

Russia: Applying the Low Cost, High Return Syrian Strategy to Africa

By

Captain Benjamin Pearson

Squadron Officer School 21C

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ABSTRACT

Russia's intervention in Syria was able to achieve high returns at a relatively low cost. Through the use of private military and security contractors and advanced arms deals, Russia was able to project power without incurring high military casualties while keeping a plausible deniability of interference. By reinforcing a regional autocrat in Syria, Russia became a political force in the Middle East, challenging the United States regional hegemony.

Russia is adapting its Syrian strategy in Africa. In Libya and the rest of the continent, Russia's use of private security contractors and arms exports provides support to African states in exchange for exclusive access to natural resources, and influence in the region. Russia's idea of combating Western dominance through a multipolar world order means Russia does not need to become the leading political force in Africa, just offer an alternative partnership. Due to the Syrian strategy's dependence on low cost for high returns, raising the cost to Russia will hinder its efforts with Africa. Through engagement with African nations, lowering Russia's international prestige by exposing regionally destabilizing activity, and effecting the political and economic calculus of local African leaders working with Russia, the United States can prevent Russia from gaining its desired power in Africa.

When Russia began conducting airstrikes in Syria in September 2015, its return to the Middle East since the dissolution of the Soviet Union was met with skepticism. Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, a key political ally to Russia, appeared to be close to defeat in the ongoing civil war. At the time, United States President Barack Obama assessed Russia's attempt to keep Assad in power was, "just going to get them stuck in a quagmire. And it won't [sic] work. And they will be there for a while if they don't [sic] take a different course."¹ Four years later, the United States was withdrawing its last remaining military personnel from northern Syria while Russia had established a military presence in Syria and emerged as a political force in the region. Through the use of private military and security contractors (PMSCs) and military arms exports, Russia was able to challenge the United States' hegemony in the Middle East. With its Syrian success as a roadmap, Russia is laying similar low cost, high return groundwork in Africa as it aims to reassert itself as a global power.

Prior to its intervention in Syria, the last time the Russian military was heavily involved in the Middle East was its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. That conflict lasted a decade, resulted in tens of thousands of Russian casualties, and exposed the limits of the Soviet's power projection.² With that history in mind a similar venture into Syria seemed foolish, but Russia's approach was markedly different. Modeled after the successes of asymmetric warfare in Ukraine, Russia was able to conduct a cheaper, more limited operation.³ Seeking to limit military casualties and avoid an official ground presence in Syria, Russia turned to PMSCs whom successfully operated in Ukrainian conflict zones while providing plausible deniability of Russian interference. The ambiguous domestic legality of Russia PMSCs allows it to commit ground forces and absorb casualties without any public acknowledgement. An estimated over two thousand Russian PMSCs were operating in combat capacities throughout Syria, and the

battlefield experience from the conflict can be applied elsewhere around the globe.⁴ But Russian PMSCs alone did not tip the Syrian Civil War towards Assad's favor; advanced Russian military arms also prevented Assad from being ousted. At the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Russia had an estimated US\$4 billion worth of outstanding arms contracts with the Assad regime. These sales of military hardware not only reinforced Russia's alliance with Assad but provided advanced weapons and training creating a prohibitive environment for the kind of Western no-fly zone that was utilized to oust Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.⁵ When the Russian military formally intervened in Syria four years later, its success utilizing sophisticated weapon systems, such as fourth generation aircraft and cruise missiles, displayed the capability of Russian military equipment and dispelled the perception its equipment was unreliable.⁶ Syria proved to be an advantageous display of force, not just for Russian military hardware, but also for Russia's ability to be an alternative power in the region.

What was initially seen as a risky endeavor resulted in high returns for Russia at a relatively small cost. With Assad firmly in control and an established military presence in Syria, Russia is now a power-broker in the Middle East and has challenged the United States' hegemony in the region. Middle Eastern rulers now have a partner that is less concerned with human rights or democratic ideals.⁷ Additionally, Russia's newfound political capital has benefited its economic interests, providing access to lucrative Syrian oil fields.⁸ Just as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan displayed the limits of Russian military might, success in Syria has provided a warning of Russia's future global ventures.

Bolstered by its low cost, high return strategy in Syria, Russia is adapting its playbook of PMSCs and arms exports to gain a foothold in Africa. The most visible example of Russia utilizing this strategy is in Libya, another oil-rich country on the strategically important

Mediterranean Sea. Russian PMSCs, particularly the company Wager Group active in both Ukraine and Syria, are fighting alongside the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the East against the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) headquartered in the West. Along with these PMSCs comes advanced Russian military equipment, including fourth generation fighter jets and modern surface to air missile systems.⁹ This familiar strategy is not unnoticed, USAFRICOM Commander General Stephen Townsend remarked in a press release, “Russia is clearly trying to tip the scales in its favor in Libya. Just like I saw them doing in Syria, they are expanding their military footprint in Africa using government-supported mercenary groups.”¹⁰ But unlike Syria, Russia’s deniability of PMSCs and its distance from the LNA provides an advantage regardless of the ultimate victor in Libya. In fact, the current stalemate unfolding provides Russian President Vladimir Putin an opportunity to play peacemaker, establishing credibility in a continent often embroiled in conflict.¹¹ Libya provides a stark example of Russia utilizing the same strategy from Syria to gain regional relevancy.

Russian actions in Africa are not exclusively resigned to outright armed conflict as seen in Libya. Russian PMSCs and arms deals provide Russia with a cost-effective way to influence the entire continent. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Russian PMSCs are used as a security provider to assist with training local forces and guarding government officials. In exchange, Russian mining companies secured rights to gold and diamond deposits. Russia is posturing to be CAR’s primary international partner, challenging France’s traditional regional power.¹² Russian arms sales also provide another avenue to expand its sphere of influence. Russia is the largest exporter of arms to Africa, accounting for 39% of total arms imported by the continent between 2013-2017.¹³ As Western sanctions against Russia apply financial pressure and the price of oil, Russia’s largest export, continues to decline, the defense industry will grow

in importance for Russia's economic stability. A strong weapons export industry not only projects an image of military power in the African region, but also secures defense agreements, maintenance contracts, and resource extraction rights ensuring a continued presence for decades.¹⁴ Russia's activities in Africa are not only taking advantage of short-term opportunities, but laying the groundwork for long-term influence in the continent.

Ironically, characterizing Russia as a major player in the Middle East and Africa further fuels its desired perception of being portrayed as a great power. In reality, Russia no longer has the resources to compete head-to-head against the United States as it did at the height of the Soviet Union, and China is far ahead both financially and diplomatically in its engagement with Africa.¹⁵ But Russia's reemergence is in terms of a creating a multipolar world order where it seeks to prevent any one power from global geopolitical dominance by providing a capable alternative. For example, during the first-ever Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, Nigeria announced a deal to purchase Russian-made attack helicopters, while accepting Chinese investments in its infrastructure that trades oil to the United States.¹⁶ Russia can also capitalize where the United States is morally unable to, making for a more attractive partner without conditions based on human rights or democratic principles. Russia's military commitment to the Assad regime in Syria provides further proof to African autocrats that Russia will be a reliable sponsor even in the event of a military quagmire.¹⁷ The United States disengagement and military drawdowns in the Middle East and Africa have provided Russia with an opportunity to take advantage. Former United States Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul describes the current situation in Africa as "another case where [the United States is] withdrawing and Putin is moving in to fill the vacuum."¹⁸ Russia needs not replace the United States the preeminent force in Africa, merely be an attractive alternative to lessen Western dominance in the region.

Since Russia's strategy in the Middle East and Africa is built upon a limited scope and resources, completely preventing all malign activity in the region is impractical. The United States can, however, raise the cost of such endeavors to force Russia to prioritize its scarce resource. Russia's desire to return to global prominence depends on a reputation of great power. Public exposure, both internationally and regionally, of Russia's support to repressive regimes causing regional instability will cause leaders to rethink relationships with Russia.¹⁹ The USAFRICOM press release regarding Russian fighter jets deploying to Libya highlighted how Russian actions will cause further devastation in order to enhance Russian strategic goals, not what is best for the Libyan people.²⁰ Further emphasis of Russian PSMC's failures can also damage their global standing. In Mozambique, Wagner Group was forced to evacuate from the Cabo Delgado region after suffering high-profile casualties, allowing insurgents to launch more complicated attacks against the local population.²¹ In addition to the political cost, the financial cost can be raised for African leaders. Purchasing Russian arms can expose countries to the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act, a useful tool to persuade against cooperating with Russia. Even if PSMCs provide plausible deniability from Russia's defense industry, international conventions against mercenaries and transnational organized crime offer avenues to punish those who employ them.²²

Russia's return as a powerbroker in the Middle East was fueled by a cost-effective strategy in Syria: utilizing PMSCs and military arms exports to achieve geopolitical goals. Russia has adapted that strategy for Africa attempting to challenge Western supremacy in the region. But as the costly invasion of Afghanistan exposed the limits to the Soviet Union's global power, increasing the cost to Russia and African nations that deal with Russia will expose Russia's great power play as a desperate attempt for regional relevance.

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- ³ Monaghan, Andrew. Army War College. "The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'." *Parameters* 45.4 (2016): 66.
- ⁴ Ruehl, John. "Outsourcing Warfare." *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* 49.2 (2021): 14.
- ⁵ Millero, Raymond G. Air War College. *Roots Running Deep: Arms Sales and Russia's Excursion into Syria* (2017): 6.
- ⁶ Idib, 7.
- ⁷ "Putin's road to Damascus." (18 May 2019). *The Economist*.
- ⁸ Rumer, Eugene. "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (31 Oct. 2019): 3.
- ⁹ Reynolds, Nathaniel. "Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (Jul. 2019): 12.
- ¹⁰ Department of Defense. "Russia deploys military fighter aircraft to Libya." Stuttgart, GER: U.S. Africa Command, 26 May 2020.
- ¹¹ Reynolds, 34.
- ¹² Rumer, 9.
- ¹³ Fleurant, Aude, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, Pieter D. Wezeman, and Siemon T. Wezeman. *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Mar. 2018): 7.
- ¹⁴ Millero, 10.
- ¹⁵ Paduano, Stephen. "Putin Lost His African Great Game Before He Started." *Foreign Policy*, 31 October 2019.
- ¹⁶ Idib.
- ¹⁷ Severin, Malin. "Chapter 13. Russian Activities in Africa (Continued)." *Russian Strategic Intentions. Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, May 2019: 72.
- ¹⁸ Paduano.
- ¹⁹ Idib.
- ²⁰ Department of Defense. "Russia deploys military fighter aircraft to Libya."
- ²¹ Quinn, Nolan. "The Military-First Approach in Northern Mozambique is Bound to Fail." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23 Nov. 2020.
- ²² Siegle, Joseph. "Chapter 22. Recommended US Response to Russian Activities in Africa." *Russian Strategic Intentions. Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, May 2019: 120.

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