercises on a regular basis. Though it is unknown how many fighters it can field today, regional analysts have estimated a range of between 100 and 300 fighters associated with the Africa Corps in Burkina Faso.⁴⁶ This active and adaptable intervention demonstrates Russia is willing to be flexible to ensure the needs of new military governments are supported, increasing regime security as well as its own networks of local resources and tools of influence.

Niger

The coup in Niger in July 2023 acted to directly fuel the contagion of coups in the region and enabled some rapprochement with Russia. Niger welcomed Russian assistance with security and expelled its Western forces. By September 2023, a high-level delegation from Russia had gone to Niger and agreed to a sweeter deal, betting on shipments of helicopter gunships, portable air-defense systems, and elite training for Nigerian paratroopers. In 2024, an agreement was signed for Russia to use three Nigerian airbases—Diffa, Agadez, and Niamey International—as operational bases in ways that were supported and marketed to the citizens of Niger as logistical and humanitarian operational bases in cooperation with Russia. The junta has promoted Russia as a credible partner in its fight against Islamist insurgencies, and Russia's reliance on Niger's uranium for its nuclear industry is resounding.⁴⁷

LOCAL RECEPTION

Responses to Russia's expanding footprint are varied across Africa. In CAR, Touadéra's regime commonly advertises the Africa Corps as a stabilizing force that keeps rebel groups from controlling diamond fields. But opponents accuse Russia of shoring up an

ever-more authoritarian government that does not provide for the population—except for security. Local civil society and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR have recorded cases of villagers being harassed by units associated with the Africa Corps near mining sites.⁴⁸

Public attitude toward Russia is divided in Mali. Even as significant parts of the military and business classes extol the Africa Corps for keeping jihadist groups in check, rural residents of Mopti and Segou speak of fear of random raids. There have been reports of civilian deaths and forced displacement during joint Africa Corps-Malian patrols, fueling jihadist recruitment.⁴⁹ Since Traore came to power and invited Russian leadership, there have been more than 15,500 civilian deaths.⁵⁰

In several African countries where Russian PMCs operate, locals alongside civil societies are openly opposing their presence, linking them to

In several African countries where Russian PMCs operate, locals alongside civil societies are openly opposing their presence, linking them to neo-colonial interference.

neo-colonial interference. In CAR, thousands of people marched against the Wagner Group, which provides security for Touadéra. The protesters want the president and Wagner gone, as they believe both have trampled on countries' sovereignty through killing and raping of civilians and looting by Russian mercenaries.⁵¹

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

In emerging trends of the Sahel, there is a stepwise evolution of the security environment across the region. These trends have ramifications for the security of all nations involved as well as the entire region. Therefore, to quantify the regional geopolitical trajectory, it is necessary to understand how Russia has embedded itself into an increasingly complex and quickly changing landscape and the response of local/regional actors, as they adjust their respective strategies to deal with this evolving security environment. The following list outlines some of the various ways in which Moscow has

been able to increase its presence and thus create a foundation for significant implications for the region.

Interlocking Security Dynamics

Coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have created a contiguous military bloc that left an environment for Russian support to occur, creating opportunities for joint deployments and doctrinal documents.

Eliciting Support and Aligning Interests

The Africa Corps tailors its approach to the unique political and security situation in each country, offering training, equipment, support, and plausible deniability on taking combat roles.

Resourcing Diplomacy

Russia's involvement has historically leveraged access to strategic minerals including gold, lithium, and uranium, often offering security assistance for resource-extraction agreements.

Eroding Western Influence

The elimination of Western forces and commitment to Russian advisers sends a powerful signal that the security environment of the region is shifting in a way that does not create opportunities for the U.S. and allies to influence outcomes or support legitimate partner forces.

Russia has changed the balance of power in the Sahel through increasing its military and security partnerships with many countries in that region. However, Russia's influence is not solely based on the use of force; in fact, it has developed an extensive network of media manipulation and diplomatic outreach to build support for its partners, gain legitimacy for those partner regimes, and ultimately undermine the credibility of the West in the eyes of local populations. The use of these methods allows Russia to convert temporary battleground successes into long-term political gain throughout Africa.

Chapter 2: Narrative, Media, and Technological Tools of Influence

While much of the discussion around Russia's expansion in the Sahel region focuses on military engagement and resource diplomacy as substantive pillars for growth, underpinned by the deployment of hard power, Russia's influence extends well beyond its direct utilization of hard power. The tangible alteration of the regional balance of power due to the consolidation of security partnerships, provision of military assistance, and access to strategic resources are two critical aspects of how Russia has changed the landscape of this area.

In short, Russia recognizes that to build and maintain influence, it must achieve both operational success and establish narrative dominance over those issues that create legitimacy for political entities and support from their populations.

However, Russia also employs a variety of complementary soft power strategies to influence public perceptions, reinforce the legitimacy of its allied regimes, and discredit Western nations. In short, Russia recognizes that to build and maintain influence, it must achieve both operational success and establish narrative dominance over those issues that create legitimacy for political entities and support from their populations. Therefore, Russia has employed a range of capabilities using various media (traditional and digital); diplomatic and technological means; state-sponsored and supported media such as RT (formally Russia Today); collaboration with local media; and AI-based content to turn tactical successes into long-term political and social influence throughout Africa. These elements of soft power, together with military and economic initiatives, support Russia's goals throughout the African continent.

SOFT-POWER DYNAMICS

To accompany its hard-power footprints, Russia unleashed a propaganda campaign directed at shaping public opinion in all African countries.⁵²

The disinformation strategy consists of a three-pronged interconnected approach:

Gray diplomacy: the use of diplomatic, cultural, and media outreach to influence narratives and create political goodwill in a non-coercive manner

Mass content dissemination: influencer or journalist social media activity and mass media broadcasting like RT and Sputnik that are designed to inundate the information space with pro-Russian messaging

Financing of local content: the direct or indirect funding of local influencers, journalists, and media organizations to make Russian messaging seem indigenous, credible, and authentic

RT and Sputnik, Russian state media outlets, both broadcast 24/7 in English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese on platforms available to African viewers. RT Africa's marquee evening news shows showcase what it depicts as Russian humanitarian assistance, military parades, and diplomatic summits, and it usually frames Western interventions in neocolonial or in hypocritical terms. RT is also suspected to be behind the "African Stream" online platform, which pushes pro-Russian content on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and other social networks under local branding.⁵³

RT organizes training for African bloggers and journalists, and between 2024 and 2025, more than 1,000 participants from more than 30 countries completed its program. Some of those graduates are given employment contracts to continue to disseminate a pro-Russian agenda.⁵⁴ The RT training, which works in conjunction with the Kremlin, is used as instrument of soft power aligning with Russia's broader strategy in Africa.

Pro-Russian African news agencies present stories of cooperation, sovereignty, and anti-colonial solidarity.⁵⁵ Public rallies, many of them organized, feature Russian national flags and portraits of Putin, reinforcing the view of Moscow as a liberator rather than a neocolonial power.

This messaging strikes a chord in settings where old grievances against former colonial powers simmer. And by positioning itself as a security guarantor that recognizes national sovereignty,⁵⁶ Russia is helping to shape mindsets and build lasting support among both elites and the population. But this soft power approach has its limitations, particularly when heavy-handed security operations fall hardest on local populations.

For instance, Russian disinformation was the strongest during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union sought to undermine U.S. credibility through false narratives. One of those disinformation efforts was Operation Denver, which claimed that HIV/AIDS was a biological weapon created by the U.S. military at Fort Detrick, Maryland. Soviet newspaper *Patriot*, and the KGB, Stasi, and their allies were responsible for the spread of this disinformation. A new wave of disinformation emerged during 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections, when Russian-linked bots and paid bloggers spread pro-Kremlin propaganda.

But as the African digital landscape expanded in the last seven years, it paved the way for approximately 300 million Africans to use social media platforms as a primary source of news interacting with false and misleading information. Here, Russian disinformation began to unravel around 2018, especially connected to the Wagner Group and networks run by Prigozhin prior to his death. This included fake Facebook pages and local media content to influence public opinion, promote anti-Western sentiment, and support Russian-backed leaders. At the time of its activity under Prigozhin, the Wagner Group was responsible for close to half of Russia-associated information campaigns conducted across the continent, reaching millions via networks of fake pages and coordinated posts. Russia remains the leader in Africa's disinformation landscape and is responsible for

80 documented campaigns spanning more than 22 countries to date. The aggressive disinformation remains a key instrument in Russia's effort to expand its political and strategic influence through nonconventional means.⁵⁷

The countries in Africa that face conflict are far more likely to be aggressively targeted by disinformation campaigns. In CAR and especially in Mali since 2021, the disinformation targeting UN peacekeepers coincided with that of the deployment of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group. Much of that content came from Russia-backed local media organizations and civil society groups. The narratives are often pro-government, pro-Russian, and especially anti-France and related to colonialism.⁵⁸ For instance, to justify military operation and secure the rights to local lucrative mining contracts, the Wagner Group needed to use propaganda, which also helped gain new

The countries in Africa that face conflict are far more likely to be aggressively targeted by disinformation campaigns.

local fighters and sell itself as liberating force while painting the West as colonialists.⁵⁹

Russia's core tactic is using local bloggers, journalists, and influencers

who receive payments to push local stories on Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok with a Kremlin agenda so it all looks homegrown rather than influenced. Troll farms are also big business, which flood social media with posts, comments, and engagement to amplify Russia-friendly hashtags. Doing this helps African leadership most aligned with Moscow stay in power while the Kremlin looks like a reliable partner.

Russian state information agency TASS is another one of Kremlin's mouthpieces that aims to open bureaus in Ethiopia, Senegal, Algeria, Congo, and other African states, and its employment will be controlled by the FSB.⁶⁰

AI-GENERATED CONTENT

The establishment of the Africa Corps marks a new chapter in Russian disinformation on the continent: it's more sophisticated, more locally focused, and more dependent on AI to amplify its influence while evading detection. Russia has scaled and modernized disinformation in Africa since Africa Corps incorporated cutting-edge AI tools and automation into these operations. AI enables Russian operators to produce high quantities of localized fake news, deepfake videos, and bot-driven social media in local languages that are used to inundate African social media feeds with tailored pro-Kremlin stories.

Bots and AI-generated accounts manifest as fake, so-called “astroturfing”—appearing to be authentic grassroots support, engaging with real users and coordinating hashtag campaigns in sensitive areas, such as elections or in anti-Western sentiment or local controversies. Deepfake tools and generative AI enable the Africa Corps to produce realistic-looking video and sound content that on the surface could appear to feature African voices of authority.⁶¹ AI-driven analytics also enable Russian actors to follow hot debates, locate key local figures, and shape their messaging on the go in response to political and social conditions, advancing a sophisticated approach that has extended its reach across the continent.

Much of it comes through the Africa Initiative, which markets itself as a local news agency but instead is based in Moscow and run by Russian intelligence agencies. Previously, it was believed to have been owned by Prigozhin and then adopted by the Kremlin after the death of the Wagner leader. (According to the U.S. State Department, Prigozhin also financed a troll farm called Internet Research Agency.) To make it more authentic, news pieces and op-eds produced by the Africa Initiative carry bylines by local African journalists. The stories are carefully chosen often to play on people's emotions. If targeting French-speaking African states, for instance, stories of anti-colonial venom, endemic poverty, and distrust of the West are posted.⁶² To evade detection that stories are AI-generated, they are often mixed with sports, entertainment, and music news.



The Russian disinformation strategy consists of a three-prong interconnected approach which includes grey diplomacy, mass content dissemination, and the financing of local content. (AI-generated image generated by Perplexity AI, October 25, 2025)

Since 2023, one of the clearest examples of using AI to disseminate disinformation in African countries was through deepfake video and fake news production right after military coups in the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mali. The Africa Initiative used social media to amplify their message throughout the networks showing anti-French sentiment and elevating Traoré, the leader of Burkina Faso's second coup. Deepfakes appeared on social media depicting him as shaking hands with world leaders and often speaking flawless English. (There

is no evidence proving his fluency.) All this was done to encourage the locals to support the coup.⁶³

THE ROLE OF RUSSIAN OLIGARCHS AND STATE-LINKED CORPORATIONS

While Prigozhin was the most-known Russian rebel commander and oligarch who acted as a key figure in Africa Initiative campaigns, along with Internet Research Agency, to disseminate disinformation in Africa, the general Kremlin propaganda ecosystem relies on state-linked media holdings and shadowy para-state companies whose footprints are felt even if direct funding trails are not precisely documented.

The evidence of direct support by Russian oligarchs for African countries, such as Nigeria and Mozambique, is largely open source. Other famous oligarchs, like Yury Kovalchuk, quietly exert influence through state-linked corporations and massive media empires. National Media Group (NMG, owned by Kovalchuk) and state-owned RT are consort with broadcasters and sponsors of local initiatives to disseminate pro-Kremlin messages. Their involvement builds the necessary infrastructure, providing legitimacy for Russian discourse to spread throughout African media spaces and ensuring that today's top news sections include at least one Kremlin-backed news story, likely from a variety of countries thanks to different local amplifiers and media middlemen.⁶⁴ These oligarchs do not serve as media intermediaries themselves; rather, they maintain this entire ecosystem by providing financial support and direction to the many different paths where local media intermediaries do business.

Other figures include:

- Alisher Usmanov: has stakes in publishing house Kommersant; internet firms and mobile operators give him reach through Russian corporate and media syndication rather than direct access to Africa
- Konstantin Malofeev: supports Orthodox Church-linked media; has been known to fund pro-Kremlin media in Europe and to a lesser extent in Africa; has ties to consulting firms, non-governmental

organizations, and para-state actors—this occasionally overlaps with networks active on the continent

- Victor Vekselberg: through his Renova Group, has invested in African resources sector, specifically, South Africa; has also donated \$826,000 to African National Congress⁶⁵

Other promoters of Kremlin narratives include “civil society” organizations, lobbying firms, local influencers, and NGOs that may be supported by Russian corporate offshoots or partnership networks. For instance, Afrique Media in Cameroon; local journalism projects in Ethiopia; and content amplification networks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and South Africa are often paid via what is commonly termed formal contracts, content grants, or sponsored events with funding channels instinctively branded as media cooperation rather than direct disinformation funding.

Private spin doctor firms and para-state consultancy firms (i.e., Rybar, Bureau Legint, and GR Group) have emerged as a new vanguard of Kremlin influence in Africa—alongside state security services but often outside of direct subordination to a state or oligarch. Contracts, digital campaigns, and media partnerships work to facilitate Russian reach on the continent; not only can they obfuscate legitimate concerns related to transparency about sources of financing, but they also categorically attempt to conflate proactive Russian posturing with actual outcomes of generated peace processes. Their work, according to regional researchers, combines opportunistic private-sector deals with more centralized state interests.⁶⁶

The firms don’t necessarily bankroll disinformation directly, but they facilitate and execute it as part of a larger strategic game plan bolstering pro-Kremlin narratives through sponsored programming, training, tech resources, and soft-power outreach. They create environments for local amplification by African intermediaries who tailor messaging to local cultural and linguistic sensitivities.

Chapter 3: Comparative Framework: Russia's Africa Corps and Competing External Actors in Africa

Africa is by far the place where four discrete great and middle-power models of influence interact. Understanding how Russia's new Africa Corps is designed and operates (and how that differs from the methods employed by Turkey and the Gulf states) is critical for SOF assigned to roles that support or counter malign forces, maintain access, and promote partner resilience.

RUSSIA'S AFRICA CORPS: A COERCIVE, RESOURCE-FOR-SECURITY ENGINE

The Africa Corps possesses a military force that includes thousands of troops, some local auxiliaries and some Russian officers and veterans, spread through Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the CAR.⁶⁷ Its offer to juntas and beleaguered incumbents: regime survival in exchange for privileged access to gold, uranium, and oil concessions. The Russian Federation places advisers among presidential guards and deploys combat units to frontier formations. Moreover, it saturates the information environment with anti-Western narratives propagated by Russian media under the direction of the GRU.⁶⁸ The model is openly elite centric: It avoids the need for parliaments or civil society representation, and it anticipates the likelihood that a leader will become entangled in an asymmetrical dependency that is exceedingly difficult to disrupt without an external security guarantee, a vacuum that SOF can find itself being able to fill (see Table 1).

Turkey: Hybrid Soft Power Plus Precision Strike Trade

Ankara's strategy combines Islamist cultural diplomacy, mosque restoration, scholarships, disaster relief, and hard-power exports. For instance, Bayraktar Taktik Blok 2 (TB2), an unmanned combat aerial vehicle), is sold to at least 11 African states⁶⁹ and is a fraction of the price

Table 1: Key Dimensions of Competing Security Influence in Africa

Dimensions	Russia (Africa Corps)	Turkey	Gulf States
Entry Point	Combat advisors and private military companies	Drone sales and aid	Capital and ports
Dependency Lever	Personal security of rulers	Training and unmanned aerial vehicle logistics	Elite cash-flow and food security
Narative	Anti-West, sovereignty	Muslim solidarity	Stability and prosperity
Visibility	Covert/deniable to overt battalions	Medium (base footprint)	Low military signature
Risk to Special Operations Forces	Kinetic clashes, disinformation	Platform fratricide	Access restrictions at ports

Table 1 demonstrates five key ways in which Russia’s Africa Corps, Turkey, and Gulf states are able to exert security influence in different African nations. Source: Author.

of a western unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The TB2 offers additional benefits: Turkish training teams and maintenance hubs (Morocco)⁷⁰.

Turkey emphasizes Muslim solidarity as the faithful peoples’ joint struggle against colonialism, a shared ideological proximity, or geography, which does not exist in Moscow’s purely transactional log. Generally, Turkey has not enacted direct resource ownership stakes but instead seeks service contracts and defense-industrial offsets. This presents an opportunity for SOF planners: Turkish leverage can cut both ways; its UAVs can loiter over the very unit it is training, yet, at the same time, Ankara’s strategic objectives align with U.S. counterterror or antipiracy objectives (see Table 1).

Gulf States: Capital-Forward Elite Capture

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), alongside Saudi Arabia and Qatar, uses its sovereign wealth funds and religious networks to

establish logistics paths throughout the Red Sea and the Sahel. Via DP World, the UAE controls, or is bidding for, Tanzania, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in an architectural template intended as maritime domain awareness for Dubai.⁷¹

Their model is opaque: memorandum of understanding between leaders, leasing of land for agribusiness,⁷² and providing stability subsidies but no troops on the ground.

Three Problematic Features of Africa Corps That Set It Apart

Militarized information warfare: psychological operations (PSYOP) cells target local populations and communities in advance of SOF deployment, increasing the operational burden of force protection.

Regime-security deepening: Russians are inside the presidential guard units, with the early warning of coup plots and foreign intervention, frustrating any U.S. partner-force switch.

Resource-backed sustainment: interruption of Moscow's dependence on oil and gold as a means of protecting its Africa Corps against defense budget cuts will require disrupting extraction routes by applying interagency economic measures and the use of maritime enforcement methods.

STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENT FOR SOF

Compete Through Governance, Not Mirroring

Attempting to out-PMC/hybrid Russian adversaries creates risk of mission creep and friction. SOF must assess where it may want to put together advisory packages that provide civilian oversight of the security service, which dilutes Russia's elite-capture advantage.⁷³

Manage Turkish Technology Proliferation

Utilize SOF liaisons with Turkish counterparts to influence export end-use monitoring that mitigates the risk of U.S. trained units using Turkish drones to conduct attacks against civilian populations.⁷⁴

Secure Maritime Gateways

Ports dominated by Gulf states can be the chokepoint for U.S. logistics: Facilitating early access bases and competing sealift nodes would be smart hedges.

Chapter 4: Russian Presence, U.S. Africa Command, and SOF Involvement in the Changing African Landscape

Africa is now a key battleground for influence between world powers, while the path of Russian activity across the continent is erratic at best. As Russia resets its Africa Corps (post-Prigozhin), and as African states grapple with fresh domestic and regional pressures, new strategic fault lines are emerging. For SOF elements under USAFRICOM, these fluctuations offer growing challenges as well as opportunities. Forward planning including flexible, culturally relevant, and sovereign-aligned strategies and operations is essential for maintaining effective U.S. engagement in the region. Possible scenarios and the implications for United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) include:

SCENARIO 1: ACCEPTANCE OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Along this path, Russia would continue to institutionalize its Africa Corps with formal state-to-state agreements that allow deeper penetration of the defense and security sectors of partner states like Mali, Burkina Faso, and the CAR. By 2027, the Africa Corps could evolve from an insurgent shadow proxy to a quasi-expeditionary force, which, it should be noted, is a hybrid model of a PMC with a Russian Foreign Legion.

Indeed, African regimes in crisis or insurrection may increasingly look to Moscow not only for support to counter insurgencies or protect their regime but also a more disturbing possibility: for assistance in disinformation operations and the manipulation of the constitution. Russian “bare-without-questions-asked” security assistance, along with weapon supplies and elite training, could institutionalize its presence on the continent as an acceptable unofficial alternative to Western support.⁷⁵

Implications for United States Special Operations Command

In this context, SOF elements under USAFRICOM should be able to shift towards gray zone competition, engaged in strategic messaging, civil-military integration, and support to unconventional warfare against threatened governments teetering on the brink of collapse. The most effective tools may be the long-term partnerships, intelligence-sharing, and sustained engagement in proxy advisory roles. Secret actions might be required when direct access is obstructed by Russian-influenced governments.⁷⁶

SCENARIO 2: THE SPLINTERING OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AS OVERREACH AND LOCAL RESISTANCE SCRAMBLE EFFORTS

While Russia has gained ground, its influence could plateau or even decline. That scenario would be one in which the African public becomes increasingly hostile to Russian involvement, especially when Russian units have been involved in extractive operations, like panning for gold or meddling in politics.

In places like Sudan or Libya, rival factions could turn on Russian-backed allies as alliances change. And domestic electoral turnovers or popular mobilizations could reduce Moscow's gains.

France could, for example, seek to mediate a return to some democratic order, assuming Mali's 2026 elections bring a moderate government to power that wants to restore regional and Western partnerships—and then the Russians would be gone as quickly as they had appeared or relegated to the shadows.⁷⁷

Russia also may not have the economic bandwidth or the room to maneuver in Ukraine to support multiple fronts in Africa.

Implications for United States Special Operations Command

This is fluid ground for SOF elements under USAFRICOM to re-intervene or expand their presence in former battlegrounds. By creating a reengagement task force, SOF can quickly redeploy advisory teams, reconstitute joint training programs, and reconstitute

intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) nodes in the liberated and transitioning zones. Strategic patience and relationship maintenance, even during downtimes, are going to be the keys to exploit these windows.

SCENARIO 3: MULTIPOLAR FRAGMENTATION AND A RUSH TO DOMINATE

Instead of a battleground between two powers—the U.S. and Russia—Africa’s theatre became a diffused, dispersed, multipolar battlefield. Turkey, the UAE, Iran, and India are all developing closer security, political, or economic relationships across the continent.⁷⁸

In such an environment of competition, African states might opt to hedge their allegiances, seeking a variety of powers to get the best deal. It encompasses the overlap zones in locations strategic to the Sahel, Red Sea, Horn of Africa, and Gulf of Guinea.

Even African governments could find themselves with offers from a series of foreign militaries to use military bases for training or for joint operations.

Implications for United States Special Operations Command

In this fragmented setting, SOF elements under USAFRICOM will need multi-vector adaptability. Tripartite missions might involve non-Western training (e.g., Kenya-U.S.-India naval operations) as well as counter-disinformation operations and embedded intelligence fusion cells in regional coalitions. Rather than competing solely against Russia, USAFRICOM should portray the U.S. as a desirable, non-coercive partner and stress sovereignty, resilience, and professionalism.⁷⁹

Crosscutting drivers shaping all scenarios include:

Insecurity in the Climate and Insecurity in the Resources

Food, water, and energy insecurity serve as both accelerants and catalyzers for instability, unrest, and state fragility. USAFRICOM and Russia contacts will increase focus on climate adaptation and control of vital resources (uranium in Niger, cobalt in DRC, oil in Libya).



A senior military officer from the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces engages a breakout group during Silent Warrior 25, Nairobi, Kenya, Dec. 8, 2025. Silent Warrior is a critical forum for senior special operations leaders from African and allied countries to discuss topics such as countering terrorism, strengthening partnerships and leveraging technology and innovation for operations. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Trenton Jancze)

Youth Demographics

Given Africa's average age is under 20, SOF units should focus on engagement with youth, civil society, and urban grassroots movements. This effective engagement can counter Russia's appeal to the elite through hybrid information operations, tech partnerships, and youth resilience efforts.⁸⁰

Digital Terrain and Narrative Warfare

Influence will be contested through encrypted chat applications, local influencers, and AI-altered content creation. USAFRICOM SOF should consider developing digital influence strategies that counter Russian PSYOP in Africa while also supporting African voices demanding accountability and transparency.

Chapter 5: Sustainability of the Model of the Africa Corps

Russia's Africa Corps, for all its recent gains, has some major limitations. Its activities require the stability of the fragile regimes, often unpopular and plagued by persistent insurgencies, on which it depends. Former Wagner operatives have carried out human rights abuses that have drawn local and international rebuke, implicating Moscow's efforts to paint itself as a benign partner.⁸¹

Operationally, the Africa Corps is stretched too thin, leading to a dire logistics situation and in danger of overstretching. It is not evident that it has a grand strategy, and Russia's own economic difficulties, aggravated by sanctions and the war in Ukraine, may restrain its ability to maintain costly foreign adventures. By shifting from deniable mercenary activity to formal state deployments, Russia also increases its exposure to reputational risk and diplomatic blowback.

The sustainability of a multi-theatre force across Africa rests with domestic considerations within Russia. Such a presence of some several thousand Africa Corps forces, along with support for mining and energy partners, could be costly. With the Russians' own budget strained, Moscow may leverage increased resource-share demands, step-ups that even friendly or committed African partners are likely to perceive as predatory and alienating.

Another constraint is human capital. The Africa Corps is largely supplied by ex-Wagner fighters who may not have received any conventional army training. These individuals must be assimilated into a disciplined homogenous force with the same doctrine through heavy training and monitoring. If Moscow cannot professionalize these cadres, cleansing themselves of the rogue behavior that soiled Wagner, the Africa Corps risks establishing in stone a reputation for thuggery that contradicts its state actor credentials.⁸²

Russia must tiptoe through the quicksand of African domestic politics. In parts of the world defined by rapid shifts in leadership,

by recurring coups in Burkina Faso, precarious coalitions in the CAR, and shifting power centers in Libya, Moscow's investments could vanish overnight.

At issue, it seems, is whether Russia's model can really help to forge an African order that is less beholden to the conditionalities of the West. African Union officials have often voiced an interest in diversifying partnerships, but they believe that transparency, governance, and respect for human rights are non-negotiable. Russia's emphasis on "noninterference" resonates with many postcolonial governments suspicious of foreign pressure but also invites questions about accountability.⁸³

The Turkish model based on economic infrastructure and religious-cultural outreach provides alternative pathways to cultivate ties through soft power. Russia's Africa Corps says it offers something more than guns: capacity-building in the security sector that should, in theory, wean African armies off reliance on foreign support. Whether the security development nexus moving forward will be a true multipolar agency or whether it will echo past extractive dynamics remains to be seen.

Chapter 6: Recommendations for SOF Operations Under U.S. Africa Command

To compete effectively against the Russian Africa Corps, SOF components operating under USAFRICOM must advance from broad CT and an advisory-based paradigm to more adaptable, networked, multidomain frameworks. Moving beyond reactive support into proactive shaping requires embedding early within contested or vulnerable spaces, coupling that with intelligence and leveraging influence at the tactical levels, and developing low-visibility, partner-focused mission sets that take advantage of the nuances of hybrid warfare.⁸⁴

Sustained situational awareness should evolve beyond the ISR fusion concept. Rather, SOF operators should create localized information ecosystems combining open-source data clean spreaders, geo-biometric sensors, and AI software to scan and track public sentiment on social media to preempt Africa Corps movements and changes in locals' opinions. Special operators trained as digital reconnaissance subject matter experts (SMEs) can map patterns of influence between Russian lines of propaganda and logistics on the ground.⁸⁵ That information can be organized and sent back through small SOF liaison units, embedded in host nation fusion centers and creating a closed loop between observation, analytics, and operational decisions on ground. No longer is the focus on broad collection but adaptive sensing: information connected directly to decision cycle to counter proxy action.

To compete effectively against the Russian Africa Corps, SOF components operating under U.S. Africa Command must advance from broad counterterrorism and an advisory-based paradigm to more adaptable, networked, multidomain frameworks.

Partner force development must be recalibrated for hybrid environments to shift the focus of training away from kinetic and patrol skills. Mobile training teams should be designed to develop organizational skills for counter-PMC warfare, that is, the tactics developed to infiltrate and neutralize formations constructed of contractors, while managing the risks from collateral considerations.⁸⁶ These teams can be backed by SOF SMEs in influence and civil affairs—instructors who can work with the design of the training cycles, simulating operations similar to that of the Africa Corps. This kind of experience allows African Forces to provide reaction elements, or a red team, to partner force training, operational and tactical, against Russian proxies. An additional point would engage selected African officers in rotational exchanges as part of a U.S. or allied SOF task organization, employing process and experience to accelerate both doctrinal convergence and mutual trust at the operational level and establish response networks operationally integrated rather than vested in individualized partnership ventures.⁸⁷

In the information space specifically, SOF should establish micro-influence cells in adjoining civil affairs and PSYOP teams that deploy local-language specialists who can wage their own narrative war. Each of these locally focused and operating teams, engaged in civilian-cantered endeavors, would work independently yet be interoperable as influence teams. These would be small teams that coordinate with regional broadcasters, associations, and influencer partnerships using combat information security methods and encrypted networks to preempt the disinformation of the Africa Corps and to unveil the disinformation before it is embedded in the public discourse and memory.⁸⁸ Rather than just counter information campaigns or tease out propaganda, SOF influence campaigns should build an anticipatory posture, using real-time analysis and behavioral data, to forecast narrative flashpoints within target communities. Civil affairs personnel can also utilize the platforms to advertise African-led accountability mechanisms, relegitimizing and restoring local governments that have been undermined by Russian-backed regimes.⁸⁹

To address illicit funding and military and commercial activity that sustain the Africa Corps, SOF-engineer advisory teams should pursue geospatial resource defense as part of their mission.

This may include mapping logistics chains of extraction companies associated with Russian operations, implanting microsensors for surveillance at critical node points in the logistics chain, and coaching partner forces on hardening of critical infrastructure. Parallel to this could be a SOF financial targeting cell situated within USAFRICOM, which can connect operational awareness with the U.S. Treasury and intelligence counterparts to expose illicit trade routes and implement rapid response sanctions or actions, turning field-collected raw data into operational leverage⁹⁰ Operational synchronization should be bottom-up and distributed. SOF liaison officers placed within African Union and Economic Community of West African States mission planning cells could build horizontal SOF networks—semi-formal coalitions of African special units directly coordinating intelligence, tactics, and influence campaigns with one another outside of time-consuming intergovernmental structures. These networks could leverage SOF's expeditionary flexibility, producing a form of coordination unconstrained by overt U.S. direction that simultaneously truly empowers African-led counter-proxy actions, while also producing a framework for increasingly consistent strategic alignment.⁹¹ Therefore, USAFRICOM must use its agility, discretion, and operational domain integration to shape environments that are below open conflict. This means developing hybrid task forces that combine digital warfare, human intelligence, civil affairs, and precision targeting into adaptable, light-footprint campaigns. With ongoing engagement, cognitive dominance, and local support, SOF can regain contested physical and information environments, restoring U.S. credibility, not solely through presence but through precision effects, credible partnerships, and the ability to outthink competitors in the ambiguity of Africa's developing battlespace.⁹²

Conclusion

The shift by Moscow from the Wagner Group to the state-run Africa Corps represents an important development in Russian ways of projecting power and engaging in influence operations in Africa. For USAFRICOM, USSOCOM, and SOF, this transition poses new challenges and valuable lessons for future engagement in Africa.

The Africa Corps has cemented Russia's military footprint in several important African states, including the CAR, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Libya. Russian deployment comprises several hundred special forces advisers, as well as a base at Mpoko airport, on the outskirts of Bangui. On paper, these forces are meant to train the presidential guard, secure strategic supply routes to the diamond-rich Ndassima region, and protect Touadéra. In fact, they work well beyond the capital.

Russian forces have sealed off the immediate environs of Bangui and extended their reach into the far-flung mining enclaves, where the Moyequa Diamonds company, which is owned by the state, has ramped up diamond production and the export of the precious stones to Moscow.⁹³ This blending of security activities and resource management is representative of Moscow's complex approach, a strategy that deploys the military to protect, not simply economic assets but regime interests.

Although countries around the world have been watching, and UN investigators have issued repeated warnings over the use of child soldiers,⁹⁴ Africa Corps says its mission is not over, pointing to the constant threat posed by armed groups such as the Union for Peace in the CAR. This story also fits with the Russian support for the CAR government to maintain vital territory and resource lines.

Russian activity in the CAR represents a tangled problem for American and allied SOF. It packs kinetic enablers, regime security assistance, and resource extraction into the operational kit. These are

all elements that are necessary if the U.S. and its allies want to have influence and protect their national interests in this contested space.

African leaders are not passive victims of their great power competition; they are, in fact, quite good at playing the West, China, Russia, and each other in order to get what they want. By shopping the market, they are picking their terms in security, investment, and political support, while playing the outside powers against one another. Cases run from ruling Sahelian juntas getting Russian backing after kicking out Western troops to countries like Angola and South Africa playing one against the other for trade advantage.⁹⁵

In practice, the model of the Africa Corps is transactional and elite based. It has regime survival schemes that entail security assistance, training, and resource extraction contracts, with modest political demands. This has been attractive to military juntas and desperate regimes that want quick fixes to internal challenges, but it has not resulted in long-term security gains. If anything, violence and instability have continued or gotten worse in places where the Africa Corps has deployed, particularly in the poor, arid Sahel region.

For USSOCOM, the Africa Corps trend suggests the need to transition to a contested operating environment where competitors pursue hybrid strategies using military, economic, and informational means to gain and hold influence. Russian operations have shown that firepower alone isn't going to solve the problems and that governance and civil-military relations, as well as strategic communications, must be factored into SOF operations.

Involvement of the Russian state itself places Moscow at higher risk, both reputational and strategic. Mistakes or abuses by the Africa Corps, which function under the direct control of the Kremlin, with direct lines of command up to Russian military and intelligence agencies, are today posthumously united with the Kremlin as the true causes, demolishing the same plausible deniability that protected Russia during the Wagner years. This opens the door for USSOCOM to capitalize on Russian overreach with tailored information



The image, which indicates high to low risk instability across the African continent, shows that states such as Niger, CAR, Burkina Faso, who welcomed Africa Corps, are more vulnerability to political, economic, and security shocks Source: Solomon Ekanem, "Top 10 Most Stable African Countries with the Lowest Political, Economic Risks in 2025", *Business Insider*, December 2, 2025, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/lifestyle/top-10-most-stable-african-countries-with-the-lowest-political-economic-risks-in-2025/vy6znlk>.

operations, by aiding civil society and by advocating for responsible security relationships.

In the future, USSOCOM should focus on persistent engagement, intelligence fusion, and interagency collaboration as the first pillar of its

approach in Africa. Developing that second pillar focused on enduring relationships with African actors, founded on respect for sovereignty, transparency, and common interests, will be critical for pushing back unwanted influence and maintaining U.S. access in contested regions. The expansion of the Africa Corps is indicative of Russia's enduring ambition of strategic competition in Africa that necessitates a sustained and multidimensional response by SOF.

SOF must be prepared for competition across multiple domains, not just kinetic but also cyber, informational, and influence operations. This means countering Russian disinformation and influence campaigns alongside direct security threats.

Russia's Africa Corps is an alarm bell and an accelerant that will have consequences for the U.S. but also for the Europeans. And while Russian propaganda uses AI for its anti-colonial rhetoric to turn young Africans against France and the West, Moscow itself treats Africa as its own colony, using the continent's resources for its own benefit in return for failed security guarantees that have seen more violence, imposition of leaders who do not bring positive change, and brain-washing of Africans to believe that Russia is their savior. The Kremlin's interest is in creating security issues for the U.S. and European interests, not developing a sustainable life for Africans. This is a cautionary reminder of the threats created by Western disengagement but also a confirmation of the enduring importance of principled, nimble, and comprehensive SOF engagement as the strategic winds shift in a new era of great power competition. ♠

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In From Guns for Hire to Military Doctrine: Russia's Institutionalization of Influence in Africa—Implications and Recommendations for U.S. Special Operations Forces, author Nadina Ronc analyzes Moscow's transition from the Wagner Group to the state-run Africa Corps. This shift signals the formal integration of Russian irregular warfare into the Ministry of Defense's chain of command, allowing the Kremlin to combine military support, AI-driven disinformation, and "memory diplomacy" to exploit security gaps in nations like Mali, Libya, and Sudan. By trading regime security for access to strategic resources, Russia has created an elite-centric model that undermines regional stability and challenges Western influence.

To address the evolving security landscape, the monograph frames a strategic shift for U.S. Special Operations Forces toward gray zone competition and proactive shaping operations. Ronc outlines an adaptable framework that emphasizes digital reconnaissance, localized influence strategies, and stronger horizontal networks with African partners to regain the initiative in contested environments and maintain U.S. credibility through precision effects and enduring partnerships.

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