

# **MILITARY RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND AFRICA, BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

by Abdelhak Bassou

23-24 OCTOBER



To prepare policymakers and investors for the onset of the African Century by supporting dynamic geopolitical partnerships with African states and multilateral institutions.

# MILITARY RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND AFRICA, BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE

by **Abdelhak Bassou**

This report is written and published in accordance with the Atlantic Council Policy on Intellectual Independence. The authors are solely responsible for its analysis and recommendations. The Atlantic Council and its donors do not determine, nor do they necessarily endorse or advocate for, any of this report's conclusions.

Atlantic Council  
1030 15th Street NW, 12th Floor  
Washington, DC 20005

For more information, please visit  
[www.AtlanticCouncil.org](http://www.AtlanticCouncil.org).

**ISBN-13: 978-1-61977-265-6**

**February 2023**

Design: Donald Partyka and Anais Gonzalez

Cover: Russian President Vladimir Putin greets Angola's President Joao Manuel Goncalves Lourenco and his wife Ana Dias Lourenco during an official welcome ceremony for heads of states and governments of member-states of Russia-Africa Summit in the Black sea resort of Sochi, Russia, October 23, 2019. Sergei Chirikov/Pool via REUTERS

# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>I. THE TEMPORAL AXIS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MOSCOW’S RELATIONS WITH AFRICA</b>	<b>3</b>
1. Religion as a Vehicle for Dialogue as Early as the Fifteenth Century	3
2. First Military Intervention: Action in Africa to Counter the Europeans	3
3. Military Relations between the USSR and Africa (1917–1990)	4
<b>II. THE MILITARY AND SECURITY ASPECT OF THE POST-USSR RUSSIA-AFRICA RELATIONSHIP</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Putin: Recovering Instruments of Power	5
2. Africa and Putin: Primarily Military Relations	5
<b>III. RUSSIAN-AFRICAN MILITARY COOPERATION AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE</b>	<b>7</b>
1. An Ongoing War, with Uncertain Outcomes	7
2. Africa Appears to Dislike Russia’s Actions in Ukraine, But Is Not Unanimous in Condemning Moscow	7
3. The African Perception of Russian Military Power	9
What Does the War in Ukraine Tell Us about Russian Military Power?	9
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>12</b>

# Introduction

In a recent telephone conversation, Russian President Vladimir Putin officially invited Assimi Goïta, the military chief of the transition in Mali, to take part in the second Russia-Africa summit to be held in Saint Petersburg.<sup>1</sup> This summit is scheduled for July 2023, according to Mikhail Bogdanov, the special representative of the president of Russia to the Middle East and Africa and deputy foreign minister. Russia is openly optimistic that several African leaders will attend the planned summit, according to Russian Ambassador-at-Large Oleg Ozerov: “Russia expects that most African leaders will attend the Russia-Africa summit in 2023 ... We are getting positive responses. I think most African heads of state will be at the forum.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite Russia’s war with Ukraine, President Putin remains keen on maintaining and strengthening relations with Africa, and this planned summit is a follow-up, four years later, to the October 2019 meeting in Sochi attended by a multitude of African leaders. Russia’s determination to hold the Summit with African countries—amid its ongoing war in Ukraine and difficulties imposed on Moscow by Western sanctions—is either: the result of Africa’s importance to Russian foreign policy and, therefore, the meeting with African leaders must take place, regardless of conditions; because Russia needs African states to counter Western attempts to isolate it on the international stage; or because Russia seeks to show that its war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed by the West do not impact the normal operations of the Russian state, which continues to hold normal relations with the rest of the world, including Africa.

It is a considerable challenge to bring together African heads of state in Russia, despite the United Nations (UN) vote by African countries last October, signaling a turning point in African positions toward Russia and its war in Ukraine. The challenge is great and begs the question of whether Russia-Africa relations are strong enough to withstand the war in Ukraine.

This paper examines this issue, and attempts to determine whether the war in Ukraine, launched by Russia in February 2022, will affect Russia-Africa relations, have no impact, or strengthen Russia-Africa ties.

1 The first Russia-Africa summit was held in Sochi in October 2019.  
2 Information and comments reported by several African media in July 2022.

# I. The Temporal Axis and Historical Context of Moscow’s Relations with Africa<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Religion as a Vehicle for Dialogue as Early as the Fifteenth Century

Russia’s first relations with Africa were steeped in religion—namely, Christianity. Russians and Africans came into contact as early as the fifteenth century through pilgrimages to Jerusalem that inspired Russian travelers, and other Slavic writers visiting Africa and writing about their journeys, leading to a broader knowledge of Africa in Russia.<sup>4</sup> Egyptians (Copts) and Ethiopians (Orthodox Church) were the first Africans to become familiar to Russians. Encounters between Africans and Russians did not, however, lead to official and lasting relations between state structures (kingdoms and empires), despite occasional events including a trip to Moscow by the patriarchs of Alexandria and Sinai in 1556 to solicit the tsar’s charity.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. First Military Intervention: Action in Africa to Counter the Europeans

Russia’s first military interaction with Africa occurred in the late nineteenth century, in Ethiopia. How and why?

As of the late eighteenth century, the United Kingdom (UK) and other European powers of the time hindered Russian expansion into the Middle East and Africa. The land of the tsars was resented by other Europeans and largely overlooked at the 1885 Berlin Conference on the partition of Africa. Faced with this rejection and an inability to deal with the Europeans, Russia turned away from Africa and concentrated its focus on Asia, the Arctic, and the Great North, while keeping an eye on colonial advances in Africa.

When the UK extended its dominion over most of the Nile in 1882, it sought to ally itself with Italy against France. Therefore, it ceded the port of Metsewa to Italy. This handover met two major hurdles.

- Metsewa is Ethiopia’s outlet to the Red Sea, and the country had always claimed its right to this gateway.
- The agreement between Italy and the UK enabled the latter to link its Mediterranean colonies to the Indian Ocean, something Russia could not accept, as Russia had always sought to contain British presence in Egypt and Sudan, and to prevent any junction between British colonies in the Mediterranean and in the Pacific.

Russian and Ethiopian interests converged, and this convergence gave Russia the opportunity to assert itself against its European antagonists and find an opening in Africa. Russia, which had until then ignored the Negus’ calls for help, revised its position and decided to reconsider its policy of indifference regarding Africa. A delegation from Emperor Menelik II was received in Saint Petersburg in 1895, and Tsar Nicholas II agreed to provide Ethiopia with assistance against Italy. History retains the name of Nikolai Leontiev, the Russian military adviser in charge of training the Ethiopian emperor’s soldiers. He was also charged with recruiting and leading Russian volunteers into battle at the decisive battle of Adwa, marking Ethiopia’s landmark victory against Italy in 1896.

Russia stood to achieve a dual objective. On one hand, it impeded British and Italian ambitions in Africa. On the other, it paved the way for Russian incursion on the continent—a dream the Cossack Ataman Nicholas Ivanovich Achinov, a merchant from the city of Penza, attempted to realize as early as 1883.<sup>6</sup>

3 “Moscow” is used here to mean the Russian Empire, the USSR, and present-day Russia at the same time.  
4 A. A. Maiga, “Africa as Seen by Russian Travel Writers (14th to Early 20th Century),” *African Literary Studies* 40 (2015), 141–157, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1035986ar>.  
5 It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that Russia opened two consulates in Egypt, and diplomatic relations were established between Russia and Ethiopia in 1898.  
6 Nicholas Ivanovich Achinov persuaded hundreds of his compatriots, including the governor of Nizhny Novgorod, of the strategic importance of a colony in Africa. He set up an expedition and settled on the former Egyptian fort of Sangallo, which he renamed “New Moscow.” The French, after seeking prior consent of the tsar, attacked the fort. Achinov was captured and sent to Russia, where he was convicted of piracy and disobedience to the Tsar.



3. Military Relations between the USSR and Africa (1917–1990)

During both its heyday and in its decline, the Soviet Union’s policy in Africa was never specific to the continent. It was always part of a general policy toward the non-American and non-European world.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was presented in Africa as a vector for anti-colonialist doctrine, defending the oppressed against Western imperialism. However, the Russians realized as early as 1920 that the revolutionary conflagration they hoped Africa’s revolutionaries would fuel was not happening. Joseph Stalin eventually became convinced that Africa’s revolutionary leaders, who spoke more of African revolution than of international revolution, were unreliable, lacking in credibility, and willing to deal with the imperialists, whom they fought only verbally.<sup>7</sup> Africans focused more on antagonism between poor and rich countries, with no concern for the principle of class conflict dear to the Soviets. In the eyes of the Soviets, Africa’s revolutionaries failed to grasp the meaning of revolution and the destiny of world civilization. As a result, there was little question at that time of Russian military effort or cooperation with Africa in this direction.<sup>8</sup>

In 1955, the Soviet Union established the Warsaw Pact, which made the Soviet Union more confident in dealing with the West. It established a balance of power in Europe, and Moscow was no longer in fear that the West would take military action against it. As the Cold War set in, each side sought to avoid an escalation that could lead to a nuclear war.

At the same time, decolonized countries sought to act against colonialism, and these efforts culminated in the Summit of Bandoeng, which established an Afro-Asian movement most notable for its anti-imperialist spirit. China took part in this, but the USSR did not. This prompted Nikita Khrushchev to deploy greater efforts in Asia and Africa to make up for delays caused by Stalin in relations with these countries, and not to allow the sister, yet enemy, revolution of Mao Zedong to take over. Post-Bandoeng conditions made his task easier.

As the wave of independence grew and spread, African peoples still under colonial rule increasingly began to organize into liberation movements and felt the need for military and diplomatic assistance to attain independence. This gave Khrushchev the opportunity to establish contacts with these movements and provide support through weapons and

training, as well as diplomacy, in the hope of making these countries satellites of the Soviet empire post-independence. Soviet aid to these movements was mostly in opposition to other Western-based movements, which preferred to emancipate themselves through negotiation and dialogue. This is how the USSR set about assisting so-called revolutionary liberation movements across several African countries.

- In South Africa, the USSR unconditionally supported the African National Congress (ANC) since its creation, and, to a lesser extent, the South African Communist Party (SACP).
- Moscow provided extensive military assistance to the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO); in this case, the USSR wanted to act against Western colonialist forces, as well as remove this movement from Chinese influence.
- The USSR gave full support to the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), at the expense of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).
- In Namibia, the USSR initially helped the Southwest African National Union (SWANU), before transferring support to the Southwest African People’s Organization (SWAPO) when SWANU turned to China in 1963.
- In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) benefited from Soviet aid, at the expense of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

Accordingly, a number of these movements, which took power in their countries after independence, maintained military ties to the Soviet Union—particularly in terms of arms supplies.<sup>9</sup>

While sub-Saharan countries do not import much given their limited financial resources, North African countries—especially Algeria, Libya, and Egypt—were important clients of USSR weaponry. The adoption of Soviet revolutionary doctrine by a number of these countries also compelled them to align with Moscow in terms of military doctrine. Most military officers in these sub-Saharan and North African countries trained in Soviet military academies.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the USSR, Russia was absent from Africa for nearly two decades, before returning to capitalize on the relationship’s Soviet legacy.

7 Bartenev, Vladimir. "L'URSS Et L'Afrique Noire Sous Khrouchtchev : La mise à jour des mythes de la coopération." Outre-mers, vol. 94, no. 354, PERSEE Program, 2007, pp. 63–82. Crossref <https://doi.org/10.3406/outre.2007.4253>

8 Not only did Stalin not take action to institutionalize relations with Africa, but he was almost indifferent to the African continent, which he totally ignored until his death in 1953.

9 These countries were not the only ones to fall under the Soviet yoke in the 1970s. Algeria, Libya, Mali, and Kenya were all under Soviet influence, as was Ethiopia after the toppling of its emperor. Africa had forty thousand Soviet military advisers in the 1970s.

II. The Military and Security Aspect of the Post-USSR Russia-Africa Relationship

1. Putin: Recovering Instruments of Power

Post-USSR Russia might be narrowed down to Russia under Vladimir Putin and the decade the Russian Federation spent under Boris Yeltsin, which most observers considered a difficult transition—in which the contours of the new Russia were taking shape without taking any definite form.

For Russian nationalists, this episode was one of humiliation. The West, still celebrating its victory over communism and sovietism, relegated Russia—the successor state of the USSR, heir to its nuclear arsenal and its position on the United Nations Security Council—to the status of a decadent, minor regional power.<sup>10</sup> In Africa, many socialist countries found themselves abandoned from a patron with little regard for democracy and governance values, and without a buffer from Western pressure.

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, he took it upon himself to reestablish Russia’s position on the world stage. Like all Russian nationalists, he had suffered from the West’s treatment of Russia in the absence of a state strong enough to assert itself inside and outside Russia. His actions, therefore, were directed toward course correction.

- He started by bringing Chechnya in line, as it had dared to challenge Russia during Boris Yeltsin’s term in office.
- He then turned his attention to the oligarchs who had gained considerable influence in the earlier period, to the point of aspiring to steer political power. Putin made it clear in both word and deed that, while they could manage their fortunes as they pleased, they ought not to meddle in politics—on pain of extinction. Putin believed the state must be strong and not fear any other force, however wealthy it may be.

- He gave the country a new doctrine that, without seeking to resurrect communism, advocated Russia’s grandeur as in the times of the tsarist empires and the Soviet Union.
- He restructured and upgraded the tool that, in his eyes, could ensure the country’s greatness: its military arsenal.

2. Africa and Putin: Primarily Military Relations

In his first term in office, Putin paid little attention to Africa, as he was mostly focused on restoring the Russian state, and then on actions in his immediate vicinity, such as Chechnya, Georgia, and other surrounding states. It was not until September 2006 that President Putin undertook a mini tour of Africa, which took him first to South Africa and then to Morocco. This mini tour was followed by Putin successor Dmitry Medvedev’s trip to Angola, Namibia, and Nigeria in 2009.

At the turn of the century, Africa had been merely a Cold War-era confrontation theater in the eyes of Russia. That period being over, Russia did not see any specific strategic or geopolitical importance for Africa in its foreign policy.

This stance is consistent with previous ones; neither the tsars nor the USSR ever attached any importance to Africa outside specific circumstances stemming from the animosity or rivalry Russia always harbored toward the West. However, this semblance of indifference did not apply to all. Some USSR allies retained certain privileges even with the continuator state of Russia, especially regarding military matters.

- In 2006, on his visit to Algiers, Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote off Algeria’s \$4.5 billion debt, in return for sizable arms-purchase contracts.
- The same applied in Libya that same year, again in return for arms contracts, in addition to gas and railroads.<sup>11</sup>

10 The Western psyche at the time was dominated by the view of Francis Fukuyama, who assumed a victory of the democratic and liberal world over all other ideologies in his book *The End of History and the Last Man*.

11 See: DIPLOMATIE N° 108, March–April 2021, 43.

As history attests, Russia turns to Africa only in times of crisis or of rivalry with the West. Putin is no exception. The Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea brought severe Western sanctions against Russia. So, starting in 2014, Moscow remembered Africa and sought new economic, political, and military relations there, reinforcing existing ones, such as those with Algeria and Egypt.

This great return of Africa to Russia’s foreign policy is evident in military and security matters. While Russia signed only seven military cooperation agreements between 2010 and 2017, this number jumped to twenty from 2017 to 2021. More than half of these twenty agreements were signed with countries that had no previous military ties to Russia. After 2014, military cooperation came to the forefront of Russia’s new ties to Africa, seemingly dominating other areas such as agriculture, minerals, and civil nuclear technology.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the talk of diversified cooperation, Russian officials rarely hesitate to put peace, security, and stability in Africa at the forefront.<sup>13</sup> Besides, arms contracts often enable other forms of military cooperation, including the use of African ports by the Russian fleet, and pave the way for Russian security contractors (which are genuine armies) to gain a foothold on the continent. These contractors frequently serve as proxies for Russia’s military when the latter does not deem it appropriate to be officially present.

The drive to develop all kinds of relationships with Africa, particularly military ones, culminated in the 2019 Sochi summit. At this meeting, and throughout the 2015–2019 period, Russia presented itself to Africans as strong and proud of its success in Syria, going so far as to talk of the quality of combat-tested Russian weaponry.<sup>14</sup> In the country of Bashar al-Assad, Russia defied the Western coalition against terrorism and, by means of horrific intervention, managed to keep its ally Bashar in power—against, and in spite of, the will of his people and the international community. Russia also presented itself as the power that defeated the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and as a state that possessed and produced a safe and effective arsenal of weapons capable of turning the tide in favor of a president on the brink of collapse.

Africans attending the Sochi summit were in awe of Russian military might. This led to the signature of the aforementioned twenty contracted agreements for arms, training, and security and defense consulting.

Between this summit in Sochi and the upcoming one in saint Petersburg, the war in Ukraine broke out, and Russian military capacities were again put into play. Were they as effective as in Syria? Are Africans still as in awe of Russian power as they were in 2019? What are the assumptions and scenarios for Afro-Russian military relations following the Ukraine war? The following section considers these questions.

12 According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2015 and 2020, • Mali purchased four Russian Mi-35M combat helicopters, the same ones deployed in Ukraine; • the Central African Republic acquired twenty BRDM-2 armored vehicles, second-hand vehicles delivered by Russia as development aid; • Burkina Faso purchased two Mi-171 armed transport helicopters; • Ethiopia purchased one hundred Pantsir mobile air-defense batteries; • Nigeria purchased a dozen Mi-35M helicopters and three hundred anti-tank missiles; • Algeria purchased two submarines, the Ouarsenis and the Hoggar; and • Egypt purchased fifty MiG29M fighter aircraft.

13 During their tour of Africa in 2018, Sergei Lavrov and Nikolai Patrushev carried a message pertaining to the multifaceted nature of Russian assistance to African partners—that it aids with the resolution of internal conflict and the fight against terrorism. They also presented the idea of creating combat-ready African units, capable of effectively fighting terrorism throughout Africa, and stated that the deployment of these units would be carried out in strict compliance with international regulations.

14 Alexander Mikheiv, for his part, said the same year that combat-tested Russian military products, are 100-percent consistent with the goal of making Africa a safer place. See: Abdelhak Bassou, “Russia in Africa: Renewal of an Old Relationship or Creation of a New One?” Policy Center for the New South, October 3, 2019, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-russie-en-afrique-renouvellement-d%E2%80%99une-ancienne-relation-ou-cr%C3%A9ation-d%E2%80%99une-nouvelle>.

### III. Russian-African Military Cooperation after the War in Ukraine

#### 1. An Ongoing War, with Uncertain Outcomes

Eight months into the war with Ukraine, which the Russians continue to refer to as a “special operation,” many uncertainties remain regarding its outcome.

- Russian forces now seem bogged down in Ukraine. Russia started the war, but no longer has control over the decision to end it. That decision now belongs to Ukraine and its Western supporters.

- Comparing the strength of the warring parties at the beginning of the war and today casts doubt on the possibility of either side winning the war. While Russia initially seemed stronger and was able to capture pieces of Ukrainian territory, the counteroffensive launched by Ukraine since September 2022 and increased Western military aid seem to be reversing the balance of power in Kyiv’s favor.

- Annexation of Ukrainian territories leads Russia and Ukraine to radicalize positions—one to uphold the annexation and the other to express the unwavering determination to liberate its territories.

- Despite agreements on prisoner-of-war exchanges and cereal exports to the rest of the world, the possibility of negotiations on an end to hostilities, or even a ceasefire, seems to be getting further and further away.

However, these doubts do not preclude us from assessing the facts and taking stock of the situation regarding this war’s strategic objectives.

- Russia, ever in pursuit of power, sees itself, alongside China, as the true “challenger” to a world order in which the United States and the West continue to dominate world affairs. President Putin makes an enemy of the West and accuses it of wanting, if not to exterminate Russia, to at least subjugate it and make it a weak and submissive state. To forestall these Western ambitions, President Putin wants to secure dominance over a large part of the former Soviet world and increase his influence over other parts of the globe that are susceptible to anti-Western ideas. Most of

these countries are in the “New Global South,” of which Africa is an integral part.

- The West seeks not only to weaken Russia to deter future aggression against other countries, but also to isolate it in order to restrict its sphere of influence and render it into a pariah state, alienated from the international community. Western military action (military aid to Ukraine), combined with economic sanctions, is backed by diplomatic action and efforts at the United Nations to get countries in the Global South including Africa, to isolate Russia and, thus, remove them from any Russian influence.

#### 2. Africa Appears to Dislike Russia’s Actions in Ukraine, But Is Not Unanimous in Condemning Moscow

The position of African countries on the war in Ukraine remains generally ambiguous at both the political and diplomatic levels and shows no support for one side at the expense of the other. This ambivalence is clearly expressed in an examination of African votes on the three UN resolutions related to the war in Ukraine.

- When the United Nations put a resolution condemning Russia’s aggression against Ukraine to a vote in March 2022, twenty-eight African countries supported the resolution, thereby voting against Russia. Only one African country supported Russia and voted against the resolution. Seventeen African countries abstained and eight declared themselves absent. While half of African countries voted against Russia, another half did not seem inclined to isolate it.

- During the votes on suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, this trend changed. Nine African countries supported Russia by voting against the resolution that excluded Russia from the Human Rights Council; only nine other countries voted for the exclusion. Thirty-six countries maintained ambiguous positions, either via abstention (twenty-three) or absence (thirteen). This time, most African countries stood aside from the intention to isolate Russia, neither frankly supporting Moscow nor clearly siding with the West.

- When votes were held on condemning Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territories in October 2022, twenty-nine African countries voted in favor of the resolution and condemned Russia’s action. No African country backed the annexation, and twenty-five countries took split positions by either abstaining (twenty) or not voting (five). Once again, Africa remained divided between countries supporting attempts to put Russia on the sidelines of the international community and countries that, while not supporting Russia, refrained from clearly aligning with the West.

The question of human rights does not seem to be as important for Africa as it is for the West, so it seemed that suspension from the international human-rights body was not a point on which Africans would risk alienating Russia. However, when it came to defending Ukraine’s territorial integrity, African countries were almost unanimous—if not in condemning and isolating Russia, then in not supporting it (see table below).

African Countries’ Voting Records in Relation to the War in Ukraine

	Against Russia and supporting the resolution	For Russia and against the resolution	Mixed positions between abstention and absence	
			Abstention	Absence
1. March vote: condemn the invasion and demand Russian withdrawal	28	1	17	8
2. April vote: suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council	9	9	23	13
3. October vote: condemn Russia for annexing Ukrainian territories	29	0	20	5

SOURCE: TABLE COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR FROM MEDIA REPORTS AND THE UNITED NATIONS WEBSITE.

15 Questioned in writing by an opposition leader in October, South African Defence Minister Thandi Modise offered no clear answer on possible arms sales to Russia. She vaguely pointed out that South Africa’s arms-contracting agency, Armscor, would be allowed, “from time to time,” to avail itself of “commercial opportunities” with countries subject to international treaties, “including Russia.” These opportunities are subject to national security secrecy. In another instance of ambiguous behavior, South Africa’s government allowed the yacht of a Russian oligarch, targeted by international sanctions, to dock in Cape Town despite opposition from the city’s mayor. See: “Guerre en Ukraine. Vente d’Armes a la Russie: le ‘Jeu Dangereux’ d l’Afrique du Sud,” *Courrier International*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/guerre-en-ukraine-vente-d-armes-a-la-russie-le-jeu-dangereux-de-l-afrique-du-sud>.

3. The African Perception of Russian Military Power

What Does the War in Ukraine Tell Us about Russian Military Power?

Observers are unanimous in their assessment. The Russian army, which was considered the world’s second most powerful, failed to prove itself in Ukraine, where the conduct of Russia’s “military operation” revealed several shortcomings.

- The Blitzkrieg, dear to Soviet strategy and favored by Putin, failed or was poorly implemented by the Russian army. Ukrainian forces far inferior in number and equipment where able to contain the Russian army. Russia was, therefore, forced to alter its plans, accept being bogged down, and suffer significant losses.
- Russian intelligence was also ineffective. This was either out of fear of exposing reality to the master of the Kremlin regarding the hostility of Ukrainians to Russia, their resolve to defend their country, and the unwavering support of the West, or out of poor or weak analysis, not having accounted for the obstacles that Russia could encounter in invading Ukraine.
- The failure of Russia’s logistics became clear to everyone from the very start of the “operation,” with images of convoys stepping over one another while exposing themselves to Ukrainian strikes. Moreover, the under-equipment (or even lack of equipment) of mobilized reservists clearly shows the shortcomings and logistical weaknesses of the Russian army.
- The absence of noncommissioned officers in the Russian chain of command was widely felt, especially in the lack of discipline and poor execution of tactical plans.
- There was a lack of professionalism among general Russian army officers who, in using their own cell phones, made it possible for Ukrainians to locate and eliminate them.
- Russia’s armed forces lack cohesion because of overlaps between an army of professionals, militias comprising mercenaries and prisoners (like the Wagner Group) and fighters (like those Ramzan Kadyrov) more inclined to propaganda than real combat.
- While Russian military equipment was highly praised by Kremlin officials for its proven effectiveness in combat theaters (especially in Syria), experts saw the precariousness of this equipment when faced with Western weaponry. Russia’s artillery, used in great measure by the Kremlin’s

army, ceased to make a difference as soon as Ukraine received US Himars and French Caesars.

- Russia’s air force, though a striking force in Syria, was unable to secure the Ukrainian sky and unable to destroy the Ukrainian air force.

One is therefore justified in asking whether, in the face of such failures, Africans still have the same perception of Russia’s military power.

As mentioned above, Africans held Russian weaponry and strategy in high regard at the Sochi summit. Moscow’s military image shined brightly because of its performance in Syria. Today, what effect will Russia’s setbacks have on that image?

The continent’s military leaders and experts—especially those who rely on Russia for weapons, training, and territorial defense—certainly monitor Russia’s military performance in Ukraine and are forced to ask themselves a few questions.

- How could Russia supply them with weaponry, if its defense industry cannot keep up with Moscow’s current war effort? Has Russia reached a point where it needs assistance from far less powerful countries, such as Iran and North Korea?
- How can one rely on planes incapable of monopolizing the skies of Ukraine, a country that is struggling with air defense?
- How can one count on Russia to train African soldiers when its own army proved its tactical and strategic inability in Ukraine?

These questions are even more legitimate for African countries that rely on Russia, as Russia has an advantage that no African country has. Indeed, while Russia can compensate for its tactical, logistical, and strategic deficiencies through the threat of using tactical nuclear weapons in its arsenal, African countries can only rely on conventional weapons and strategies in their wars. But if such weapons and strategies, procured from Russia, are less effective than those supplied by the West, failure is inevitable.

Will African countries sourcing from Russia reconsider their positions? Will they change their minds and look to the West? Are the shortcomings that have arisen sufficient to call on African countries to switch suppliers and military partners? This does not yet seem to be the case.

- In April 2022, amid the war in Ukraine, Cameroon signed a military-cooperation agreement with Russia. This agreement covers the exchange of information on defense pol-



icy and international security, development of relations in combined training, and training of troops.

- In August 2022, Mali received new military equipment from Russia, after a secret mission to Moscow earlier that year by the Malian Army chief of staff. Mali has long-standing relations with Moscow and is reportedly one of the countries for which the relationship continues against all odds.
- A number of countries with agreements with Russia prior to the war are now trapped in Russia’s quagmire. Madagascar is one such case.
- Countries such as Algeria or Egypt—the former relying on Russia for all its armaments, while a large part of the lat-

ter’s forces rely on Russian equipment—are trapped and can only continue their relationship with Russia.

The major risk for Africa is that of Russia, keen on preserving its image among Africans for the capabilities of its armaments and military training, pushing African clients with Russian equipment that embrace its combat doctrine to go to war against countries that get their supplies from the West and follow Western doctrine. Nothing appears less certain, as Russia is tied up in its war in Ukraine and a victory for its clan in Africa is highly unlikely. However, it is not excluded that the African countries monitor the outcome of the war in Ukraine more closely.

# Conclusion

Russia’s relationship with Africa is long-standing, dating back at least to the fifteenth century, but it only took on an institutional character at the end of the nineteenth century. At the time, Russia sent official military aid to Ethiopia and opened a diplomatic legation there.

The timeline of Russia-Africa ties indicates that the posture toward Europe in the first instance, and toward the West (Europe and the United States) in the second, determines the degree of Russian involvement and the timing of its actions in Africa. For the tsars, the Soviets, or Putin, Africa is a theater for confronting the West and countering European projects.

As far as the current war in Ukraine is concerned, and what positive or negative effects this could have on Russia-Africa relations, we should emphasize the following.

- It is premature to assess the effect of the present state of war between Russia and Ukraine on military-cooperation relations between Russia and Africa. Nevertheless, considering recent developments in this war, it is reasonable to anticipate several African questions on the sustain-

ability of Afro-Russian cooperation in military matters. As noted in the previous paragraphs, Russia’s military has not demonstrated great qualities during the war in Ukraine, neither in terms of strategy nor of equipment performance. The fact that Russia is turning to Iran or North Korea to arm itself will raise questions for Africans. If Iranian drones are more effective, Africans might also turn to Iran. Russia might not be as admired in Saint Petersburg as it was in Sochi. It is not only Africans who are questioning the image of Russia’s military; Russia’s president himself has doubts about its weaponry and seems to find it necessary to praise its qualities and performance, and his country’s readiness to help and supply arms to countries of the Deep South, at a time when his army is still engaged in Ukraine and has not achieved the goals assigned to it.

- However, whatever the outcome of the war or its consequences, some African countries will continue to maintain military relations with Russia because their arsenals are Russian (as in the cases of Algeria and Egypt), or because they are tied to Russia by agreements made before the war in Ukraine.



# About the Author



**Abdelhak Bassou** is Senior Fellow at the Policy Center for the New South, Member of its Editorial & Research Oversight Steering Committee, and Affiliate Professor at the Faculty of Governance, Economic and Social Sciences (FGSES) of the Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P).

Specializing in security, strategy and defense studies, he previously occupied several offices within the Directorate General of the Moroccan National Security where he was Borders' Division Chief from 1978 to 1993. He was appointed Director of the Royal Institute of Police in 1998, before serving as the Chief of Regional Security in Errachidia from 1999 to 2003, and Sidi Kacem from 2003 to 2005. In 2006, he became Head of the Central General Intelligence until 2009. Bassou contributed to the output of several endeavors of international organizations including the Council of

Arab Interior Ministers from 1986 to 1992, where he represented the Directorate General of National Security in various meetings.

Since 2018, Bassou has been directing and editing the collectively written annual report on Africa's geopolitics, originally titled 'Miroir d'Afrique' and published by the Policy Center for the New South. His works have been featured in numerous world-renowned think tanks and institutions, including a contribution in 'Towards EU-MENA Shared Prosperity' (Bruegel, 2017), Evolving Human Security Challenges in the Atlantic Space (Jean Monnet Network, 2019), and is also recurring author and participant in the HEC-PCNS Strategic Dialogues and its corresponding written volumes.

Abdelhak Bassou holds a Master's Degree in Political Science and International Studies from the Faculty of Law, Economics and Social Sciences of Agdal in Rabat.

# Acknowledgements

We thank the Policy Center for the New South for supporting this publication.



**CHAIRMAN**

\*John F.W. Rogers

**EXECUTIVE  
CHAIRMAN  
EMERITUS**

\*James L. Jones

**PRESIDENT AND CEO**

\*Frederick Kempe

**EXECUTIVE VICE  
CHAIRS**

\*Adrienne Arsht

\*Stephen J. Hadley

**VICE CHAIRS**

\*Robert J. Abernethy

\*C. Boyden Gray

\*Alexander V. Mirtchev

**TREASURER**

\*George Lund

**DIRECTORS**

Todd Achilles

Timothy D. Adams

\*Michael Andersson

David D. Aufhauser

Barbara Barrett

Colleen Bell

Stephen Biegun

Linden P. Blue

Adam Boehler

John Bonsell

Philip M. Breedlove

Myron Brilliant

\*Esther Brimmer

Richard R. Burt

\*Teresa Carlson

\*James E. Cartwright

John E. Chapoton

Ahmed Charai

Melanie Chen

Michael Chertoff

\*George Chopivsky

Wesley K. Clark

\*Helima Croft

\*Ankit N. Desai

Dario Deste

\*Paula J. Dobriansky

Joseph F. Dunford, Jr.

Richard Edelman

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

Stuart E. Eizenstat

Mark T. Esper

\*Michael Fisch

Alan H. Fleischmann

Jendayi E. Frazer

Meg Gentle

Thomas H. Glocer

John B. Goodman

\*Sherri W. Goodman

Jarosław Grzesiak

Murathan Günal

Frank Haun

Michael V. Hayden

Tim Holt

\*Karl V. Hopkins

Kay Bailey Hutchison

Ian Ihnatowycz

Mark Isakowitz

Wolfgang F. Ischinger

Deborah Lee James

\*Joia M. Johnson

\*Safi Kalo

Andre Kelleners

Brian L. Kelly

Henry A. Kissinger

John E. Klein

\*C. Jeffrey Knittel

Joseph Konzelmann

Franklin D. Kramer

Laura Lane

Almar Latour

Yann Le Pallec

Jan M. Lodal

Douglas Lute

Jane Holl Lute

William J. Lynn

Mark Machin

Marco Margheri

Michael Margolis

Chris Marlin

William Marron

Christian Marrone

Gerardo Mato

Erin McGrain

John M. McHugh

\*Judith A. Miller

Dariusz Mioduski

Michael J. Morell

\*Richard Morningstar

Georgette Mosbacher

Majida Mourad

Virginia A. Mulberger

Mary Claire Murphy

Edward J. Newberry

Franco Nuschese

Joseph S. Nye

Ahmet M. Ören

Sally A. Painter

Ana I. Palacio

\*Kostas Pantazopoulos

Alan Pellegrini

David H. Petraeus

\*Lisa Pollina

Daniel B. Poneman

\*Dina H. Powell

McCormick

Michael Punke

Ashraf Qazi

Thomas J. Ridge

Gary Rieschel

Lawrence Di Rita

Michael J. Rogers

Charles O. Rossotti

Harry Sachinis

C. Michael Scaparrotti

Ivan A. Schlager

Rajiv Shah

Gregg Sherrill

Jeff Shockey

Ali Jehangir Siddiqui

Kris Singh

Walter Slocombe

Christopher Smith

Clifford M. Sobel

James G. Stavridis

Michael S. Steele

Richard J.A. Steele

Mary Streett

\*Gil Tenzer

\*Frances M. Townsend

Clyde C. Tuggle

Melanne Verveer

Charles F. Wald

Michael F. Walsh

Ronald Weiser

\*Al Williams

Maciej Witucki

Neal S. Wolin

\*Jenny Wood

Guang Yang

Mary C. Yates

Dov S. Zakheim

**HONORARY  
DIRECTORS**

James A. Baker, III

Robert M. Gates

James N. Mattis

Michael G. Mullen

Leon E. Panetta

William J. Perry

Condoleezza Rice

Horst Teltschik

William H. Webster

*\*Executive Committee Members*

*List as of November 18, 2022*



The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 778-4952  
[www.AtlanticCouncil.org](http://www.AtlanticCouncil.org)