



SAIJA Special Issue Launch: *Russia in Africa. Who's courting whom?*

**Russia's return to Africa in a historical and global context: Anti-imperialism, patronage, and opportunism**

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# Introduction

- Russia's return to Africa is increasingly seen as a grave security threat
  - Former AFRICOM commander, General Stephen Townsend, referred to 'Russia's malign influence in Africa' as the second biggest threat to US security interests in Africa after terrorism
- Others argue that Russia's involvement in Africa should not be overstated
  - Kimberly Marten notes how Russian activities in Africa remain limited in comparison to the longstanding presence of the United States and the European Union, as well as the huge new commercial and financial inroads made by China
- Our aim: putting Russian involvement in Africa in context
- We provide a snapshot, conscious of future uncertainties



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# The Soviet past

- Strong non-alignment norm
- Yet, also strong Soviet support for liberation movements
- Russia re-attaches itself to the Soviet Union's legacy of supporting liberation struggles
- Anti-imperialist & pan-African
  - Russian support to develop an 'African self-identity' based on anti-imperialism, as an integral part of the pan-African school of thought -- internal documents describing Russia's African priorities [leaked](#) in June 2019





# Two differences between Soviet and Russian involvement in Africa

- Focus on countries in Africa ignored by the West rather than focusing on priority countries of the West
  - Mali as an exception?
- A much less state-centric approach



# Current rulership architecture in Russia and Africa

- Russia's use of a patronage-based strategy is a natural fit in Africa
  - Alex **de Waal** has noted how Sudan is best characterised as a 'political marketplace' in which local elites seek to obtain the highest reward for their loyalty within patrimonial systems
  - Marie-Joëlle **Zahar** and Delphine **Mechoulan** reflect how elites in the Central African Republic have consistently 'used all the means at their disposal — including legal and illegal financial rewards and political appointments — to buy the loyalty of potential rivals'
- Putin's 'Solar System'
  - A highly personalised, networked conglomerate of different constituencies and personalities
  - State and patronage assets overlap
- Examples: CAR, Sudan, Libya, Zimbabwe



# The Global Context

- Opportunism as a corollary of selective state involvement
  - Up until this year likely not driven by Kremlin as element of global competition with West/NATO but rather by Prigozhin/Wagner network (opportunism vs strategy?)
- No Russian *playbook* but common *strategic priorities* can be observed
  - Pre-2022: striven to maximise strategic utility at minimum cost: “reasonable sufficiency”
  - Was initial (failed) approach after annexation of Crimea, observed in Syria and Libya
- Holistic approach: Russian understanding of information operations more concerned with content than structures
  - Reconciliation Centres (Syria): nominally about local mediation but element in targeting cycles
  - Russian involvement in CAR holistic: mercenaries only one element in wider entrenchment campaign



# Discussion & Outlook

## / No Russian 'masterplan' but so far a patchwork of actors and approaches

- / Especially skilful at presenting Russia as alternative to West
- / View on Russian 'shadow-state' helps explain strengths and weaknesses
- / Russian power projection has to be achieved at low cost
- / Debate over whether decentralised nature is an advantage or a weakness

## / Uncertainty over future nature of Russia's involvement in Africa

- / Dynamics of war determine political perception, interact with local conditions and Russian efforts at narrative control
- / Militarisation vs withdrawal? Probably a spectrum
  - / Increased tension with West and shifting of norms (related to what can be done below threshold of open conflict) might increase degree of strategic control by Moscow and higher degree of militarisation...
  - / ...however, with Russian military losses, questionable how many resources can be devoted to non-European theatres of rivalry



# Comments and questions

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