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By examining Soviet involvement during the Cold War in Sub-Saharan Africa and comparing it to current Russian activities in the region, this study demonstrates that most of the principal methods and objectives transcend both periods. The key objectives analyzed are the promotion of ideology, exerting influence, establishing military bases, and securing access to minerals. The methods studied are the use of development and military aid, trade, propaganda educational exchange programs, and avoiding direct confrontation with the West. Understanding Russia's intentions and the methods it will and will not use may help the United States counter Russian influence in the region.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Russian Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa from the Cold War to the Present

Author: Gabriel del Bosque, US Department of State

Thesis: The foreign policy objectives and tools employed by the Soviet Union in Sub-Saharan Africa during the final two decades of the Cold War provide a framework for understanding current Russian policies and predicting future activities in the region.

Discussion: For fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had limited engagement with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Visits to the region by high-level Russian officials in the mid to late 2000s indicated a major shift in Russian foreign policy. The question was whether Moscow would pursue the same ambitions as it did during the Cold War despite Russia having new economic and government systems. If so, could the United States benefit from the lessons of Russia's past to better compete against it in Sub-Saharan Africa? Various studies have established connections between current Russian policies in Africa and those of the former Soviet Union, but they pay little attention to Cold War-era engagements. By examining Soviet involvement during the Cold War in Sub-Saharan Africa and comparing it to current Russian activities in the region, this study demonstrates that most of the principal methods and objectives transcend both periods. The key objectives analyzed are the promotion of ideology, exerting influence, establishing military bases, and securing access to minerals. The methods studied are the use of development and military aid, trade, propaganda, educational exchange programs, and avoiding direct confrontation with the West.

Conclusion: Most of Russia's objectives in Sub-Saharan Africa date to the Cold War era, as do the methods it employed to achieve its goals. Also important is the fact that Russia's actions signal long-term plans towards the region. The most important difference between Cold War-era and current Russian engagement is that much of what Russia does in Sub-Saharan Africa is meant to support more aggressive actions in other parts of the world. Understanding Russia's intentions and the methods it will and will not use may help the United States counter Russian influence in the region.

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PREFACE

I became intrigued with the Cold War as a child. Although I was too young to follow, or even care about, foreign policies and arms treaties, I vividly remember conversations with my elementary school classmates about the likelihood of the United States going to war against the Soviet Union and whether our hometown was likely to “be hit” by a nuclear weapon. Then, almost overnight, the Soviets stopped being a topic of conversation altogether.

My work at the Department of State awoke my interest in Russia once more. After serving in Sub-Saharan Africa for six years and then covering the region as part of my portfolio while serving domestically, it was evident that Russia was becoming more active in the region. I was not the only one wondering if old Soviet ambitions were influencing Russia’s modern-day activities. Journal articles seemed to indicate this was the case but, at least in my mind, created more questions than they answered. This project was an opportunity to answer these questions and dive deep into the Cold War.

My research started with a look at current Russian engagements in Sub-Saharan Africa, then traced these goals and objectives back to the Cold War era. My research was facilitated thanks to Commander Kelley making his personal library available to me, which proved essential for this project. I was able to draw connections for all but one objective: promoting ideology. Supporting socialist movements was such a strong motivator of Soviet engagement in the 1970s and was so intertwined with everything else they did that it was impossible to leave out.

I would like to thank my Masters in Military Science mentor, Commander Stephen Kelley, PhD, and my Second Reader, Dr. Claire Metelits, for their guidance over the course of this project, and for constantly pushing me to dig just a little deeper.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines Soviet involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa during the final two decades of the Cold War and compares it to contemporary Russian activities in the region. The specific question it answers is: does the history of Soviet involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa provide a framework for understanding current Russian policies and predicting future activities in the region? Although Russia maintained diplomatic relations with most African countries after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), it was neither interested in nor able to compete with other actors such as China, the United States, India, and the European Union.¹ For the next fifteen years, Russia focused its foreign policy primarily on areas close to its borders.² As it increased engagement with Africa in the second half of the 2000s, the effect that Russia's new government and economic system would have on foreign policy was unknown.

President Putin's visit to South Africa in 2006 and President Medvedev's visits to Nigeria, Namibia, and Angola in 2009 signaled that Russia was placing a higher priority on relations with Sub-Saharan African countries while trying to diminish Western dominance and enhance its own international position.³ The increased engagement throughout the region has yielded benefits. For example, President Putin recently approved a plan to build a naval base in Sudan, which will allow it to project its power throughout the region.⁴ For the United States to effectively compete with Russia across Sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to understand the methods being employed by Moscow, the goals it is trying to achieve, and how it weighs different factors before deciding on a particular course of action in the region.

To determine whether connections exist across both periods, it is necessary to first study Soviet involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa during the last two decades of the Cold War and compare it with Russian activities in the region over the last fifteen years. Such analysis reveals

that similarities indeed exist, such as a reliance on providing military assistance to gain influence while countering that of Russia's competitors, primarily the United States. Other similarities include a desire to secure access to sea lines of communication, elevating Russia's international prestige, and focusing on countries neglected by the United States and its allies. The foreign policy objectives and tools employed by the Soviet Union in Sub-Saharan Africa during the final two decades of the Cold War provide a framework for understanding current Russian policies and predicting future activities in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various writings attempt to establish relationships between Soviet and current Russian policies towards Africa, but most do so superficially. In "The Africa Policy of Russia," Janos Besenyo identifies a possible overlap between former Soviet and current Russian ambitions in Africa. During the 1970s and 1980s, which Besenyo describes as the "golden age of Russian-African relations," various African countries purchased significant amounts of Soviet military equipment.⁵ Unfortunately, the author fails to provide further details of such arms sales. Paul Stronski's report, "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa," also glances over Soviet Cold War diplomacy on the continent. The author lists cultural and educational exchanges, along with infrastructure, agricultural, health, and military assistance programs as important foreign policy tools employed in Africa by the USSR.⁶ With the Russian government currently implementing developmental assistance programs in the region, it is possible that a connection exists across both periods.⁷ Unfortunately, Stronski's report does not provide a deep analysis of Soviet-era development assistance.

Gerrit Olivier and Dmitry Suchkov's "Russia is Back in Africa" also provides a limited explanation of Cold War-era engagement, focused primarily on the USSR's interest in

establishing strategic relations with ideologically aligned African governments.⁸ The authors emphasize the importance of Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University, where many prominent students from Africa received higher education during the Cold War.⁹ Jędrzej Czerep's report, "Russia's Political Offensive in Africa," also underscores the importance of Soviet-era educational exchange programs. Approximately 25,000 African students, including the future presidents of various African countries, attended Patrice Lumumba University and other schools in the Soviet Union.¹⁰

Maxim Matusevich's commentary, "Russia in Africa: A Search for Continuity in a Post-Cold War Era," provides a more detailed analysis than the works previously mentioned. Matusevich explains that, during the Cold War, the USSR established itself as a moral partner against racism and even supported anti-apartheid militias in Africa.¹¹ In the early 1970s, it also supported the Organisation of African Unity, implemented "extravagant" development projects such as a steel mill in Nigeria, and became an African ally at the United Nations. Strategically, Russia was interested in securing economic cooperation and international support in its competition with the West.¹²

Matusevich argues there are "continuities" between Cold War-era and current Russian policies towards Africa and that there are some overarching objectives across both periods, such as Moscow's pursuit of international support.¹³ However, he provides little explanation regarding specific economic and political interests during the Cold War. He does expand further than other scholars on the importance of personal connections between key Russian and African leaders, which have facilitated Russia's re-entry into the region. Not only were many politicians and African business leaders trained in the Soviet Union, but also many prominent Russian leaders were former intelligence officers, some with African connections.¹⁴

Existing literature that connects the Soviet era to current Russian policies pays little attention to the former, requiring the review of material that studies the Cold War specifically. Morris Rothenberg's *The USSR and Africa: New Dimensions of Soviet Global Power* provides an overview of Soviet activities across the continent and explains that Africa's importance to the Soviet Union grew in the 1970s. In addition to ideological and geopolitical interests, Rothenberg argues that the USSR wanted to disrupt oil routes and Western access to minerals and other raw materials.¹⁵ Rothenberg also explains that, before taking military actions, the USSR would carefully consider US positions. For example, the USSR did not participate militarily in Angola's liberation movement until it assessed the United States was not likely to intervene directly.¹⁶

Of particular interest in Rothenberg's book is that military aid, training, and exchanges were Moscow's primary methods to make friends, gain influence, and "project Soviet power" on the continent.¹⁷ From 1973 to 1977, the USSR gave \$3.6 billion in military aid to Africa, almost eight times as much as the United States.¹⁸ Rothenberg takes the position that the Soviets pursued trade as an objective, citing as an example the high volume of bauxite purchased from Guinea in the mid-1970s.¹⁹ Rothenberg's book is critical to understand Soviet policies across Africa during the 1970s as well as its strategic goals for the following decade.

An important book that studies the Cold War through its final days is Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War*.²⁰ Westad delves into the motives and interventions of both the United States and USSR in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Covering both sides of the conflict across three significant geographic areas, Westad only studies a limited number of events in Africa. However, he provides an in-depth view of those events he does cover. Regarding the Horn of Africa, for example, Westad agrees with Rothenberg on the importance of Soviet military

assistance programs to gain influence.²¹ Westad also stresses the importance of ideology, stating that Soviet elites believed their country's "role was to help make the world safe for revolution and thereby assist in the progress of humankind."²² Westad emphasizes that the Soviets became involved in countries like Angola because they were concerned that the United States and China would work together to control much of the continent.²³

Andrei Gromyko's *Memories* provides a first-hand account of Soviet diplomatic relations across more than fifty years. Gromyko served in several high-level positions within the Soviet Union, including as Foreign Minister. He articulates the Soviet perspective on major engagements and negotiations throughout the Cold War. However, except for relations with the United States, he only mentions other countries in passing. He dedicates less than four pages to all of Africa, and there is no mention of Soviet involvement in countries like Ethiopia and Angola. Still, the book provides useful insight for understanding Soviet goals. For example, Gromyko explains that the USSR believed that African countries would require substantial aid to help them overcome the effects of centuries of slave trade and colonialism.²⁴ He also explains that the Soviets provided aid to help these countries resist the "pressures of the imperialist countries," supporting the argument that Moscow intended to counter Western influence in Africa.²⁵

Additional insights on Soviet perspectives during the Cold War are found in Anatoly Dobrynin's *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*. Like Gromyko, Dobrynin participated in some of the major engagements between the United States and Russia during the Cold War. Dobrynin provides detailed accounts of his conversations with US and Soviet leaders, the latter articulating the driving forces behind key Soviet decisions. For example, he explains that international prestige was an important goal for

Soviet leaders, emphasizing that they felt pressured to win in Angola to establish a “superpower image.”²⁶ He also explains that ideology drove Soviet involvement in both Ethiopia and Angola, a result of the International Department taking interest in a region that the Foreign Ministry did not rate as being of high importance.²⁷ Another noteworthy observation is that the USSR intended to counter China in the region while avoiding a direct confrontation with the United States, opting to achieve its ideological objectives by providing weapons and military advisers and not troops.²⁸

Raymond L. Garthoff’s *Détente and Confrontation* provides a comprehensive overview of major international events during the Cold War. Of particular importance is Garthoff’s account of the Angolan Civil War. While countering Chinese and US influence were important goals, the Soviets were primarily worried about accusations of failing to support a Marxist liberation movement within a socialist state.²⁹ Garthoff also provides a detailed account of Soviet involvement during the war between Somalia and Ethiopia, for which the Soviets supported the latter believing there “was a major opportunity for socialism in Ethiopia.”³⁰ Supporting the view that the Soviets tried to avoid direct confrontations with the United States, Garthoff cites Soviet National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who indicated that weak action by the United States motivated the Soviets to advance their interests in both Angola and Ethiopia.³¹

The Pattern of Soviet Conduct in the Third World, edited by Walter Laqueur, is a compilation of works by nine scholars that analyze Soviet efforts to exert influence across the Third World. The contributions by Paul B. Henze, Raymond Copson, and Herbert Block are particularly important as they provide valuable insight on Soviet activities in Africa through the early 1980s. In terms of methods employed by the USSR, all three scholars emphasize it

provided minimal economic aid to Sub-Saharan Africa, choosing instead to provide military aid to accomplish its goals.³² Block uses the examples of Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique, all key allies of the USSR, to highlight the overwhelming preference for military aid. Combined, the three countries received roughly three times more military than economic aid during the second half of the 1970s.³³ Block discards trade as important, arguing that the Soviets were not interested in expanding the “insignificant” trade between the USSR and its African partners.³⁴ At the same time, Copson contributes to the argument that the Soviets were interested in establishing naval bases, explaining that competition with China and interest in the Middle East motivated Soviet involvement in the Horn of Africa.³⁵

David E. Albright’s *The USSR and Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s* is also helpful to understand Soviet involvement in Africa. Albright provides useful historical background and, more importantly, explains that the major Soviet objectives were exerting influence over the region while countering that of China and the West. Albright explains that the USSR was trying to establish itself as a global power by maintaining a “lasting Soviet political, economic, and even military presence in the region.”³⁶ Also important was the Soviet’s interest in minerals, which, according to Albright, would help compensate for the minerals it supplied to its allies while blocking the West’s access to them.³⁷

Various studies have established connections between current Russian policies in Africa and those of the former Soviet Union. The authors of these publications argue that such links exist but focus almost exclusively on current Russian policies and glance over the Cold War period, thus failing to establish connections between the last two decades of the Cold War and the present day. This study fills this gap by analyzing Cold War and current Russian activities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

OBJECTIVES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

To provide a framework to better understand current Russian policies in Sub-Saharan Africa and predict future activities in the region, this study will identify the methods and objectives that transcend both periods. The key objectives analyzed are promoting ideology, exerting influence, establishing military bases, and securing access to minerals. The methods studied are the use of development and military aid, trade, propaganda, educational exchange programs, and avoidance of direct confrontation with the West.

Ideology

Soviet elites believed the USSR was responsible for promoting social revolutions and that it was essential to counter Western ideology in developing countries.³⁸ In the early 1970s, the USSR developed a new strategy towards Africa that centered on supporting ideologically aligned governments and liberation movements in Southern Africa.³⁹ This strategy was the driving force behind Soviet support for the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), a Marxist-led front, during the Angolan civil war. The Soviets saw the engagement as an opportunity to extend their influence in the region while promoting progressive historical change.⁴⁰ In his memoirs, Dobrynin recalled a private conversation he had with General Secretary Brezhnev, during which Brezhnev expressed his belief that they were supporting a just cause in Angola.⁴¹

Ideology was also behind Soviet support of Ethiopia both during and after its war with Somalia. In February 1977, Mengistu Haile Mariam, a Marxist-Leninist, assumed power in Ethiopia.⁴² The ideologically aligned government presented an opportunity for the USSR to supplant American influence in Ethiopia while promoting socialism.⁴³ Because the Soviets saw the nascent Ethiopian government as committed to developing a socialist state, supporting it was a feasible investment that would help advance social and economic reforms. The disposition of

the Ethiopian government also motivated the Soviets. As Westad explains, it was “proof that the Third World was turning toward socialism and that their experience would be crucial in securing and fostering that world historical turn.”⁴⁴ It is important to note that the importance of promoting ideology waned by the mid-1980s, as General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev prioritized improving relations with the West over supporting liberation movements.⁴⁵

Although promoting socialism was the most important driver of Soviet foreign policy in the 1970s, ideology does not influence current Russian engagement in Africa.⁴⁶ Russia is more pragmatic than the Soviets were in their relations with African states.⁴⁷ For example, Russia does not interfere as much in the internal politics of its African partners.⁴⁸ The lack of ideological constraints has made it easier for relations to blossom between Russia and unpopular heads of state, such as with former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who the International Criminal Court has accused of genocide.⁴⁹

Ideology did not drive all Soviet engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, but it was perhaps the most important motivator for the Soviet Union. While promoting ideology today is no longer an objective, the role it played during the Cold War gives Russia a competitive advantage over Western countries. On one hand, Russia has the option of re-kindling the relationships once nurtured by the Soviet Union with the ideologically aligned governments of the time. On the other hand, Russia has no constraints when it comes to choosing partners and benefits from agreements with countries shunned by the West. The relationships established during the Cold War because of ideology, coupled with an absence of ideological commitments today, are a niche for Russia as it competes with Western countries with interests in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although a lack of ideological objectives distinguishes current Russian policies from those of the Cold War era, there are other goals that transcend both periods.

Prestige and Competition over Influence

In addition to being a fertile ground for communist ideology, the Soviets believed Africa presented opportunities to extend their influence. Support to both Ethiopia and the MPLA in Angola presented such opportunities.⁵⁰ In March 1975, for example, the Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia reported that military cooperation would enable the USSR to exert its influence across the Horn of Africa, a region of strategic importance.⁵¹ Exerting influence in Sub-Saharan Africa remained a key Soviet objective during the 1980s, which the Soviets believed was critical to reduce Western and Chinese influence in the region.⁵²

The Soviet military intelligence office (GRU) was concerned about American interests to establish military bases in the region, and countering US influence would block it from achieving this goal.⁵³ Direct Soviet involvement in the Horn of Africa helped reduce Western influence and, ultimately, the US military and diplomatic presence in Ethiopia. In April 1977, almost immediately after Ethiopia saw a surge in Soviet military assistance, the government closed the US base and consulate in Asmara, several US Information Service offices, the US Navy's medical research facility, and the office of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group. The provision of military aid served to accomplish the Soviet goal of drastically reducing the once robust US engagement in Ethiopia.⁵⁴ Countering Western influence remained a priority for the Soviets during the 1980s.⁵⁵ However, competition with China was of even greater concern.

The Soviets were also concerned by China's efforts to establish itself as an ally to the Third World, ranking it as a greater threat to Soviet goals than the United States and other Western countries.⁵⁶ According to Dobrynin, the Politburo wanted to make a stand in Africa to counter China "so as not to be seen by international communist and democratic movements as being idle in postcolonial areas."⁵⁷ Soviet leaders were worried about appearing less willing and

capable than China to support national liberation movements. They also believed that successful Chinese interventions would hamper their own ability to exert influence across the region.⁵⁸ In the spring of 1974, the USSR had stopped aiding the MPLA in Angola due to a power struggle within the group, but it resumed support because the United States and China supported a rival of the MPLA.⁵⁹

Soviet concerns over improved relations between the United States and China dated back to 1971, and their support for the same side in Angola fueled Soviet fears of the two countries joining forces against the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ In 1974, the Soviets were worried that Washington and Beijing would also work together in the Horn of Africa to take advantage of its weak and unstable governments.⁶¹ The Soviets also believed these countries were trying to influence the liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau, raising the GRU's concern that the United States and China were aligning themselves to control much of the continent.⁶² An extended visit to Africa by Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang from late 1982 to early 1983 ensured that countering Chinese influence remained a key Soviet objective during the 1980s.⁶³

Although fending off external influences in Africa to assert their own was a key objective, the Soviets also pursued self-glorification. According to Dobrynin, the USSR felt pressured to win in Angola to maintain a "superpower image."⁶⁴ He explains that top officials outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs easily swayed General Secretary Brezhnev, convincing him that Soviet victories in the Third World showed the USSR was a "world power to be reckoned with."⁶⁵ In late 1976, the Soviet journal *Kommunist* declared that Soviet prestige on the continent was growing, pointing to the large number of ideologically aligned countries in Africa.⁶⁶

Turing towards contemporary times, Russia sees itself as having interests in every region of the world.⁶⁷ An important Russian foreign policy goal is to regain the influence it had over Africa during the Cold War.⁶⁸ Tending to these interests requires Russia to forge new relationships on the continent.⁶⁹ In 2019, for example, Russia joined forces with the three African representatives to the United Nations (UN) Security Council to hamper plans for the UN to examine the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) election results. Three months later, the four countries partnered to block UN resolutions that countered Russia's political objectives.⁷⁰ One of the resolutions would have criticized Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, whom Russia supports.⁷¹ The other resolution regarded the coup in Sudan that ousted Omar al-Bashir. As mentioned previously, Russia had forged a strong relationship with al-Bashir and wanted to keep the U.N. from getting involved in the transition of government.⁷² According to a 2019 EU Parliament Brief, Russia's overarching foreign policy goal "is to consolidate the Russian Federation's position as a center of influence in today's world."⁷³

Another reason behind contemporary Russian engagement in Africa is to counter Western influence, particularly as Moscow feels chastised by Western sanctions for its actions in Ukraine, its human rights abuses, its malicious cyber-activities, and interference in foreign elections, among other activities. The Russians believe Africa can be a stage where it can find partners to create a multipolar world and reduce Western global dominance.⁷⁴ By forging new relationships across Africa, Russia would gain new allies within multilateral organizations, particularly at the UN General Assembly (UNGA).⁷⁵ For example, when the UN voted in 2014 on a resolution criticizing Russian hostilities in Crimea, twenty-nine countries from Africa either voted against the resolution or abstained. Russia garnered much of this support through debt

relief, a tactic studied later in this report.⁷⁶ Russia's foreign strategy consists of blocking Western interests while pursuing its own.⁷⁷

Much like it did during the Cold War, elevating its global prestige is a key Russian goal. Russia has been more active in Africa over the last few years as part of President Putin's efforts to reestablish Russia as a major international player.⁷⁸ This ambition motivates Russia to pursue the economic opportunities Africa provides, particularly its abundance of natural resources.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Russia seeks to enhance its position as an international power with the support of African countries, which make up one fourth of the votes at the UNGA.⁸⁰

In terms of exerting influence, Russia's goals in Sub-Saharan Africa are subtly different from those of the USSR. While it was important for the Soviet Union to counter the West as they competed for global primacy, it also saw China as a threat that could disrupt its sphere of influence. Countering China is not as high of a priority today, perhaps because ideology is not a factor and Russia would be, at least in the short-term, satisfied with being a power player within a multi-polar world order. Another difference is the role that the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa play in the power struggle.

During the Cold War, the United States and USSR competed over influence within the region. Today's Russia seeks partners that will support its positions at the UNGA. In other words, the competition used to be about Africa. Now, Russia is competing in Africa to enhance its position in other regions. Despite the differences, Russia's continued pursuit for prestige and influence is unlikely to change. Furthermore, Russia's re-engagement with Africa is too recent to determine whether it will be satisfied with sharing the stage with other global powers or whether it could become more ambitious. Having the support of African countries at the UNGA

as well as its representatives within the UN Security Council would be imperative for more aggressive Russian actions in other parts of the world.

Military Bases and Control of Sea Routes

An important Soviet objective was to establish military bases in Sub-Saharan Africa, contradicting claims made by prominent Soviet officials. Dobrynin recalls that General Secretary Brezhnev emphasized that the Soviets were supporting a just cause in Angola, explicitly excluding the pursuit of military bases as an objective.⁸¹ After the civil war, however, the Soviets made use of Angola's seaport and airport for military purposes along the Atlantic. Other examples of Soviet interest in establishing military facilities in the region were their use of the airfield they built in Conakry to support long-range flight missions from 1973-77 and launching of reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft out of Somalia from 1976-77.⁸²

Ethiopia also made concessions to the Soviets, facilitating their access to the Indian Ocean and Red Sea.⁸³ Early in 1976, A.P. Ratanov, Soviet Ambassador to Ethiopia, emphasized that Soviet access to the Red Sea contributed to the strategic importance of the Horn.⁸⁴ In 1974, the USSR and Somalia entered a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. As part of the agreement, the Soviet Union provided arms and military equipment to Somalia and, in turn, built naval facilities at Berbera and Mogadishu, which gave it access to the Gulf of Aden and approaches to the Red Sea.⁸⁵

In addition to using air and seaports for military purposes, the Soviets were also interested in controlling access to the oil routes that Western countries depended on.⁸⁶ Soviet commentaries during the Cold War implied that a reliance on sea routes near the Horn of Africa was a vulnerability for Western countries, making the blocking of sea lanes a goal for the Soviets.⁸⁷ In the 1980s, competition with China and interest in the Middle East further raised

Soviet interest in the Horn. The Horn of Africa is located along a key sea route to Southeast Asia, and its proximity to the Middle East could have proven beneficial during a confrontation with another superpower in that part of the world.⁸⁸

Interest in establishing bases in Africa did not diminish after the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2012, Russia and Angola reached an agreement to open a small-arms weapons factory in Angola. The Angolan government now wants to open facilities to manufacture Russian military equipment.⁸⁹ In 2013, Russia opened a facility to repair Russian military helicopters in South Africa.⁹⁰ While these facilities primarily support Russia's weapons export program, they allow it to maintain a permanent presence in Southern Africa.⁹¹ Russia is also interested in opening facilities in the Horn of Africa, which would help it project power from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf.⁹² Russia attempted to establish a military facility in Djibouti, where China, the United States, and others currently have bases.⁹³ However, Western countries successfully blocked Moscow's efforts.⁹⁴

Russia's failed efforts in Djibouti did not deter it from pursuing its goals in the region, however. In 2018, Russia signed an agreement to build a logistical base in Eritrea. This facility will give Russia a position along the Red Sea from which it could collect intelligence on the activities of the United States, China, and others.⁹⁵ In November 2020, Putin approved a plan to build a naval base in Sudan to service and resupply warships. Because it will be able to support nuclear-powered ships, it could potentially increase the number of patrols that Russian nuclear submarines can undertake in the region. The base in Sudan will boost Russia's ability to project its influence and military power.⁹⁶

Projecting power and securing sea lines of communication are as important for Russia today as they were during the Cold War. The Putin government also wants to reduce its

vulnerability in the event of a conflict. The questions are, why would Russia invest in protecting its sea lines of communication if it did not see a conflict as a possibility, as it did during the Cold War? Why is it now, again, so eager to establish naval bases in Africa? Establishing naval facilities are probably less about protecting Russia's interests in Africa than about deterring others from interfering with Russia's military actions elsewhere. These could be incremental steps in anticipation of more aggressive Russian involvement in other parts of the world, including possible military engagement.

Russia is already in the process of establishing naval bases in the Horn of Africa, and the focus should be on anticipating what its next target will be. A logical next step would be for Russia to seek a naval base from which it could project power across the Atlantic, and both Angola and South Africa are viable candidates. Not only did Angola once allow the Soviets to use its seaport and airport, but Russia has also recently established facilities to repair weapons in both countries, an indication that these governments do not oppose a permanent Russian presence. Russian naval repair or logistical facilities in either of these countries, like those planned in Sudan and Eritrea, could be on the horizon.

Access to Minerals

Another Soviet objective was to secure access to African minerals. Soviet commentaries during the Cold War stressed the vast supply and variety of minerals in the region.⁹⁷ However, the USSR's own supplies were more than adequate for domestic consumption; new supplies were needed from external sources to compensate for the minerals it supplied its allies, particularly Eastern Europe.⁹⁸ Soviet purchases of Guinean bauxite are often cited as exceptions to the low volume of trade between African countries and the USSR.⁹⁹ The Soviets entered into

an agreement to develop the bauxite industry in Guinea, which provided half of the bauxite purchased by the Soviets in 1975.¹⁰⁰

Africa was also important because the Soviets wanted to control the sources of raw materials upon which Western countries depended.¹⁰¹ The GRU emphasized that the United States was interested in African natural resources and, by securing mineral rights, the Soviets could block the United States and other Western countries from accessing them.¹⁰² By 1980, the USSR had entered into agreements with eleven Sub-Saharan African countries to evaluate, prospect, and develop mineral resources.¹⁰³ Although the USSR secured access to these minerals, it did not have the money to pay for them.¹⁰⁴

Much like it was during the Cold War, Russia is also interested in Africa's mineral resources for economic and political reasons. Africa possesses about 30 percent of the world's natural resources, making it attractive to Russian energy firms. Although Russia still has an abundance of domestic natural resources, it needs external sources to remain as a primary global exporter while maintaining Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas.¹⁰⁵ Specifically, Russia wants to block Europe from projects that might provide alternative sources of oil and gas.¹⁰⁶ In 2009, Gazprom and Nigeria entered a \$2.5 billion contract. A pipeline is under construction that, when completed, will supply gas from Nigeria to southern Europe. Lukoil also got concessions in Nigeria and various other Sub-Saharan African countries. In 2015, Lukoil and RT Global Resources signed an agreement to build a \$4 billion oil refinery in Uganda.¹⁰⁷

Russia also wants to expand its international footprint and control of the various phases of extraction of minerals such as bauxite, cobalt, and uranium.¹⁰⁸ Rather than buying these minerals, it tries to acquire the mines to influence the international trade and prices of these minerals.¹⁰⁹ Russia has invested over \$20 billion to develop the mining industry in Africa.¹¹⁰

One company alone invested \$350 million to develop and modernize a manganese mine in South Africa.¹¹¹ Over thirty Russian companies take part in the uranium business in Africa.¹¹²

Russia is also interested in exploring and exploiting undiscovered mineral ore.¹¹³ Part of the incentive for Russian companies is that extracting resources is less costly in Africa than from Russia's untapped reserves, many of which are deep underwater or in the Arctic.¹¹⁴ It is also worth noting that Russian energy companies see Africa not just as a source of minerals but also as a potential market in and of itself. In 2018, a Russian company signed an agreement to provide liquefied natural gas to Ghana.¹¹⁵ Compared to the Cold War era, Russia has more ambitious goals in Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of mineral resources.

The Russian government's interests in Sub-Saharan Africa's natural resources remain unchanged since the Cold War, but the methods it uses to acquire them are different. Russia continues to pursue resources to supplement its domestic production to remain a global exporter while keeping the West, particularly Europe, from accessing them. During the Cold War, the Soviets achieved this by merely entering into agreements with African governments. Even if the Soviet Union lacked the funds to exploit or purchase these minerals, the agreements alone would have served the purpose of blocking the West's access to them.

Russia is more active today. Its companies are investing billions of dollars to explore and exploit mineral resources, gradually moving Russia into a position from which it can influence global prices.¹¹⁶ Another difference from the Cold War is Russia's willingness to take risks in countries with weak governments like Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR). Knowing this, it may be possible to place roadblocks on Russia's path through more robust engagement and development assistance by both the United States and European Union in countries that meet the criteria that Russia is looking for.

METHODS EMPLOYED

Development Assistance

Claims made by Foreign Minister Gromyko on the importance the Soviets attributed to development assistance are unfounded. According to Gromyko, Africa could not recover alone from the devastation caused by the slave trade and colonialism, and it was “up to the international community to give proper aid.”¹¹⁷ He further claims that it was essential for the Soviets to provide aid to “newly independent African countries” to help them resist the “pressures of the imperialist countries.”¹¹⁸ However, the actual amounts of Soviet economic assistance counter Gromyko’s claims.

The USSR did not prioritize Sub-Saharan Africa when it came to development assistance. Soviet aid to the region was \$1.2 billion from 1954-79, while the United States provided almost five times as much during that same period.¹¹⁹ The portion of Soviet economic aid allocated to Sub-Saharan Africa was just four percent during the second half of the 1970s.¹²⁰ Table 1 shows that Sub-Saharan Africa ranked behind the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa from 1954 to 1979.¹²¹ Even key Soviet allies in the region received limited aid. The USSR committed just \$27 million to Angola from 1976-78, and \$8 million to Mozambique from 1976-77.¹²² After committing \$95 million to Ethiopia in 1979, it provided just \$10 million in aid from 1980-81.¹²³

Table 1- Soviet Economic Aid (in billions) from 1954-79

Total	18.19
Middle East	7.87
South Asia	4.98
North Africa	2.92
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.2
Latin America	0.965
East Asia	0.26
Europe	0

Source: National Foreign Assessment Center (U.S.) and Central Intelligence Agency, *Communist Aid Activities in Non-Communist Less Developed Countries, 1979 and 1954-79: A Research Paper* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1980), 18-20.

The Soviet Union focused a large portion of its economic aid towards large-scale projects. For example, Nigeria did not have socialist inclinations, but the Soviets wanted to maintain good relations with the country because it had the largest population and second-largest army in Africa. The Soviets funded the construction of a major pipeline in Nigeria as well as the construction of an iron and steel complex.¹²⁴ The USSR also assisted with the construction of railways and roads in Angola, and in 1982, both countries agreed on \$400 million worth of infrastructure projects, including a hydropower station.¹²⁵

The total amount of global economic aid provided by the Soviet Union declined in the early 1980s, from \$8.1 billion from 1975-79 to just \$2.5 billion in 1980-81, an average reduction of \$367 million per year.¹²⁶ Several factors influenced the Soviet Union to reduce economic aid in the 1980s. First, the Soviet Union was facing its own economic struggles, making it difficult for it to continue providing aid to developing countries. Also, Gorbachev's reforms, which started in the mid-1980s, allowed for a more open press, which criticized the Soviet Union's policy towards Africa.¹²⁷ According to an EU Parliament Brief, Soviet interest in the region declined in the 1980s because of economic hardship coupled with improved relations with the West.¹²⁸

The Soviets benefited as much from economic aid as they invested in it. Their primary goal in Sub-Saharan Africa was to promote socialism, a path few countries pursued. However, their expenditures were negligible. Soviet aid in 1979 was less than one percent of global development assistance, and less than .001 percent of the USSR gross national product.¹²⁹ The one important gain was the international recognition the USSR received for funding large-scale infrastructure projects.¹³⁰

Today, Russia uses development assistance as part of its strategy to establish a multipolar world order and regain the status it had during the Cold War in Sub-Saharan Africa. Russia claims to pursue normative foreign aid goals such as eradicating poverty, but it uses development assistance to exercise political influence and enhance its position in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹³¹ By providing development assistance, Russia legitimizes its status as a great power that can assume a global leadership role.¹³² Russia's political motives are also evident through its prioritization of food security and health assistance programs. In terms of food security, Russia sources its contributions from domestic producers, further enhancing its position as one of the largest wheat suppliers in the world. In terms of health assistance, Russia funds medical projects that include training elements, which allow it to maintain a long-term physical presence in the recipient country.¹³³

Russia distributes its development assistance primarily through international organizations. According to a 2011 Russian national report, it channeled most of its development assistance through the UN, World Bank, World Health Organization, and International Civil Defense Organization. By providing aid, Russia presents itself as a major power capable of assisting countries in need.¹³⁴ Russia distributes approximately 60 percent of aid through international organizations and the rest through bilateral agreements.¹³⁵ Russia provides very little development and humanitarian assistance overall, but it broadly advertises when it does to promote its image as a major donor.¹³⁶

Russia has a limited aid budget to achieve its political and economic goals but compensates with debt relief. Due to a financial crisis, Russia reduced its aid budget for Africa from \$785 million in 2009 to \$458 million by 2012.¹³⁷ That same year, the United States gave almost \$12 billion in development assistance to Africa.¹³⁸ However, Russia has canceled debts

in advance of new weapons deals (Ethiopia), to improve relations (Benin), to access markets (Zambia), and to secure mineral rights (Guinea).¹³⁹ Debt relief has also helped Russia garner support at the UNGA. For example, when the UN voted in 2014 on a resolution criticizing Russian hostilities in Crimea, twenty-nine African countries either voted against or abstained.¹⁴⁰ In 2008, Russia wrote-off \$16 billion in debt from African countries, \$20 billion in 2012, and the same amount in 2017-18.¹⁴¹

The limited use of development assistance is a Russian characteristic that has continued from the Cold War. The Soviets did not provide much aid to Sub-Saharan Africa and got as much in return, which perhaps influenced Russia's current disposition towards development assistance. Russia is unlikely to change this trend, creating opportunities for the United States to counter Russia. The United States could, for example, reallocate portions of its development assistance budget to countries where Russia is trying to make inroads. Angola, which Russia could target as a location for a naval base, is ranked in the bottom third among Sub-Saharan African countries that receive assistance through the US Agency for International Development.¹⁴² Additional aid would help bring Angola closer to the United States.

Military Aid and Agreements

The Soviet Union relied heavily on the provision of military assistance to accomplish its objectives in Africa. By providing weapons, the USSR exerted influence while countering that of the West, supported liberation movements, established itself as a major global power, and found markets for Soviet weapons.¹⁴³ However, the Soviets treated arms sales to Africa like military aid rather than business transactions. The Soviet government, not recipients, paid manufacturers for the weapons. The recipient would then incur a debt, with repayment

postponed so long as it maintained good relations and remained ideologically aligned with the Soviets.¹⁴⁴

Soviet involvement in Angola and Ethiopia, where it aimed to promote ideology, demonstrated the extent of its willingness to provide military support to achieve its goals. As early as 1970, the Soviet government started providing military equipment, political training, and logistical assistance to the MPLA in Angola.¹⁴⁵ In November 1975, the Soviets became more directly involved, transporting Cuban troops, which would total 12,000 within a few months, and providing their own military advisors.¹⁴⁶ The Soviets also provided robust support to Ethiopia. Soviet weapons, including helicopters, tanks, and armored personnel carriers arrived in Ethiopia between November 1977 and February 1978.¹⁴⁷ In January 1978, Ethiopia defeated the Somali invaders with the help of 15,000 Cuban troops and \$1 billion worth of Soviet weapons and military equipment.¹⁴⁸

The Soviet Union demonstrated a clear preference for providing military over economic aid. According to estimates by the Central Intelligence Agency, the USSR provided a total of \$575 million in economic aid worldwide in 1979, while providing an annual average of \$576 million in arms shipments just to Sub-Saharan Africa from 1975-79.¹⁴⁹ Not counting support for liberation movements, nineteen countries received Soviet weapons during this period.¹⁵⁰ The Soviets preferred to provide military over economic aid because the former was more closely aligned with their strategic requirements.¹⁵¹ It is also worth noting that the Soviets provided significantly more military assistance to Africa than the United States and the West in general. From 1973-77, the USSR gave over \$3.6 billion in military aid to Africa, almost eight times as much as the United States.¹⁵² The table below compares Soviet weapons deliveries with those of the United States and its key allies.

Table 2- Weapons to Sub-Saharan Africa (1973-80)

Weapons	USSR	US, France, UK, Italy, and West Germany
Tanks and self-propelled guns	1,520	110
Artillery	3,090	620
APCs and armored cars	2,370	800
Major surface combatants	5	16
Minor surface combatants	60	67
Submarines	0	0
Supersonic combat aircraft	330	90
Subsonic combat aircraft	140	20
Other aircraft	70	300
Helicopters	130	200
Guided missile boats	4	1
Surface-to-air missiles	1,960	200

Source: Raymond W. Copson, “The Soviet Union in Africa: An Assessment,” in *The Pattern of Soviet Conduct in the Third World*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New York, NY: Praeger, 1983), 198.

Military aid helped the Soviet Union achieve some of its key goals in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Central Intelligence Agency specifically attributed military aid to the USSR’s success in securing base rights in the region. For example, military aid helped the USSR secure access to airports in Guinea and Mali, which it used to support the MPLA in Angola. Military aid also helped it establish more permanent naval and air bases, first in Somalia and later in Ethiopia.¹⁵³

Economic conditions, a lack of popular support, and a shift in foreign policy priorities contributed to drastic cuts in Soviet military aid. Starting in the early 1980s, the Soviet Union’s Gross Domestic Product grew by just 0.7 percent. The USSR continued to support socialist states despite its financial hardship, but the policy was becoming unpopular domestically.¹⁵⁴ In 1985, Gorbachev saw Soviet policies as failing in the Third World. He believed some of these countries depended too much on Soviet aid and required them to change their internal policies.¹⁵⁵ Gorbachev also required improvements in terms of human rights, a position that influenced his decision to reduce support to Ethiopia and other allies in 1987-88.¹⁵⁶ The USSR drastically

reduced foreign assistance in 1990, a year after the public learned of the massive amounts of aid provided to Third World countries, which was unpopular now that the USSR was suffering economic hardships.¹⁵⁷

Much like it did during the Cold War, Russia uses military cooperation, including the provision of weapons and training, as its primary tool for gaining favor and achieving its objectives in Africa.¹⁵⁸ While selling weapons for profit could itself be an objective, Russia uses its ability to supply them as a tool to achieve other goals. Weapons exports help Russia to forge relationships with rising African leaders, further expanding its influence throughout the continent while countering that of China, the United States, and other Western countries.¹⁵⁹ Russia also makes inroads by forging alliances with countries that have limited international support or leaders who are struggling to stay in power.¹⁶⁰ These agreements provide other benefits to Russia. For example, they allow Russia to maintain a presence of military training personnel and advisors as well as a limited number of troops in the recipient country.¹⁶¹

There are numerous examples of Russia benefitting from quid pro quo transactions involving military deals. The President of the CAR, Faustin-Archange Touadera, visited Russia in 2017. The visit yielded a military cooperation agreement through which the CAR received Russian light weapons, military trainers, and security for the president and government facilities.¹⁶² Russia trained 1,300 soldiers from the CAR, some of them in Russia, and all but a handful of the trainers worked for private companies such as the Wagner Group. Russia also staffed the president's bodyguard unit with its own special forces personnel and provided a security advisor to the president.¹⁶³ Russia's military assistance was dependent on mining concessions in the CAR.¹⁶⁴ In another example, Russia offered weapons and military advisors to

the DRC in 2018 in exchange for access to the country's energy, agriculture, and mining sectors.¹⁶⁵

The impact of Russian weapons deals is widespread. In the past decade, Russia provided arms to eighteen Sub-Saharan African countries. Russia often provides financing or writes off debts as part of these arrangements.¹⁶⁶ Russia has entered into military agreements with more than twenty African countries since 2015. These deals include weapons sales, the provision of military advisors, training in Russia for African officers, access to sea ports and military air bases, counterterrorism, and peacekeeping operations. Russia provided 34% of Africa's defense imports between 2000-18. Other important weapons providers included the United States (19%), Germany (17%), France (9%), and China (8%).¹⁶⁷ By 2015, Russia was second only to the United States in global weapons exports.¹⁶⁸

Russia has also improved bilateral relations by supplying troops to UN peacekeeping missions.¹⁶⁹ Russia's involvement in these missions has helped forge military relationships, opening doors for arms sales and more intensive political and economic arrangements.¹⁷⁰ Although Russia currently provides only seventy-eight personnel to UN peacekeeping missions, there are reports of hundreds of Russian mercenaries in a few African countries.¹⁷¹ However, the number could be as high as 1,400 in the CAR alone.¹⁷² The robust involvement of Russian mercenaries is a recent phenomenon.

Russia uses paramilitary groups to achieve economic and political objectives in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁷³ The Wagner Group, for example, is an organization with ties to the Kremlin and works more as an extension of Russia's military than as a private company.¹⁷⁴ It not only provides training and security but also exerts influence to achieve Russia's goals, such as securing mining concessions.¹⁷⁵ In the CAR, Russian military contractors protect senior officials

and key facilities, including mines.¹⁷⁶ The arrangement revolves around Yevgeniy Prigozhin, who controls the Wagner Group as well as diamond and gold mines operating in the country.¹⁷⁷ Because mining revenues finance the group's activities, the arrangement serves as an inexpensive option for Russia to exert political influence with the option to deny involvement.¹⁷⁸ In Sudan, another Prigozhin company secured gold mining rights in 2017 at the same time trainers from the Wagner Group arrived to work with the Sudanese military.¹⁷⁹

The Soviet Union successfully used military aid as a tool to achieve its political objectives in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is thus unsurprising that Russia would continue the trend of using military aid as its primary tool. The difference is that while the Soviet Union did so to support liberation movements with socialist inclinations, it now does it to garner support within international organizations and obtain special treatment in the form of mining concessions. Another difference is that Russia has effectively reshaped its military assistance program in two ways that make it difficult for the United States and other Western countries to compete. First, Russia is willing to support alienated African leaders. Second, it uses paramilitary groups, which is concerning as they operate without accountability to any sovereign government.

Trade

Trade figures between the USSR and Sub-Saharan Africa countered Soviet rhetoric. Soviet commentaries during the Cold War claimed that trade with Africa was a high priority.¹⁸⁰ However, the Soviets were not interested in expanding the negligible trade between the USSR and its African partners. Except for minerals, countries in Africa lacked both the priority goods and hard currency the Soviets sought to acquire through trade.¹⁸¹ Imports from Angola, Ethiopia, Benin, the Congo, and Mozambique, the most important Soviet partners in the region, totaled just 0.4 percent of total Soviet trade, while exports to these countries were just 0.2

percent.¹⁸² Sub-Saharan African trade with the Soviet Union between 1975-79 was less than one percent each way. By contrast, during that same period, Western countries took 75 percent of the region’s exports while accounting for 73 percent of its imports.¹⁸³

Current trade between Russia and Africa is intended to help the former exert influence in the region through enhanced economic relationships.¹⁸⁴ Although trade grew considerably since 2000, as shown in table 3, the \$20 billion in trade between Russia and Africa in 2018 pales in comparison with African trade with the United States (\$61 billion), China (\$200 billion), or the European Union (over \$300 billion).¹⁸⁵ Commerce with Africa accounts for just 2 percent of Russian foreign trade, and it is even more limited with North Africa factored out of the equation.¹⁸⁶ Trade between Russia and Sub-Saharan Africa totaled just \$3 billion in 2017, while Sub-Saharan trade with the United States and China totaled \$27 billion and \$56 billion respectively.¹⁸⁷ Russian investments, with the exceptions of those involving energy and mining, have also been minimal.¹⁸⁸

Table 3- Russia - Africa Trade Growth (2000-18)

Year	Amount
2000	\$597 million
2009	\$6 billion
2012	\$10 billion
2018	\$20 billion

Source: Janos Besenyo, “The Africa Policy of Russia,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 1 (2019): 140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1555976>; Jędrzej Czerep and Agnieszka Legucka, *Russia’s Rising Influence in Africa*, Bulletin 162 (Warsaw, Poland: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2019), 2, [https://pism.pl/publications/France and the Russian Presence in Africa](https://pism.pl/publications/France%20and%20the%20Russian%20Presence%20in%20Africa).

Russia’s limited reliance on trade with Sub-Saharan African countries is yet another characteristic that dates back to the Cold War. Despite the increase in trade over the last twenty years, it pales in comparison with those of China, Europe, and even the United States. Russia is unlikely to pursue more robust trading with Sub-Saharan Africa. The United States could strengthen its relations with countries in the region through more robust trade.

Propaganda

The Soviets implemented a robust propaganda campaign to counter Western influence in Africa. Radio Moscow, for example, broadcasted an average of 273 hours weekly, more than either the BBC or Voice of America. The campaign promoted socialist ideology while criticizing US policies. Much of the propaganda was outright misinformation, such as a claim in 1982 that the United States was helping South Africa build weapons for use against the black population and tried to overthrow the leaders of Zambia and Zimbabwe. It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of Soviet propaganda. On one hand, African media and school campuses sometimes repeated the accusations made against the United States, an indication that the campaign was somewhat effective. At the same time, surveys conducted in the early 1980s indicated that Western programs from the BBC, Voice of America, and Radio France were far more popular and deemed more objective by African audiences.¹⁸⁹

Much like it did during the Cold War, Russia uses propaganda to shape public opinion across Africa, discrediting Western policies while promoting its own activities.¹⁹⁰ In Mali and Burkina Faso, where Russia is competing for influence with France, it has engaged in propaganda activities, primarily through social media, to promote negative images of France and other European countries.¹⁹¹ In early 2019, Russian disinformation experts advised the government of Sudan to promote fake stories through social media about Israel supporting demonstrators in Sudan.¹⁹² In October 2019, Facebook cancelled over 200 Russia-linked accounts that were used to disseminate propaganda to eight African countries.¹⁹³

Russia's propaganda activities have been successful. For example, African news outlets often rely on content packaged by Russian media. Much of this content has anti-Western biases. Furthermore, reports commissioned by the French government determined that Russian media

are gaining popularity in Africa. For example, in a few months a Russian news outlet gained hundreds of thousands of followers on social media.¹⁹⁴ According to a report by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Russia's "growing influence in shaping public opinion in Africa has led to undermining confidence in Western countries."¹⁹⁵

Russia's reliance on propaganda to advance its interests in Sub-Saharan Africa dates back to the Cold War. It is, therefore, no surprise that it continues to spread false information to target audiences in the region to shape their perceptions of the West. Russia has learned to effectively combine traditional media and modern social media campaigns to achieve higher levels of success than the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Russia can spread propaganda inexpensively and remotely, which is another reason why it will continue using this tool. Moving forward, it would behoove Western countries operating in countries where Russia has interests to expect and be prepared to quickly respond to Russian propaganda.

Education and Training Programs

The provision of military training and other educational exchange programs were important methods for the Soviets to accomplish their goals. Training African military personnel in the USSR was a way of projecting power and important to forge ties and gain influence with countries that received military aid.¹⁹⁶ Soviet schools trained 2,240 military personnel from the region in 1978 and 1979 alone.¹⁹⁷ But there were also training and education programs for non-military personnel. The number of African students attending schools in the USSR increased from 6,260 in 1970 to 12,865 in 1979.¹⁹⁸ In 1978, the Soviet Union hosted 11,600 students from 30 Sub-Saharan African countries.¹⁹⁹

The Soviet government prioritized educational exchange programs, particularly for Sub-Saharan Africa. Approximately 25,000 students from Africa, including the future presidents of

various African countries, attended Patrice Lumumba University and other Soviet schools.²⁰⁰

Other reports are more generous, claiming that as many as 50,000 Africans studied in the USSR before the collapse of the Soviet Union while another 200,000 received Soviet-sponsored education or training in their countries.²⁰¹ Table 4 shows that the number of students from Sub-Saharan Africa not only doubled during the 1970s, but also made up the largest population of foreign students in the Soviet Union.²⁰² It is worth emphasizing that the Soviet government covered the expenses for most of these students.²⁰³ Despite the popularity of these programs, Gorbachev's reforms led to a drastic cut in the number of educational scholarships.²⁰⁴

Table 4- Students in the USSR from Non-Communist Developing Countries

Year	1970	1975	1979
Total No. of Students	12,695	17,920	30,970
Sub-Saharan Africa	6,260	8,040	12,865
Middle East	2,790	3,615	6,745
South Asia	1,125	2,300	6,635
Latin America	1,640	2,190	2,860
North Africa	610	1,555	1,825
East Asia	270	220	25
Europe	0	0	15

Source: National Foreign Assessment Center (U.S.) and Central Intelligence Agency, *Communist Aid Activities in Non-Communist Less Developed Countries, 1979 and 1954-79: A Research Paper* (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1980), 11.

Educational exchange programs were a major Soviet success, as Russia has made inroads in Africa with support from alumni. Many current African politicians, including former presidents, either received military training or attended Soviet universities.²⁰⁵ In the CAR, for example, Russia was able to establish a fruitful relationship thanks, in part, to the fact that former President Michel Djotodia lived and studied in the Soviet Union for over ten years.²⁰⁶ Russia has continued such programs, albeit in smaller numbers.

Russia's modern educational exchange programs have gained ground versus those of Western countries, which benefit from the fact that English and French are widely spoken across Africa. In 2019, there were over 30,000 students from Africa attending universities in the United

States and a similar number in the United Kingdom, while France received almost 100,000. Approximately 50 percent of all Africans studying overseas attended schools in one of these three countries.²⁰⁷ Russia has had more modest numbers but experienced faster growth. The number of African students in Russia almost doubled from 8,000 in 2013 to 15,000 by 2018.²⁰⁸ During that same period, the number of African students in the United States increased by 26.5 percent.²⁰⁹

Soviet era educational exchange programs did not bear fruit for many years. In fact, in the early 1980s the CIA dismissed the decades-old programs as ineffective for expanding Soviet influence in developing countries.²¹⁰ The success of these programs would not be evident until much later, as Russia began to make inroads with help from alumni who eventually climbed to prominent positions across Sub-Saharan Africa. The delayed success could help explain the sharp increase in Africans studying in Russia over the last few years. By rapidly expanding these programs, Russia could be signaling that it has long-term objectives in the region. After all, it knows from experience that it may not reap the benefits for several decades. While Russia will have a hard time competing with French and English-speaking Western countries, it will likely continue to expand educational exchange programs and wait patiently for the return on its investment.

Avoid Direct Confrontation with the West

Former Soviet officials emphasized that their strategy consisted, in part, of minimizing risk by avoiding direct confrontation with the West.²¹¹ According to Dobrynin, Foreign Minister Gromyko preferred to avoid confronting the United States.²¹² For example, the Soviets were originally not in favor of transporting Cuban troops or providing any type of direct military assistance to the MPLA in Angola, believing the United States would interpret such actions as a

violation of Détente.²¹³ The Soviet stance changed after South African forces, which the Soviets believed had US support, intervened against the MPLA.²¹⁴

Before taking aggressive actions, the USSR carefully considered US positions and whether it would intervene directly.²¹⁵ In December 1975, the Soviets suspended support to the MPLA but resumed it a few days after the US Senate approved legislation that banned the country from providing covert support in Angola.²¹⁶ The USSR increased support once it was certain that the US would not reciprocate. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that a lack of assertive action by the US in Angola motivated the Soviets to advance their interests.²¹⁷

Current Russian strategy also consists of avoiding direct confrontation with the West. Russia has been able to advance its interests in Africa thanks, in part, to limited engagement in the region by the United States and Europe.²¹⁸ Russia already tended to engage with African countries that had a limited European presence, but France's and the United States' recent disengagement allowed it to exert power and influence in the region.²¹⁹ For example, France's decreased presence in the CAR, after its peacekeeping operation there ended in 2016, allowed Russia to advance its relations with that country.²²⁰ In 2018, Russia offered weapons and military advisors to the DRC in exchange for access to the country's energy, agriculture, and mining sectors. They successfully negotiated this agreement after both the United States and European Union reduced diplomatic relations and economic aid to that country.²²¹

There is a correlation between improved Russian relations with Sub-Saharan African countries—including Sudan, Angola, and Ethiopia—and the Trump administration paying less attention to the continent.²²² Russia took advantage of the United States' reduced high-level engagement as well as comments by the President that were widely interpreted as racist towards

African countries.²²³ Furthermore, Russia entered into various military and economic cooperation agreements with African countries in October 2018, just a few months after the US decision to reduce troops in the region.²²⁴ It is also worth noting that former President Trump was the first US leader not to visit Africa since Ronald Reagan.

The Soviet Union avoided taking actions in Sub-Saharan Africa that could trigger a military reaction by the United States. Although the risk today of direct military confrontation is lower, Russia has maintained and amplified the use of this strategy. Russia appears to avoid not just military but also diplomatic confrontation. With few exceptions, as is the case of South Africa, Russia pursues its interests more aggressively in areas where Western countries have a weak presence. An understanding of Russia's reluctance to compete directly with the West, combined with an understanding of its goals in Sub-Saharan Africa, are perhaps the best predictors of Russia's future actions in the region. More robust diplomatic engagement, particularly visits by the President and Vice-President of the United States, would serve as significant hurdles along Russia's path.

CONCLUSION

Most of Russia's objectives in Sub-Saharan Africa date back to the Cold War era, but there are important differences. Competition with the West remains a high priority for Moscow, but its focus today is to garner support at the UNGA, which will ultimately help its pursuits in other parts of the world. Securing sea lines of communication also continues to be a goal, which would help deter others from interfering with its military actions elsewhere. Finally, Russia continues to seek access to minerals to supplement its domestic production as well to keep the West, particularly Europe, from accessing them. Russian companies are investing heavily, including in unstable countries, in all stages of mineral extraction to influence global prices.²²⁵

There are also connections between the methods employed by the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia. Much as it did during the Cold War, Russia engages in limited trade with Sub-Saharan Africa and has a strong preference for providing military aid over developmental assistance, using the former to garner support within international organizations and obtain mining concessions. Russia has improved on Soviet propaganda techniques to counter the West, and has effectively combined traditional media with modern social media campaigns. Also, the delayed success of Soviet-era educational exchange programs may explain the sharp expansion of Russia's current programs. Finally, Russia appears to avoid diplomatic confrontation and pursues its interests more aggressively in areas where Western countries have a weak presence.

Russia's activities in Sub-Saharan Africa are not only likely to continue, but may also signal long-term plans and possible actions in other parts of the world. For example, the expansion of educational exchange programs could be a signal that Russia has long-term objectives in the region. It will likely continue to expand such programs and wait patiently for the return on its investment. Also, having the support of African countries at the UNGA and UN Security Council, as well as building naval bases in Sub-Saharan Africa, would be imperative for more aggressive Russian actions in other parts of the world, including military engagement. Establishing a position in the region from which it could project power across the Atlantic, as it had during the Cold War, could be Russia's next major step in the region.

Knowing Russia's intentions and the methods it employs to achieve its objectives may help the United States counter Russian influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Russia is engaging in countries where the West has a weak presence, that have mineral resources, and/or whose locations are suitable for naval bases. Also, countries with unstable governments are a match for Russian military aid, including the use of paramilitary groups like the Wagner Group.

Understanding the characteristics Russia looks for in its partners, combined with the knowledge of which tools Russia is not likely to employ, can provide a significant advantage to the United States. For example, the United States could strengthen its relations with countries in the region through more robust trade. Furthermore, it could reallocate portions of its development assistance budget to countries where Russia is trying to make inroads. Finally, more robust diplomatic engagement, particularly visits by the President and Vice-President of the United States, would serve as significant hurdles along Russia's path.

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- ²¹⁴ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 234; Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 567.
- ²¹⁵ Rothenberg, *The USSR and Africa*, 11.
- ²¹⁶ Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 570–71.
- ²¹⁷ Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation*, 716.
- ²¹⁸ Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa*, 20.
- ²¹⁹ Maslanka, *France and the Russian Presence in Africa*, 2; Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa*, 1.
- ²²⁰ Maslanka, *France and the Russian Presence in Africa*, 1.
- ²²¹ Czerep, *Russia’s Political Offensive in Africa*, 2.
- ²²² Matusevich, “Russia in Africa: A Search for Continuity in a Post-Cold War Era,” 36; Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa*, 5.
- ²²³ Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa*, 5.
- ²²⁴ Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa*, 5.
- ²²⁵ Monaghan, “Russian Grand Strategy: Avoiding the Barracuda Effect,” 7; Besenyo, “The Africa Policy of Russia,” 137.

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