



In 2019, after the first very successful Russia-Africa Summit, President Putin declared that Africa was one of Moscow's foreign policy priorities, writes Olivier Guitta. With its charm offensive in Africa, Moscow had de facto bought votes at the United Nations that proved crucial in particular since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For proof of the critical importance of Africa, despite having suffered massive human losses and military defeats in Ukraine, Russia and its private military company Wagner are not removing any assets from the continent.

A recent military coup, led by the 34-year-old army captain Traore, succeeded in Burkina Faso. While there's no proof that Russia had anything to do with it, it is no secret that Moscow is very supportive of the new junta. The founder of the Russian private military company the Wagner Group, Putin's ally Prigozhin congratulated Traore, saying his men "have done what was necessary and they did it simply for the good of their people." For months, Russia has been pushing in Africa anti-French sentiment through its social media operations. Coincidentally, Captain TraorÃ© accused France, the country's former colonial power, of helping the ex-leader Colonel Damiba stage a comeback and protecting him at its embassy or at a base where French special forces are posted. Right after, the French embassy and other French institutions were attacked by pro-Russian protesters that have urged Captain TraorÃ© to seek Russia's help in the country's fight against Islamist insurgents. Others even suggested that TraorÃ© ordered France to quit the country altogether and that he should travel to Russia soon.

Coincidentally this sounds like Groundhog Day: eight months ago, after Colonel Damiba took power in the previous coup, Russian flags were unfurled in the capital and protesters called for the then-new leader to reject the country's ties to France and join up with Russia. In January Burkina Faso President was ousted just weeks after refusing to pay Russian paramilitaries from the Wagner Group. The coup leader had tried and failed, to persuade the Burkina Faso president to sanction the introduction of Russian mercenaries before kicking him out of office.

Burkina Faso junta's ties with Russia will put a further strain on relations with ex-colonial power France, which has provided military support in recent years but has become the target of pro-Russian protests. The U.S. warned the junta of the risks of siding with Russia, saying it condemned "any attempt to exacerbate the current situation in Burkina Faso. Countries where Wagner has been deployed find themselves weaker and less secure and we've seen that in a number of cases in Africa alone".

The most important country on the continent for Wagner is probably Mali. Wagner has recently dramatically increased its number of mercenaries in Mali despite moving many from other countries around the world to fight in Ukraine. For proof of the close relationship with Russia itself, the Russian Ambassador was the first foreign diplomat the junta met and the new leader, Assimi Goita, had come back just before the putsch from a one-year "training" in Moscow.

Putin called the chief of the junta to express its support. In fact, Mali has an extensive defence agreement with Moscow and has just received more fighter jets, combat helicopters and surveillance radars from Russia in a difficult context for Moscow that needs all the heavy military equipment to wage war against Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov also confirmed that Moscow is ready "to increase the combat capabilities of the Malian armed forces". He also assured that Moscow will continue to deliver mineral fertiliser, petroleum products and wheat to Mali amid growing concerns of a global food crisis. Nonetheless there might be signs of tensions since the main target of Wagner mercenaries in Africa is civilians rather than jihadists: indeed, in Mali 70% of Wagner's operations are aimed at them. Numerous massacres of civilians by Wagner have also occurred and this will only fuel jihadist recruitment. Wagner's CEO Prigozhin when reacting to evidence implicating Wagner fighters in massacres in Mali said that "a dying-out western civilisation" and "a pathetic endangered bunch of perverts", will be defeated by Russia. Nonetheless Wagner may have a more pressing issue to decrease the soaring bad blood between the Malian army and Wagner: just a few days ago, in the first incident of this kind, Russian Wagner mercenaries killed two Malian soldiers-who are their allies- in a military camp in the northeast, near the border with Niger.

A big part of the strategy of Russia in Africa is also to undermine France and the west as a whole. Just a few months ago, while hosting his Malian counterpart in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov attacked France saying that France's "dissatisfaction with the intent of Malian leadership to seek help from external security forces is nothing other than a recurrence of colonial mentality. We understand but we do not appreciate the attempts of France and other EU countries to claim a dominant role in Africa and other regions". Moscow is looking to destabilise the continent, stirring chaos that could lead to more terrorism and more refugees that could both end up in Europe. Interestingly the more the war with Ukraine lasts, the more

Moscow will be active on the African front.

With the latest coup in Burkina Faso very much supported by Moscow, Russia is adding another potential satellite in the Sahel and the Wagner Group might be moving in soon there as well. Mali and the Central African Republic are already pawns of Moscow. Even with the focus being on fighting the war in Ukraine, Russian President Putin is still very much looking at Africa and has allegedly just told Mali's junta leader Assimi Goita that the next Russia-Africa conference will take place in St Petersburg in April 2023.

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