

Intelligence in Public Media

Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender

Samuel Ramani (Oxford University Press, 2023), 455 pages, introduction, postscript, notes, index.

Reviewed by Charles Long

When reflecting on their long-standing distrust of their Russian neighbor, Finns often observe that “a Russian is a Russian even fried in butter.” Despite the nearly 4,000-kilometer distance from Finland to Africa, this word of caution is equally appropriate to African countries currently engaging with Russia. Dr. Samuel Ramani authoritatively analyzes the several stages of Russia’s experience in Africa in his book, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* Little of Ramani’s book concerns Russian intelligence, but his serious research is well worth the attention of intelligence, security, and policy professionals who focus on Africa, Russian power projection, and the attraction of African governments to Russia.

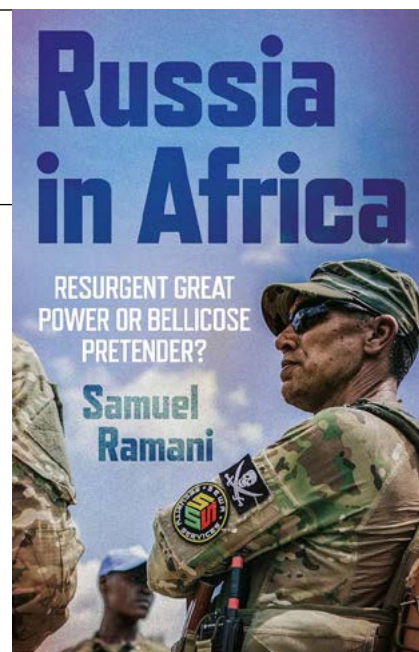
Ramani, an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), based his analyses on an impressive body of research that included scholarly literature on the Soviet Union’s Africa policy, media coverage of Russia’s more notable recent actions on the continent and the products of reputable think tanks and subject matter experts of mostly non-Russian origin. As he points out, there is a lack of published work on Russia’s post-1991 Africa policy. Ramani does not let this keep him from offering his readers a broad and objective analysis.

He begins with a brief but very useful history of Russia’s experience in Africa, beginning with the spread of Orthodox Christianity in the Maghreb (particularly Egypt) and the Horn in the late 16th century. These partnerships evolved over time and the regions have remained key Russian zones of influence. As the Cold War kicked off and Africa states decolonized, the USSR amplified its efforts across the continent. Russia made inroads through weapons sales and military and development assistance. Cuban and Warsaw Pact surrogates in Africa acted as force multipliers for Russian interests. Ramani points out that while the US supported decolonization to counter Soviet outreach in the newly independent countries, Russia armed and supported national liberation movements. As a celebrated CIA Africa officer has observed,

with ruling parties in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola and Mozambique that grew out of movements at least partially supported by the USSR, one can conclude the United States lost the Cold War.

Ramani re-counts the low points in Russia’s Africa policy. Burdened by its own socio-economic and political crises in the late 1980s and 1990s, Russia was forced to scale back its activities and presence. It lowered Africa’s strategic priority, reduced arms sales, and closed 10 embassies on the continent. It even allowed its normally close bilateral relations with Libya and Sudan to atrophy, and at times it coordinated with the United States on African initiatives in the UN.

Ramani also illustrates how, under Foreign Minister Primakov, Russia reversed course and became more independently engaged on the continent. To reassert itself, Russia used a combination of debt forgiveness (in return for privileged access to African markets), closer commercial ties with key countries and expanded arms sales to traditional partners and fragile states. These have been some of the underpinnings of Russia’s strategy in Africa. Years later, Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group and other private military contractors conveniently dovetailed into this strategy by supporting weak or authoritarian regimes in return for allowing the Russians to engage in predatory mining and exploitation of valuable natural resources. African regimes apparently agreed to these practices with little regard to Russia’s sloppy environmental record.



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By the mid-2000s, Russia began devoting even more attention to Africa, supporting development through institutions such as the UN, the African Union, various African regional organizations, and the BRICS alliance. Russia presented its Africa policy as principled. It increasingly used soft power such as foreign aid and commercial relations to advance its interests. This allowed Russia to portray itself as an alternative partner to the West, a critic of France on the continent, a bridge between underdeveloped and developed economies, and a crisis mediator.

As Ramani points out, at the same time, Russia often showed counterrevolutionary tendencies by dithering on popular uprisings against old regimes during the Arab Spring and by opposing Libyan dictator Gaddafi's overthrow and international efforts to intervene on behalf of popularly elected Ivorian President Ouattara when incumbent Laurent Gbagbo refused to step down. Russia's anti-Western tone in Africa also became more pronounced. Russia opposed and undermined US initiatives in Africa and capitalized on apparent US neglect. It reached out to smaller nations to garner more support (or less opposition) in the UN to its global activities.

Ramani documents how, by Vladimir Putin's fourth term as president, Russia appeared to have regained its status as a continent-wide great power in Africa. A highly symbolic event, the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019 in Sochi, highlighted Russia's accomplishments on the continent and its commitment to Africa's future. Amid the flash and the customary anti-Western hyperbole, Russia trumpeted \$12.5 billion in new ventures with African partners. Ramani carefully researched Russian commercial activity across the continent and their mixed results.

Russia's bread and butter, however, remains its military sales. Intervention in Syria created new opportunities for security cooperation across Africa and showcased Russian military equipment and capabilities it then promoted on the continent. Credible reports of civilian massacres conducted by Russian mercenaries in the Sahel, however, called into question the effectiveness of

Russian-supported security.^{a b} African countries partnering with Russia on security may soon learn the hard way that Russia's poor record in transnational counterterrorism and its disastrous "Grozny Model" of counterinsurgency could very well accelerate terrorist and popular threats to their regimes.

The book's chronicle of Russia's return as a great power in Africa can make readers conclude that Moscow capitalized off a corresponding drop in Western interest in the continent, perhaps due to wars, threats, and crises elsewhere. This conclusion has merit. As Ramani points out, in recent years the United States has been more focused on China's actions in Africa and has dealt with Russian initiatives there on an ad hoc basis. At least symbolically, the US position in Africa was not helped when then President Trump omitted any mention of Africa during his 2019 address to the UN. Some observers believe Russia is filling a vacuum left by the West in the Sahel and in the Central African Republic (CAR). Russia may in fact be chiefly responsible for this vacuum through disinformation that incites fragile and exploitable African governments into believing the narratives that the West is unreliable and that Russia offers a panacea to their problems.

Russia is often the partner of last resort for African pariah states and countries that have exhausted the budgets and patience of traditional partners in development. These regimes still need basic assistance to operate (or to protect their skins from their own people) and tend to under-price their mineral wealth in return for Russian security lifelines. As a *préfet* (governor equivalent) in a particularly violent area of the CAR told the BBC, "When your house burns and you shout: 'Fire! Fire!' You don't care if the water you are given is sweet or salty. All you care about is that it extinguishes the flames."^c

Russia's poor record of delivering on its promises calls into question the longterm sustainability of its model in Africa. By the time of the second Russia-Africa Summit in 2023 in St. Petersburg, Russia direct investment in

a. Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson, "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali," Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 11, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

b. "Central African Republic: Human Rights Violations against Civilians by the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) Are Unacceptable, Says UN Expert." February 20, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/central-african-republic-human-rights-violations-against-civilians-central>. Accessed April 15, 2024.

c. Yemisi Adegoke, "Why Russia Is Winning Hearts in the Central African Republic" BBC News, December 10, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67625139>.

Africa remained at about 1 percent of the continent's total inflow. Despite the lofty promise Putin made four years earlier in Sochi to double trade with Africa in five years, Russian trade with Africa had in fact fallen.^a Seventy percent of that trade was with four countries: Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and South Africa.^b

Ramani also analyzes how Russia used instruments of national power in six of its interventions in Africa from 2018 to 2020: Guinea, CAR, Libya, Sudan, Madagascar and Mozambique. Not all the interventions were successful, but the Russian approaches were illuminating. Ramani's examples of Moscow's diplomatic, informational, military, and economic levers would be suitable for military war college students researching the DIME framework. His chapters on Russia's COVID-19 policy and the new frontiers of Russian security in Africa are timely retrospectives of significant recent Russian actions on the continent.

In Africa at least, Russia's default is to act unilaterally. Russia and China may appear to have common interests, but the two countries do not really cooperate with each other on Africa outside of UN Security Council voting. As Ramani points out, Russia sees instability in Africa as a geopolitical opportunity while China sees it as an existential threat to its Belt and Road Initiative, which is intended to expand China's economic and political power (249). Despite its attention-getting recent gains, Russia may ultimately be destined to remain a second-tier power in Africa, alongside the UK, India, Japan and Turkey and looking up at the US, China, and France (246).

Ramani finished this work before the Wagner mutiny and before Prigozhin had cause to worry too much about air travel. Therefore, the book does not cover Russia in Africa in the post-Prigozhin era, but Ramani addresses the minimal adverse impact Russia's now two-year war in Ukraine has had on its Africa strategy and relations. Indeed, as this review was written, Russia continued preparing its summer offensive against Ukraine and Russian military advisers had arrived in Niger at a time when the US-Niger security partnership was under unprecedented stress.

Russia in Africa is well written and straightforward. Readers who are not steeped in Russia or Africa will find it easy to follow. In addition to the book's thorough research and balanced analysis, Ramani does a service to readers wanting to undertake further study by listing his wide range of sources. Had there been room for another chapter or two in this book, Africa watchers would have probably welcomed a longer and deeper look at the history of Russia in Africa to better appreciate Russia's long legacy. Intelligence officers working Africa will find this book exceptionally useful in gaining a solid understanding of Russia's national strategy and its methods in Africa.

Perhaps African governments and regimes that partner with Russia will find another Finnish proverb useful: "When you'll try to be a friend with a Russian, keep the knife near!"



The reviewer: Charles Long is the pen name of a retired CIA operations officer who served in Africa.

a. Vadim Zaytsev, "Second Russia-Africa Summit Lays Bare Russia's Waning Influence," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 31, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90294>.

b. Joseph Siegle, "The Russia-Africa Summit is coming, but Putin barely invests in the continent while the mercenary Wagner Group rages across the countryside," *Fortune*, July 24, 2023, <https://fortune.com/europe/2023/07/24/why-russia-africa-summit-vladimir-putin-yevge-ny-prigozhin-wagner-group/>.