

Russia's return to Africa: An arduous process**Belkacem Iratni ^{1*}, Lazhar Marouk ²**1 University of Algiers 3, kiratni54@gmail.com2 Algiers University 3, lazharmrkmrk@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Decades after the end of the cold war, the Russian Federation, the heir of Soviet Union, was relatively, absent from Africa. It has still not regained a privileged position in this continent, though it has tried to compete effectively with other world powers in the last few years.

Since this period, Russia has been trying to rebuild strategic partnerships with many African States, engage military in some conflict-torn countries, such as, Central African Republic, Mozambique and lately Libya and gain outlets for its relatively expanding industries, notably the energy sector.

The paper assesses what can make Russia a reliable partner for African countries, despite some ambiguities and constraints, particularly in a context marked by the military engagement it has incepted in Ukraine since March 2022.

Keywords:

Russia, Africa, Cooperation, Competition with USA and China

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1. INTRODUCTION

Addressing the first Russian-African Summit held in Sochi in October 2019, President Putin declared that the objectives pursued by Russia's return to Africa did not aim "the participation in a new 'partition' of Africa, but engage in a competition for cooperation with this continent, providing that this cooperation is civilized and develops in compliance with law. We have a lot to offer to our African friends" (Cayley, 2021).

As clearly stated, Russia's intention did not meant to participate in a new colonial scramble over Africa, but to have a share in the promising markets of this continent, amid a fierce international competition.

The Russian leader assumed that the cooperation his country intended to carry out would benefit Africa and aspire to be transparent, and conform to legal procedures and management. It remains to question, however, if Russia has the required potential to meet Africa's needs, if it can pursue a transparent cooperation with this continent and if it can effectively compete with powerful external actors in Africa, such as China, the United States, Japan and India.

Russia came a long way from the wrecks of the Soviet Union, as it has lost traditional allies, notably in Africa. During the cold war, Russia enjoyed friendly relations with several African leaders, has strategic partnerships, military agreements, airfield bases, and naval facilities in many African countries.

With the logics of East-West confrontation ending, many of these allies have shifted from progressive and socialist regimes to more or less liberal political regimes, and market economies. The Russian authorities closed down nine Russia embassies, four consular offices, and many cultural centers in 1992, because of Russia's disengagement from Africa. Conversely, 14 African countries do not have diplomatic representation in Moscow.

From that time, Russia's focus concerns Western Europe, and the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), as many of the former members of the Soviet Union and its satellites started to seek protection, and develop cooperation with countries which were considered as the traditional rivals of Moscow, throughout its modern history, from the Napoleonic era to the cold war period. Russia regarded such a move as being detrimental to its strategic interests in Europe, and undermining its position as a world power. These are some of the arguments put forward by the Russian leaders to justify their military intervention in Ukraine in March 2022.

The obsession of Russian leaders consists in the willingness to behave as an Empire, regardless of the nature of their political regime, for the simple reason that they strongly believe that their country is an Empire, in contrast to other western powers, such as Italy, Britain or France, which used to have an Empire, but were not, Empires, as such.

The concept of *derzhavnost* or great power status seems central to apprehend Russia's foreign policy behaviour.

Russian leaders boast that their country has all the ingredients to enable them to think in this way. In terms of geostrategic setting, Russia encompasses large swathes of three regions: Europe, Asia and the Northern Arctic, the largest territory in the world, the biggest population in Europe (with one-eighth Earth inhabited land area). It possesses vast natural resources, mainly oil and gas (the seventh industrialized country in the world), sound military might (being a big nuclear power and perhaps superior or equal to the United States in some fields of armaments, and hardware), a diversified federation (different ethnic groups, cultures and religions). Finally, it still exercises a substantial influence over a large geographic space (some former Soviet members and ex-Eastern Europe satellites).

This imperial obsession may explain Russia's use of Africa in its grand design intended to regain its world power status.

An expert of African politics Joseph Siegle rightly argued that Russia has been gradually pursuing its strategic objectives in Africa in recent years through "securing a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean, gaining naval port access in the Red Sea, expanding natural resource extraction opportunities, and displacing Western influence"(Siegle, 2022).

The incursion in world affairs of emerging powers (Bricks) with the ambitions of setting up a new international system based on multilateralism, and a fair cooperation among nations, gave Russia a valuable opportunity to woo Africa through deep political and economic links. It started to establish a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with South Africa with a provision for cooperation in the political, economic, and defense spheres, ever since the convening of the fifth Bricks Summit in Durban in 2013.

The first visit of a Russian President to Africa since the downfall of the Soviet Union occurred in 2006, with Putin's tour in which he promised to engage heavily in Africa by massively investing in the energy and mining sectors and helping many conflict-riven African countries to regain peace and stability.

However, it was the first Russian-African Summit convened in Sochi in 2019 that signaled Russia's determination to have a solid and permanent foot in the African continent. More than forty African leaders attended the Black Sea resort meeting, comforting the growing status of Russia in international affairs and credibility as a major world power.

The study encompasses two analytical parts. The first one assesses the strategy carried out by Russia in order to achieve its strategic goals in Africa, mainly military cooperation, and the search for mining outlets. The second part pertains to the ambiguities observed in the relationships Russia tried to forge with its African partners. It scrutinizes also, the impact of the war in Ukraine that has started to impregnate the relations this country strives to maintain with the African continent.

2. The search for natural resources and outlets for arms exports

Russia's engagement in Africa focuses essentially on two sectors: mining-energy, and military cooperation. These preoccupations reflect, in fact, the nature

of Russia's economy, and political motivations. Russia is a natural resources-rich country with military capabilities, which relies on the exports of oil and gas as well as on the selling of arms, and military equipment.

The power of Russia depends on a strong energy-rent economy, and on an autocratic rule, which limits the role of big private entrepreneurship. These two features explain Russia's inclinations to "illiberalism" in its foreign policy behavior and, particularly in its external dealings with African countries, as shown through these two paradigms: mining and energy, and arms trade, two sectors regarded as the main pillars of Russia's involvement in the African continent:

2.1 Mining and energy:

The economy of Russia remains modest in terms of Gross Domestic Product. In 2022 it represented the eleventh in the world with \$1.67 trillion, well behind USA (\$22.20trillion), China (\$15.47 trillion), and a little over Spain's GDP estimated at \$1.50 trillion (Global, 2020).

Russia's industrial outputs and share in the world trade, and technology innovations are quite limited. It has also a little to offer to African markets in terms of needed products, particularly in the sectors of services, and new technologies of information and communications.

Russia has abundant natural resources, estimated at \$75 trillion, and ranks in the top three in the world for the production of commodities, such as platinum, gold, and iron ore. Its mining sector contributed to more than \$20 billion to the country's national economy.

However, most of the mining potential remains quite difficult, and costly to extract, as most of the mining deposits are in remote places not easy to reach. This is the case of Eastern Siberia, the region, which encompasses 70 % of the country's reserves of copper, 76% of its copper lead, in addition to substantial deposits of diamond, tungsten and zinc. More interesting to mention is that the quality of some of Russia's minerals such as platinum, for instance, is reputedly lower than the quality of metals extracted in Africa.

Given these constraints, Russia prefers to import some of the raw materials it needs with lower costs in terms of production and transport. Thus, Russian extractive companies such as RT Global Resources and Renova Group exploit mining deposits throughout Africa, such as manganese (South Africa), Zimbabwe (platinum), Angola (Diamonds), bauxite (Guinea), and uranium (Namibia).

On the energy level, State-owned companies such as Gazprom, Rustec and Rosatom are active in Africa with substantial investments in the hydrocarbons sector in Algeria, Egypt, Uganda, Angola and offshore gas exploration in Mozambique (Cayley, 2021). Cooperation in the energy sector extended to help some African countries to develop nuclear capabilities intended for peaceful purposes through the State-owned nuclear power, Rosatom. Therefore, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan and Zambia incepted nuclear projects. However, more impressive was the huge nuclear plant under construction at El Dabaa, in Egypt that necessitated a \$ 13 billion investment (Forum, 2021).

According to Joseph Siegle, Russia "is already staking its claim for untapped oil, and gas reserves off the Libyan coast, securing port access in the Red Sea, and expanding its capacity to maritime passage along Africa's East coast, as well" (Siegle, 2022).

2.2 Arms trade and military designs

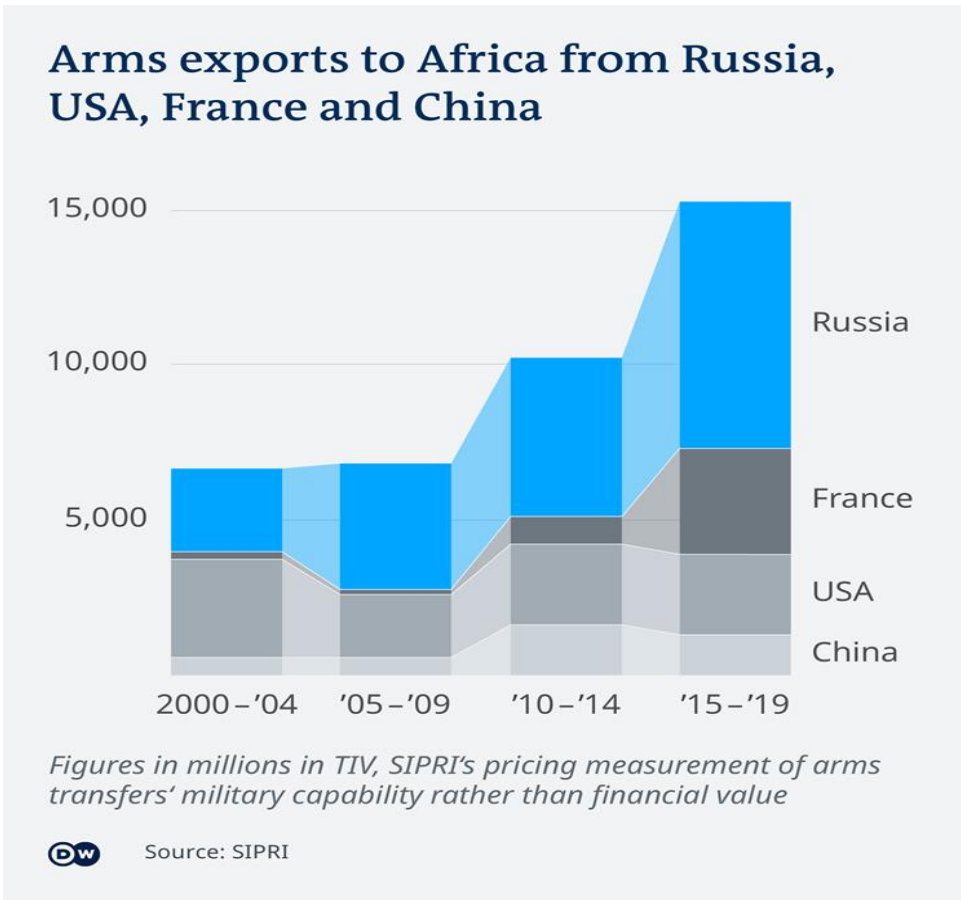
Russia has attempted to mark its military influence in Africa by intervening in civil war-torn countries, selling arms and hardware, signing military agreements, sending army advisers to help some African forces to fight terrorism, and train their troops, as well as engaging in negotiations to acquire naval bases and maritime facilities.

One aspect of Russia's military cooperation with Africa concerned joint military maneuvers. Thus, Russia conducted a tri-nation maritime maneuver with China and South Africa in November 2019 and February 2023 aimed at drilling off the port city of Durban and Richard Bay, one of the strategically important shipping routes connecting Europe to Asia. Russia intended to test-fire Zircon hypersonic missiles during the drills (Lesedi, 2023). These missiles, believed to have "no analogues in any other country," are long-range weapons that travel more than five times the speed of sound, and are hard to detect and intercept than other missiles. Algeria carried out joint military exercises with Russia in the Algerian Sahara swathes in November 2022, aiming to prevent terrorist operations in this region (Atalayar, 2022).

Most tangible evidence of Russia's military presence in Africa consisted in the direct intervention of this country in Libya in support of the forces backed by Marshall Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, which has contested the UN-recognized Government of National Union based in Tripoli. Moscow provided the Libyan rebels with Mog-29 and Su-24 fighter jets, SA-22 surface-to-air missile, anti-craft systems, and hundreds of flights delivering military logistics.

Russia sent six hundred security instructors to conflict-riven Central African Republic (RCA) to raise the total of Russian military personnel in this country to 1.135 by July 2021 (AFP, 2021). This reinforcement came after Russia has responded to the appeal made by the central authorities of RCA in order to help them control diamond business from the rebels, and put an end to a civil war that has torn this country ever since 2017.

During the last two decades, Russia has been the main arms exporter to African countries, and in value, its arms trade (more than \$16 billion) period, amounted to more than the double of the arms sales of USA, China, and France put together for the 2015-2019, as shown by this Table:



Africa accounted for 18% of all Russian arms exports between 2016 and 2020. Russian State-owned arms agency Rosoboronexport, announced that it has signed contracts with African countries worth more than \$1.5 billion in 2020, alone. This amount accounts for a staggering 49% of Russia's arms exports to Africa in that year (The National Interest). The completion of other deals occurred during the MAKS-2021 Aerospace Show attended by some Sub-Saharan countries to supply Tigr armored vehicles and other military equipment. Thus, Russia signed 13 contracts worth more than \$1 billion with these countries.

A Polish study stated that Su-30SME aircrafts, Mi-35M and Mi-17V5 helicopters were among the weapons most sought by African clients (Warsaw Institute, 2021). For the last decade, Algeria, Egypt, Angola and Nigeria have been the largest importers of Russian weapons in Africa. This picture reminds of the cold war configuration when nationalist and progressive leaders ruled these three countries and entertained friendly relations with the former Soviet Union (Kondratenko, 2020).

Russia's military engagement in Africa extended to searching for naval bases and maritime facilities to have an access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea, and get control of maritime routes along the Indian Ocean. Particular attention concerned the ports of Berbera (Somaliland), Massawa and Assab (Eritrea), Port Sudan (Sudan), and various facilities in Libya.

Accordingly, Joseph Siegle argued that Russia's naval strategy suggests "an interest to project force along the strategic maritime chokeholds of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait (Djibouti-Yemen), the Suez Canal, and the eastern Mediterranean. Russia has also explored port access in southern Africa with Mozambique, and has conducted joint naval exercises with South Africa (Siegle, 2022)."

Globally, Russia's trade with African countries concerns the purchase of mining products, and the exports of arms. The volume of the exchanges of Russia with African countries amounted \$20 billion in 2021, a level that remains far behind that of China, estimated at \$190 billion.

3. Ambiguities in Russia's African policy

3.1 Assessing "Civilized" and fair cooperation

To help some African regimes to control the mining riches of their countries, and fight the rebels who contest their political authority and legitimacy, Russia sent to these conflict-riven countries, training officers and military experts. However, some political writers suspected that these military personnel were, in fact, "armed mercenaries," adding that the operations of these groups have evolved "into a thinly veiled effort to build influence, and strike business deals for Russia in Africa" (Walsh, 2021). In this vein, there was a belief that resorting to private groups would avoid Russia from involving directly in operations, and transactions in Africa. It also permits this country to undertake initiatives at low cost, as long as these groups were not working against Russia's interests.

Russia denied, officially, allegations of links with Wagner troops operating in Mali. Its Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared, "Military initiatives established by private Russian citizens in Mali were not Moscow's official business," in a meeting held with Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop in Moscow in November 2022 (AFP, 2021). The Kremlin also declared that "speculations" related to the presence of Wagner group in Burkina Faso were "unfounded," according to a statement made by Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov to the Russian State News Agency *Ria Novosti* in February 2023 (Voa Africa, 2023).

Wagner military trainers landed in Libya to back the forces of Marshall Khalifa Haftar, hostile to the Tripoli based-Government that enjoys recognition from the international community. They also came to assist the government troops of

Sudan's President Omar El Bashir to curb down a growing opposition to his regime. The Central African Republic called upon Wagner troops in order to protect the regime of Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who faced a rebellion, after the withdrawal of French troops from this country in 2017. Mozambique also resorted to these Russian private groups in 2020 to fight Islamic insurgents who sought to get control of Cabo Delgado, a Muslim- dominated, and gas-rich province of this country.

In Libya, Russia intended to have access to warm waters, a strategic anchor in the Mediterranean and energy supplies. In Sudan, it sought to install, and operate a small naval base to gain access to trade routes across the Pacific Ocean, and the Red sea straight. In December 2020, the Russian government struck a deal with Sudan to establish a small naval base in this country. However, the Sudan's transition government reportedly scrapped off the agreement.

Russia lured concessions of diamond deposits in the Central African Republic (RCA), while Wagner group finances itself through mineral concessions. This for-profit self-financing arrangement lets Russia engage, at no cost to the Kremlin.

UN experts estimated that up to 2.100 Russian instructors were operating in RCA, while the Kremlin officials said they have never had more than 550 trainers in this country. Valery Sakharov, the Russian adviser of the Central Republic president Touadéra, denied a UN report that he was a Wagner commander (Lechner, 2021). A United Nations report claimed also that Russian military instructors have committed, with soldiers from the Central African Republic, "excessive use of force, indiscriminate killings, the occupation of schools, and looting on a large scale." The Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov categorically denied all of these assertions (Al Jazeera, 2021).

The presence of Wagner groups did not fail to lead to tensions with the armed forces of the host countries in Africa, as it happened in Mozambique after a number of failed military operations.

Russia's military cooperation was not exempt of feelings of deception resented by some of its African clients, as report indicated for instance, that three of the 10 old BRDM-2 armored vehicles offered by Russia to RCA broke down during their inaugural parade (Lechner, 2021).

In addition, the supposed Russian meddling in domestic political affairs in some African countries, such as Mozambique, Madagascar and RCA met some suspicion of misconduct. While there was no evidence to suggest that Russia has sent operatives to influence the Mozambican elections, companies linked to Prigozhin faced accusations of propping up the campaign of the outgoing President Nyusi, and his party (Sauer, 2019). Still, according to a political scientist

Paczynska, Russia's strategy on elections in some African countries seemed to focus "on shoring up authoritarian strongmen in unstable, yet resource-rich states, thus bolstering these regimes' ability to persist. These priorities are in stark contrast to popular opinion on the continent, which favors democracy"(Paczynska, 2020). As Guinean President Alpha Conde was seeking an unconstitutional third term, Russian Ambassador Alexander Bregadze said on national television in 2019 that "rotating leaders was not necessarily a good thing," and that "Constitutions are no dogma, Bible, or Quran...It is constitutions that adapt to reality, not reality to constitutions." (Reuters, 2019).

A political study revealed a link between Russia's support to African regimes, many of which were undemocratic, and the policies this country pursued at the United Nations Security council, by wooing African members of this Council to vote for Moscow's political interests in Africa. Thus, Russia succeeded in blocking resolutions condemning unconstitutional change of regimes with the support of these African countries. These actions concerned the denunciation of the events that took place in Sudan in April 2019, the fraud that occurred during the presidential elections held in the Democratic Republic of Congo in January 2019, the imposition of a cease-fire in Libya or the call for political reforms in the African continent (Siegle, 2021).

3.2 The looming impact of the Ukraine war on Russia's relations with Africa

The last outstanding success performed by Russia consisted in the abstention of 28 out of 54 African countries during the United Nations' vote condemning Russian intervention in Ukraine in March 2022. Moscow achieved a further success when 19 African abstained from supporting a UN resolution condemning Russia's "illegal annexations" of Ukraine in October 2022 (26 African countries voting in favour). Moreover, 15 African countries, also, abstained during the UN cast demanding Russia's pull out of Ukraine in February 2023. Finally, during the vote to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, 9 African countries voted against, 22 abstained and 11 chose not to vote. Thus, the African election narrative discloses that an overwhelming majority of the African States (43 States) did not upset Russia's standpoints, especially as the issue of human rights in Africa seems as crucial and controversial. As it appeared, Russia found more lenient attitudes towards its foreign policy stands in Africa than in any other part of the world. An indication that Russia's presence in Africa is paying off.

One of the immediate incidences generated by Russia's war in Ukraine on African countries, consisted in the disturbance of their food and energy supplies, and the soaring of the prices of wheat, fertilizers as well as the spiral increase of the costs of oil, and transportation.

Russia is one of the world's top three crude oil producers, and the second largest exporter of natural gas. It is also one of the biggest exporters of wheat and fertilizers, which are essential to develop crops in Africa, as they contribute to food security, the improvement of soil health, and the increase of crop yields.

North Africa depends largely on wheat coming from Russia with Egypt alone importing 70% of this food product from Russia. Kenya imported about 30% of its wheat from Russia; and Ukraine, while Cameroun received nearly 45% of its fertilizers from Russia before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Food prices jumped by 40% and fertilizer prices rose almost by 30% (BBC, 2022) in the second quarter of 2022. Oil prices rocketed to a ten-year-high \$130 a barrel, shortly after the outbreak of the Ukraine -Russian war, and the prices of crude oil are still high, a year later.

Nearly 346 million Africans are severely food insecure, according to a recent report released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (Cordon). With severe drought recorded in the last five years in the Horn of Africa, humanitarian crisis is spreading, as 26 million of persons expect to face acute food insecurity in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia by 2023, according to International organizations. To alleviate the hardships provoked on African countries by this food crisis, Russia promised to "supply food and crops only to [its] friends," because food was its "quiet weapon," former Russia president Dmitry Medvedev declared in March 2022, alluding, perhaps, to the fact that Russia may "weaponize" commodities (Al Jazeera, 2022).

In addition to the difficulties to channel food products to the African continent, because of the blockade on the maritime routes imposed by the war in Ukraine, Russia opted to supply only friendly African countries. Such a selective option stands in the right line of the ideological line practiced during the cold war that opposed the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union to the US-driven Western world.

Russia seems to prefer dealing with regimes it considers as "sovereign democracies," but which Western political scientists label as authoritarian political systems. Such an option may narrow the scope of the influence of this country in Africa and alter its image in the eyes of the African public opinion, generally, opposed to the hegemony of the Western powers over the world affairs, and to the liberal democracy fashion based, arguably, on the power of capitalism, monetarism unfair world economic globalization. However, African countries may resort to

Russian support, and assistance because democratic space is shrinking, terrorism wide spreading, and French influence declining in Africa. Such an eventuality may be more perceptible with the inclination of this continent to become the theater for the East-West new cold war, as highlighted by the war in Ukraine.

Many African countries may face, in the foreseen future, social unrest, and popular upsurges because of the exacerbation of the economic crisis due to the rise of the cost of living and, the difficulties of these countries to find appropriate responses and solutions.

Several African countries may also confront thorny security threats represented by the continuous spread of terrorist groups, and their affiliated smuggling networks involved in drug trafficking, illegal migration, and illicit trade of arms. Terrorism affected Mauritania again, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Ivory Coast, after being confined mostly in North Mali a decade ago, despite France's Serval and Barkhane military interventions that had mobilized more than 5.000 French soldiers. The violent operations of the Jihadist group of Boko Haram, which were limited to North Nigeria in the late 2000s, have spread to Cameroun and Chad in the 2020s. Moreover, the Guinea Gulf region (Benin and Togo) as well as Ghana may become the next target of Jihadist organizations, because terrorist groups are getting closer to these countries.

It remains to see to what extent, Russia would be able to meet the security expectations of its African partners if the war in Ukraine continued. In this case, the engagement of Russia in Ukraine may exhaust its military power and limit its deployment in Africa, whether in terms of implanting bases, sending troops to fight terrorism or selling arms.

On the economic level, Russia lags far behind the potential made available to Africa by other major powers. Indeed, "with broad diplomatic, foreign direct investment (\$45 billion), trade (\$65 billion), development (\$10 billion), security (\$600 million), and cultural ties with Africa, the United States' engagement in the African continent is still an order of magnitude greater than that of Russia"(Siegle, 2021).

In terms of commercial exchanges value, Russia's global trade with Africa, which amounted to \$20 billion in 2019, remained far below of the value of commercial exchanges of this continent with the US (\$ 56 billion) or China (\$192 billion) for the same period. In all cases, the Covid-19 pandemics, and the war in Ukraine have certainly not improved these figures, since then.

Russia's arms supplies to African countries may be disturbed, because Moscow may not find alternative financial systems and compensation mechanisms to settle future arms deals, and transactions or honor ongoing arms contracts. These distortions may not permit Russia to continue supplying spare parts, operational and training plans for the armies of its African clients, as well as ensuring the maintenance of the military equipment already acquired by these clients.

As the armed forces of only a very few African countries could switch to develop their own manufactures, and military hardware, the rest of African countries may search supplies from other major arms exporting countries. China may be a substantial alternative source. The result may consist of a substantial loss of foreign earnings for Russian military industry, and deprive Moscow of a valuable asset in its African approach.

4. CONCLUSION

Returning to Africa proved not easy for Russia, not because of its lack of potential or because of the reluctance of African countries to deal with Moscow, but because of the world conjuncture, marked by relatively long and devastating pandemics and by the Ukraine-Russia war, which proved quite long and damaging for many parts of the world, especially Africa.

Russia's economic and military potential may not be as sound as it was before the war in Ukraine. Thus, Moscow may find some difficulties to meet the expectations of African countries with which it has entertained strong relationships. However, Russia may still count on the fact that it has no colonial legacy unlike its neighbors in Europe, and that it has contributed in achieving the independence of many of the African peoples.

A decisive element that may maintain Russia's presence in Africa consists in the eventuality that this continent may turn into a theatre for proxy wars between East and West, and in a new scramble for its raw materials, in the light of this new cold war generated by the war in Ukraine.

Indeed, Russia shares with many African countries the experience of a path of development quite different from the capitalist model, and the desire for a multilateral world more advantageous to non-Western countries.

It remains for Russia to contribute in the efforts displayed by many African countries in fighting terrorism, whose threats may increase with the widespread of poverty and famine because of the scarcity of consuming products and fuel, and the soaring of their prices because of the war in Ukraine.

In this peculiar context, Africa needs what Russia can easily offer: wheat, fertilizers, and energy more than it needs heavy armaments. Thus, it may be a moral and a human obligation for all, to contribute in the food programs intended for African peoples. As United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, speaking at the Global Food Security Call to Action in May 2022, warned, "If we do not feed people, we feed conflict."

During a visit to Bamako in February 2023, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, hoped that Russian supplies of wheat, fertilizers, and oil products to African countries will resume soon.

The next Russian-African summit scheduled to take place in November 2023 would certainly reveal the depth or the fragility of the relations existing between these two partners.

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