



The Cambridge Security Initiative

RUSSIA SEEKS TO CAPITALISE ON U.S. DISENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA

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Russia continues to consolidate its position on the African continent as the U.S. withdraws. Reports in December 2019 that the Pentagon is examining the possibility of a drawdown of its troops in West Africa, as part of a wider re-evaluation of global deployments, will present further opportunities for Moscow, which has been actively re-establishing ties across Africa.

Many of Russia's links are legacies of the Soviet era: the Soviet Union had a significant foothold across the continent, but, since 1991, Moscow has lost influence, which it is seeking to regain. Russian interests in Africa have traditionally been economic, especially in the arms trade, energy and strategic cooperation. Russia is the world's second biggest exporter of arms after the U.S., and the defence industry helps bring in a significant amount of foreign currency. It has been seeking to increase its market, actively seeking new 'client states', particularly in Africa and the Middle East, in markets not covered by sanctions imposed by the EU and U.S. in response to Russian support for separatists in Ukraine.

Energy, both oil and gas, but also nuclear power, are also key drivers of Russian engagement in Africa. Rosatom, the state nuclear energy company, has been increasing its presence across the globe over the past decade, including Africa, and in October 2019 it took part in the Russia-Africa summit held in Sochi. The company is already working with more than 20 African countries on different projects, from nuclear power plant construction in Egypt to uranium projects in Tanzania and Namibia.

Other areas of Russian involvement include the presence of private military and security companies in several countries, including Libya and the Central African Republic. Officially, these groups are not connected to the Russian state, but they nevertheless facilitate the expansion of Russian influence in the region. As one of the states providing support for the warring parties in Libya, Russia was a key player at the Berlin conference held in January 2020 to discuss the conflict.

OUTLOOK

The redeployment of U.S. troops out of Africa is driven by a desire to shift troops from a focus on counter-terrorism toward countering the threat the U.S. perceives from China and Russia, ironically presenting Russia with an opening to expand its influence and fill a power vacuum. Moscow will continue to exploit any opportunity to further its interests, both political and

economic, around the globe. Its growing presence across Africa will facilitate the expansion of its global influence, using a wide range of tools ranging from arms sales, to energy deals, diplomacy and political and military advisers. The West is likely to find its position on the continent increasingly challenged as powers such as Russia (and China) are now able to provide material support to countries in a way that they have not been able to previously, thereby undermining Western influence and conditionality.