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Russia's strategic projection in the Sahel and its regional environment*Russia's strategic projection in the Sahel and its regional environment***Abstract:**

Russia's strategy in the Sahel is part of Russia's broader global repositioning. Within the Kremlin's strategic approach to this region, the use of hybrid tools stands out, combining military, economic, diplomatic, and cultural instruments. Moscow takes advantage of the vacuum created by the partial withdrawal of Western actors to present itself as an alternative partner that prioritizes sovereignty and cooperation without conditions. Its presence is particularly concentrated in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, where it seeks access to strategic resources such as uranium and gold, while also consolidating political influence. Within Russia's actions, the use of actors such as the Wagner Group stands out, which was later integrated into the Ministry of Defense under the name Africa Corps. At the same time, Moscow places special emphasis on cultural and educational diplomacy in these areas to legitimize its presence.

Keywords:

Russia, Sahel, geopolitics, security, natural resources.

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Introduction

Over the past few years, Russia has intensified its activity in Africa, particularly in the western Sahel, in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, with a more limited presence in Mauritania, Chad, Libya, Sudan, and Syria¹. This should not be described as “expansion” in territorial terms, but rather as the establishment of an ecosystem of influence, an interdependent set of military, economic, diplomatic, and cultural instruments that Moscow coordinates in order to obtain geostrategic and economic advantages at low political cost and with high strategic returns².

The Sahel as an Emerging Strategic Space

Internal political changes in several Sahelian countries (coups and transitions, 2020–2023), together with the partial withdrawal of Western military presence, created a vacuum that Russian authorities have sought to fill. This dynamic is complex and multi-causal, ranging from local factors such as popular discontent to international factors such as the restructuring of France's priorities and political decisions by Moscow to offer an alternative that emphasizes sovereignty and non-intervention.

Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso together account for 2.3 million square kilometers and 73.8 million inhabitants, with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024 of 62.4 billion dollars. The subsoil of these countries contains strategic resources such as uranium, gold, hydrocarbons, and other minerals. All this explains Russian interest beyond mere political support and regional influence. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between declaratory interest and the effective capacity to exploit these resources, a nuance that is often absent in official statements³.

From the Russian perspective, penetration into the Sahel is conceptualized as a hybrid strategy combining military assistance requested by local governments, extractive and energy projects formalized through memoranda, and cooperation with Russian state

¹ ZUBENKO, Alexandra S. Uranium competition in the Sahel region and Russia's interests: Current situation, assessment of prospects, recommendations. *PIR Center Report Series* 47/2025. <https://pircenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/25-12-01-ZUB-REP-on-SAH-Ed.by-SHAH-Rev.by-ORL-AS-PUBLISHED.pdf> (accessed 28/01/2026)

² Российский совет по международным делам (РСМД). *Глобальный прогноз РСМД 2019–2024*. Documento de análisis RCMД 2019–2024. https://russiancouncil.ru/upload/iblock/992/riac_forecast_2019_2024.pdf (accessed 28/01/2026)

³ KARR, Liam y BORÉNS, Avery. *Russia, US Compete in West Africa: Africa File, July 31, 2025*. Documento de análisis *Critical Threats Project Africa File* (31/07/2025). <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russia-us-compete-west-africa-somalia-sudan-parallel-governments-deadly-attacks-in-burkinafaso-and-drc-africa-file-july-31-2025> (accessed 30/01/2026).

entities such as Rosatom. Moscow also seeks to increase its cultural presence through exchange centers, training programs, and performative diplomacy that present the Russian offer as “cooperation without conditions”⁴.

Cultural diplomacy and educational cooperation occupy a central place in Russia's strategy. The promotion of the Russian language, culture, and technical training constitutes an instrument of legitimization and the creation of long-term influence networks. As explained, among others, by Avakin A.S., a researcher and professor affiliated with the Russia House in Ouagadougou, the opening of cultural spaces serves as a tool to “create centers for the study of Russian language, culture, and history” and to foster lasting social and professional ties between local elites and Russian networks⁵.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in April 2025 that, in addition to military cooperation, the Kremlin considers the promotion of educational programs vital for training qualified personnel in various fields. In practice, Moscow has supported the opening of Russia Houses and other cultural spaces in regional capitals (Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso), which function as language centers, scholarship offices, and technical training hubs aimed at developing local cadres and disseminating the Russian narrative of cooperation “without conditions.”

In these cases, Russia is employing soft power, defined by Joseph Nye as an asset that generates attraction and often leads to acquiescence. In his work, Nye argues that “seduction is always more effective than coercion”⁶. This approach is intertwined with conventional diplomacy organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and cultural agencies through high-level meetings (including the Russia–Sahel Alliance meeting held in Moscow in April 2025), cycles of economic cooperation such as “Economic Days,” and the planning of an intergovernmental commission aimed at systematizing commercial collaboration and facilitating business contacts.

⁴ GARCÍA LLATA, Antonio. *Los zarpazos del oso en el desierto: Rusia y la nueva geopolítica del Sahel*. Orden Internacional, Revista de Estudios Internacionales, Nº 1, e72, 2025. <https://revistas.urjc.es/index.php/roi/article/view/72/96> (accessed 30/01/2026).

⁵ А. С. Авакян. *РОССИЯ И АФРИКА: стратегическое партнерство в контексте трансформации региона Сахеля*. Вестник науки, №11 (92), том 1, с. 573–580, 2025. <https://www.xn----8sbempclwd3bmt.xn--p1ai/article/26246> (accessed 30/01/2026).

⁶ GOMICHOIN, M. *Joseph Nye on Soft Power*. E-International Relations, 08/03/2013. <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/08/joseph-nye-on-soft-power/> (accessed 30/01/2026).

These initiatives serve a dual function: on the one hand, they legitimize Russia's presence before local authorities as an offer of technical cooperation; on the other, they prepare the political ground for more substantial agreements in security and strategic sectors. The objective is to institutionalize economic ties that complement security cooperation⁷.

Russia's Hybrid Penetration Strategy

This articulation between culture, economy, and security forms part of a broader strategic project of Moscow's global repositioning. Reports and foreign policy analyses, such as research by the PIR Center (a Russian non-governmental organization specializing in nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament, and global security issues), along with other analytical institutions, emphasize that cooperation in defense, personnel training, and advisory support constitutes a central component of the Russian offer. This offer is conceived as an alternative that avoids political "conditionality" in exchange for access and shared strategic priorities. Such a vision constructs the narrative of Russia as a non-interventionist partner and provider of security capabilities, an approach that is attractive to governments prioritizing sovereignty and autonomy in the face of external pressures⁸.

Internal sources also point to tensions and limitations, as the effort to present cooperation as "without conditions" coexists with direct instruments of influence such as extractive contracts, energy memoranda, and military presence. All these actions entail commitments that go beyond mere rhetoric. The cultural and educational narrative functions as a legitimizing component of a presence that combines technical, geoeconomic, and security interests^{9,10}.

⁷ ZUBENKO, Alexandra S. Uranium competition in the Sahel region and Russia's interests: Current situation, assessment of prospects, recommendations. *PIR Center Report Series* 47/2025. <https://pircenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/25-12-01-ZUB-REP-on-SAH-Ed.by-SHAH-Rev.by-ORL-AS-PUBLISHED.pdf> (accessed 28/01/2026).

⁸ ZUBENKO, Alexandra S. Uranium competition in the Sahel region and Russia's interests: Current situation, assessment of prospects, recommendations. *PIR Center Report Series* 47/2025. <https://pircenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/25-12-01-ZUB-REP-on-SAH-Ed.by-SHAH-Rev.by-ORL-AS-PUBLISHED.pdf> (accessed 28/01/2026)

⁹ ТАСС. «Газпром» возобновил добычу нефти в Ливии. *Экономика*, 25 май 2021, 08:12. <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/11464015> (accessed 31/01/2026).

¹⁰ ROSATOM NEWSLETTER. *Russian Atoms for Africa*. Issue #294, 28 octobre 2025. <https://rosatomnewsletter.com/2025/10/28/russian-atoms-for-africa/> (accessed 31/01/2026).

From Wagner to the Africa Corps

One of Russia's main actions in this region is support in the fight against jihadism. From the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, diplomatic authorities have expressed concern about the activities of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), highlighting the persistence of operations in the Liptako-Gourma area and along border corridors toward the Gulf of Guinea¹¹. Both groups are present in Mali, a country that clearly illustrates the rhetorical and operational dimensions of Russian policy.

Diplomacy and official channels describe the cooperation as counterterrorism support requested by local authorities, while on the ground it combines advisory roles, equipment supply, and the participation of the new Africa Corps under the Ministry of Defense¹². This corps has been involved in tasks such as convoy protection and the normalization of fuel transit, at least since 2024–2025. The provision of military equipment and training operations has contributed to strengthening the Bamako government's capacity to maintain control over local power centers and to redefine its foreign policy orientation.

In official documents and press briefings from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this support is framed as a response to requests from Bamako and aligned with the priorities of local governments. As an operational example, in December 2025 Russian authorities reported that the Malian Armed Forces, with the support of the Africa Corps, conducted counterterrorism operations to secure routes and protect convoys. In the official Russian narrative, this action was presented as coordinated with Bamako and directed toward specific security objectives¹³.

¹¹ ТАСС. Захарова: Россия будет и дальше помогать Мали в преодолении топливного кризиса. Экономика, 20 noviembre 2025. <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/25683763> (accessed 01/02/2026).

¹² MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION. Press release on Russia–Confederation of Sahel States ministerial meeting. 3 abril 2025. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2007055/ (accessed 01/02/2026).

¹³ ЛАКСТЫГАЛ, Илья. Что известно об «Африканском корпусе» России. Ведомости, 22 diciembre 2023. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/12/22/1012398-cto-izvestno-ob-afrikanskom-korpuse-rossii> (accessed 01/02/2026).

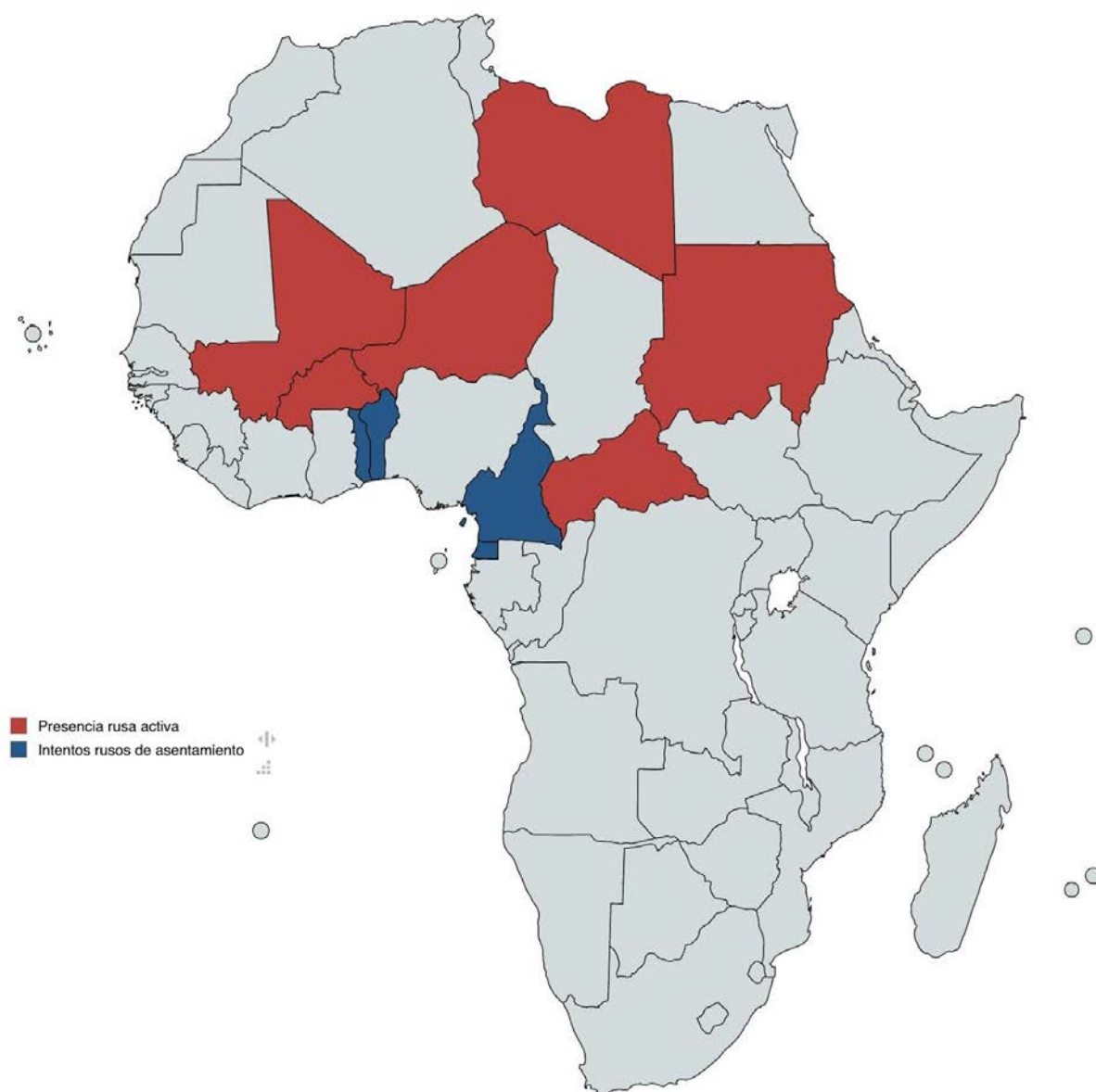


Figure 1. Russian military and economic presence in Africa as of 2021. Source: Author's own elaboration

However, these forces do not always succeed in combating armed insurgency. A notable case was the Battle of Tinzawatène, which took place in northeastern Mali in late July 2024. During those days, the Wagner Group reported that its soldiers, together with Malian personnel, suffered casualties in clashes with Tuareg rebels near the border with Algeria.

The Wagner Group (predecessor of the Africa Corps) was led by Yevgeny Prigozhin prior to its dissolution and first appeared assisting local governments in 2017 in Mozambique and Sudan, later in the Central African Republic in 2018, in Libya in 2019, and subsequently in Mali. Although Malian authorities stated that the Russian personnel were

trainers rather than mercenaries, Wagner confirmed at the time that its fighters had been involved in the battle¹⁴.

Taking this into account, it is necessary to distinguish four dimensions when assessing the nature and impact of such cooperation. First, legitimacy, defined as a mandate by invitation or popular consent. Second, operational capacity, meaning the real scope of the deployed units and supplied equipment. Third, effectiveness, whether the actions reduce or merely displace insurgent violence. Finally, it is important to consider the international political cost for both the local partner and Russia.

On a broader level, Moscow interprets the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Libya–Syria axis as a strategic laboratory to test military cooperation missions “by invitation,” economic diplomacy, and cultural programs. This formulation, repeated in analyses by think tanks and official Russian statements, nevertheless requires critical evaluation. Operational “flexibility” may generate political dependence on the client and risks of escalation or attrition¹⁵.

Economic and Extractive Dimension

In operational terms, Russia's presence in Africa was initially articulated through hybrid actors, notably private military companies (PMCs) such as Wagner. This modality allowed Moscow to maintain varying degrees of plausible deniability and to limit political exposure in the face of international controversies. The Syrian experience (intervention beginning in 2015) served as a testing ground for coordination between regular forces, private contractors, and local allies. Russian bases on Syrian territory constitute the bridge connecting Russia to Africa, a logistical node of vital importance for the Kremlin. For this reason, Moscow moved quickly to negotiate with the new Syrian leadership following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024¹⁶.

Libya was one of the first nodes in this projection process. Russian policy combined engagement with both state and non-state actors, including contacts with Khalifa Haftar's

¹⁴ МЕДУЗА. *«Или в Минобороны, или ****»: Русская служба Би-би-си рассказала, что произошло с наёмниками ЧВК Вагнера за год, прошедший с мятежа Евгения Пригожина. Meduza, 21 junio 2024. <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/06/21/ili-v-minoborony-ili> (accessed 01/02/2026).

¹⁵ TIMBUKTU INSTITUTE. *Russia's Repositioning in the Sahel: From Wagner to Africa Corps*. Report, Dakar, julio 2025. <https://timbuktu-institute.org/index.php/toutes-l-actualites/item/1262-report-russia-s-repositioning-in-the-sahel-from-wagner-to-africa-corps> (accessed 01/02/2026).

¹⁶ ТАСС. *Вершинин: базы РФ в Сирии действуют и играют стабилизирующую роль в регионе*. Политика, 3 diciembre 2025. <https://tass.ru/politika/25804457> (accessed 03/02/2026).

Libyan National Army, and the use of Libyan territory as a logistical-strategic platform toward the western Sahel¹⁷. Russia leverages Libya's geographical position and its potential role as an energy and military hub in the central Mediterranean to expand its capacity for indirect influence over Europe. Moscow maintained contacts with multiple actors, both Haftar and other Libyan authorities, in order to preserve influence options and conclude commercial and arms agreements across different parts of the country. This pragmatism has enabled the Kremlin to secure logistical corridors and energy opportunities for projection into the Sahel.

At the same time, Russian energy companies resumed activities in concessions and exploration projects in Libya. Gazprom, through its subsidiaries, and Tatneft have been mentioned as participants in oil wells south of Benghazi and in the Ghadames Basin. These operations increased bilateral trade after years of conflict, although the full reopening of infrastructure and energy investments remains contingent upon security normalization and the finalization of contracts¹⁸. In 2023, Russia reopened its embassy in Tripoli, and the new diplomatic representative reaffirmed "close traditional relations" and a willingness to cooperate in education, technology, and trade. Concurrently, Russian diplomacy has supported political processes among the different factions and facilitated the country's participation in international forums as part of its logic of normalization and commercial reintegration¹⁹.

The military dimension coexists with an extractivist ambition, particularly in Niger and other areas rich in uranium and minerals. State and corporate actors have structured energy and mining cooperation agreements. In these cases, Rosatom is the central actor in the nuclear agenda, seeking not only raw material supplies but also integration into value chains and the development of civilian nuclear capacities²⁰. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the gap between memoranda and actual implementation, as numerous agreements do not translate into large-scale industrial investment or sustained

¹⁷ РИА НОВОСТИ. *Военные Ливийской национальной армии заявили о нейтрализации 26 боевиков в районе Ливийской национальной армии Халифы Хафтара* (28 julio 2023). <https://ria.ru/20230728/diplomatiya-1886193314.html> (accessed 03/02/2026).

¹⁸ РИА НОВОСТИ. *Двусторонняя торговля России и Ливии достигла 80,17 млрд долларов в 2020 году*. 28 июля 2023. <https://ria.ru/20230728/diplomatiya-1886193314.html> (accessed 03/02/2026).

¹⁹ РБК. *Россия возобновила работу посольства в Ливии спустя девять лет*. Политика, 26 июня 2023. Электронный ресурс <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/64999e159a794752480d95c1> (accessed 03/02/2026).

²⁰ WORLD NUCLEAR NEWS. *Rosatom expands cooperation in West Africa*. 16 octubre 2023. <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Rosatom-expands-cooperation-in-West-Africa> (accessed 03/02/2026).

exploitation due to logistical, financial, and security constraints acknowledged by Russian sources themselves. It is therefore essential to distinguish between strategic intent and the effective capacity to execute projects in volatile environments.

Russian military policy in Africa has gone through two main phases. The first involved the use of hybrid actors and contractors to project power while exploiting plausible deniability. The second phase has been one of recentralization, adopted after the 2023 crisis triggered by the Wagner insurrection. During this period, the mercenary group's structures were integrated into entities subordinate to the Ministry of Defense, becoming the Africa Corps, which seeks to institutionalize Russia's presence. This transition represents an adaptation aimed at preserving operational capability and reducing diplomatic risks associated with the use of PMCs, without implying an abandonment of ongoing missions. This transformation can be interpreted as a reinforced commitment to Africa, insofar as the Kremlin has chosen to assume political and military responsibility for operations that are no longer conceived as tactical or short-term, but rather as part of a long-term presence²¹.

²¹ OSINT SAHEL. *Después del Grupo Wagner: Rusia reorganiza su presencia militar en África*. 24 julio 2025. <https://www.osintsahel.com/2025/07/24/despues-del-grupo-wagner-rusia-reorganiza-su-presencia-militar-en-africa/> (accesed 03/02/2026).



Despliegue ruso en África y Mediterráneo.

Figure 2. Deployment of Russian forces in Africa and the Mediterranean. Source: IEEE.

The shift from hybrid projection toward a more state-centered projection does not eliminate the structural contradictions of the Russian model. Re-statisation reduces the scope for plausible deniability while increasing political accountability. It also raises questions about whether institutionalization enhances or limits tactical flexibility²². These

²² «Замена Вагнеру. Россия активно перебрасывает вооружение в Африку — AP». NV.ua, 11 junio 2025. <https://nv.ua/world/geopolitics/afrikanskiy-korpus-rossiya-narashchivaet-prisutstvie-v-afrike-50521076.html> (accessed 03/02/2026).

issues are explicitly discussed in Russian analyses and publications and should be central to any assessment of the sustainability, costs, and long-term risks of this projection model²³.

Diplomacy and narrative

In Burkina Faso and Niger, coups d'état and friction with former allies opened political spaces where the Russian offer of security, training, and technical cooperation became attractive. Security cooperation, anti-imperialist discourse, and the provision of support against jihadist insurgencies have turned both countries into relevant nodes within the belt of influence that Moscow seeks to consolidate in the Sahel²⁴.

Investments and projects in key sectors such as energy, mining, transport, and infrastructure complement the military deployment. A paradigmatic case is nuclear cooperation with Niger. In 2025, the state-owned company Rosatom signed an agreement with Nigerien authorities to explore civil nuclear energy cooperation, an initiative aimed not only at uranium extraction but also at developing value chains through the construction of reactors, training programs, and the advancement of nuclear medicine. Moscow and local partners also agreed to promote projects in transport, infrastructure development, agriculture, and extractive industries; however, these intentions require additional documentation regarding financing and implementation plans to properly assess their real feasibility. For example, the April 2025 visit of a Russian health delegation led by Anna Popova, head of the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor), to Ouagadougou is presented as part of an effort to strengthen healthcare capacities. These actions, which combine diplomacy and capacity building, are consistent with the Russian narrative of “cooperation without conditionality”²⁵.

Within the context of nuclear cooperation in Africa, relations with Ghana are also noteworthy. Recently, bilateral cooperation has expanded into education and training

²³ «Африканский корпус и будущее российского присутствия в Африке». *Topwar.ru*, 27 octubre 2025. <https://topwar.ru/272746-afrikanskij-korpus-i-buduschee-rossijskogo-prisutstvija-v-afrike.html> (accessed 03/02/2026).

²⁴ РБК. Президент Владимир Путин согласился на официальном портале правовой информации опубликовать закон о продлении Россией срока действия Договора о сокращении стратегических наступательных вооружений (СНВ-III). *Политика*, 16 noviembre 2020. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/11/2020/5fb2aab59a79471401c3e49f> (accessed 03/02/2026).

²⁵ «Rusia y Uganda acuerdan cooperar en la garantía de la seguridad epidemiológica». *NoticiasLatAm*, 17 febrero 2023. <https://noticiaslatam.lat/20230217/rusia-y-uganda-acuerdan-cooperar-en-la-garantia-de-la-seguridad-epidemiologica-1135891812.html> (accessed 03/02/2023).

initiatives, including virtual seminars in 2025 that brought together Russian and Ghanaian experts to discuss research, knowledge transfer, and human resource development in nuclear science and technology. Additionally, in 2022 both parties agreed to establish a Joint Working Group to coordinate information exchange and explore emerging technologies such as small modular reactors (SMRs). In 2023, representatives of Rosatom and Ghana's Ministry of Energy met during the Africa Energy Week to deepen cooperation. Although Ghana has not yet begun constructing a commercial nuclear power plant, these activities reflect sustained Russian engagement²⁶.

These programs are mainly focused on memoranda of understanding and training initiatives rather than the immediate construction of large nuclear power plants. This strategy allows Moscow to position itself across multiple African markets while maintaining contractual flexibility and potential commercial advantages. For example, Rosatom signed an agreement with Algeria in 2024 to advance cooperation in the peaceful uses of atomic energy and the development of technical and regulatory capacities²⁷. Morocco signed cooperation agreements for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, with a focus on medical applications²⁸. In Rwanda and Burundi, Rosatom concluded cooperation frameworks aimed at establishing legal bases, personnel training programs, and radioisotope applications for medicine and agriculture²⁹. Zambia and Uganda have registered contacts with Russian actors to explore possibilities in radiological safety, professional training, and, in the case of Uganda, site assessment and supply options that place Rosatom among the considered potential providers³⁰. In Ethiopia, cooperation has evolved from framework agreements toward planning documents and roadmaps that include feasibility assessments and staff training,

²⁶ WORLD NUCLEAR NEWS / NEI MAGAZINE. *Russia and Ghana to set up Joint Working Group on SMRs*. 31 agosto de 2022. <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/russia-and-ghana-to-set-up-joint-working-group-on-smrs-9967732> (accessed 20/02/2026).

²⁷ ROSATOM STATE ATOMIC ENERGY CORPORATION. *Rosatom and Ministry of Energy and Mining of Algeria sign cooperation road map*. 27 marzo 2024. <https://rosatom-mena.com/press-centre/news/rosatom-state-corporation-and-ministry-of-energy-and-mining-of-algeria-sign-cooperation-road-map/> (accessed 20/02/2026).

²⁸ TACC. *Russia's Rosatom, Morocco sign cooperation agreement*. Economía, 11 octubre 2017. <https://tass.com/economy/970060> (accessed 20/02/2026).

²⁹ ANADOLU AGENCY. *Russia's Rosatom, Rwanda to cooperate in nuclear energy*. 26 junio 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/nuclear/russias-rosatom-rwanda-to-cooperate-in-nuclear-energy-20616> (accessed 20/02/2026).

³⁰ TÜRZAM-Zambia Businessmen Association. *Russia-Zambia Relations with Potential for Development*. 29 noviembre 2023. <https://turzam.org/en/this-is-the-translate/> (accessed 20/02/2026).

indicating an intention to move toward nuclear projects if technical and financial conditions are met.

Regarding the deepening of diplomatic ties, at the end of May 2025, President Vladimir Putin received the president of Burkina Faso, Ibrahim Traoré, in Moscow, in a meeting that addressed security and bilateral trade issues. According to official statements, Moscow committed to supporting efforts to restore order and facilitate economic cooperation mechanisms. At the same time, Russian diplomacy uses international forums to denounce the alleged “double standards” of Western powers in the Sahel and frames its support as a defense of African sovereignty. Russian permanent representative to the United Nations, Vasily Nebenzya, has criticized the military presence of former colonial powers, especially France, and has welcomed regional initiatives such as the creation of the Alliance of the Sahel, which Moscow presents as expressions of autonomy and subregional cooperation³¹.

Outside the central Sahelian triangle, Russian presence is less visible but remains significant. This is the case of Mauritania. Military cooperation was formalized in 2021 and, according to official records and energy-focused analytical sources, Moscow has shown particular interest in fields such as Bir Allah and the potential participation of Russian companies in gas development projects³².

Bilateral cooperation with Mauritania also covers fisheries and aquaculture, business support, and educational programs³³. Russia maintains business support centers and scholarship schemes. Both countries have committed to strengthening opportunities for maritime fishing cooperation and coordination in Arab and African forums. These initiatives were consolidated through a bilateral agreement signed in December 2025 that provides visa exemptions for diplomatic and service passport holders³⁴.

³¹ ПОСТОЯННОЕ ПРЕДСТАВИТЕЛЬСТВО РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ при ООН. *Выступление Постоянного Представителя В.А. Небензи на заседании Совета Безопасности ООН по вопросам борьбы с терроризмом в Африке*, 21 января 2025 г. https://russiaun.ru/ru/news/nebenzia_africa_210125 (accessed 08/02/2026).

³² КРАСОВСКАЯ, Екатерина. *Россия рассматривает участие в мавританском газовом проекте BirAllah*. *Oilcapital.ru*, 18 июля 2025. <https://oilcapital.ru/news/2025-07-18/rossiya-rassmatrivaet-uchastie-v-mavritanskom-gazovom-proekte-birallah-5438826> (accessed 08/02/2026).

³³ ТАСС. *Путин заявил, что РФ и Мавритания имеют все возможности для наращивания сотрудничества*. *Политика*, 4 декабря 2023. <https://tass.ru/politika/19452227> (accessed 08/02/2026).

³⁴ ТАСС. *Россия и Мавритания подписали соглашение о безвизе для владельцев диппаспортов*. *Политика*, 19 декабря 2025, 15:42. <https://tass.ru/politika/25970879> (accessed 08/02/2026).

The case of the Central African Republic is essential for understanding the Russian model in Africa. There, Russia achieved one of its deepest and most visible interventions, assuming a central role in national security, restructuring the armed forces, and protecting strategic infrastructure. The Central African case illustrates how Moscow combines military assistance, natural resource access, and long-term political influence, offering a precedent that has inspired other African governments³⁵.

According to an analysis by the Spanish Ministry of Defence published in February 2023, in the Central African Republic, Wagner Group influenced public opinion through the creation of media outlets, stabilized internal politics by marginalizing opposition groups and politicians closer to France, and supported the incumbent power structure. This strategy, used by Russia for years, typically begins with diplomats approaching African leaders, followed by the signing of security agreements with Russian PMCs and finally by contracts involving resource extraction companies³⁶.

³⁵ ВАСИЛЬЕВ, Алексей. *Россия и Африка в глобальной борьбе за ископаемые ресурсы*. Журнал *Международная жизнь*, архив № 6, 2011. <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/474> (accessed 08/02/2026).

³⁶ VILLENA SÁNCHEZ, Fernando. *La presencia rusa en África*. *Revista Española de Defensa* (RED), nº 402, febrero 2023, pp. 52-55. <https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/gabinete/red/2023/02/p-52-55-red-402-rusia-africa.pdf> (accessed 08/02/2026).



Figure 3. Image from the Second Ministerial Conference of the Russia–Africa Partnership Forum. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia

Sudan occupies a singular place in Russian strategic narrative and practice, functioning as a key space located outside the Sahel but directly connected to it. In 2020, the Kremlin proposed establishing a naval and logistical support point on the Red Sea, and on 16 November of the same year, President Vladimir Putin authorized the signing of an agreement with Khartoum to establish a logistical facility in Port Sudan³⁷. However, the civil war that began in late 2023 has delayed the implementation of this project.

Sudan's importance for Moscow lies in the potential control of strategic maritime routes in the Red Sea and access to global trade corridors. In this context, Russia has sought opportunities in the extractive sector and the possibility of strengthening its naval projection in a region that connects Africa, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific³⁸. Moscow has maintained contacts and channels of communication with the main actors in

³⁷ РБК. Президент Владимир Путин согласился опубликовать на официальном портале правовой информации закон о продлении действия СНВ-III. Политика, 16 ноября 2020. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/11/2020/5fb2aab59a79471401c3e49f> (accessed 08/02/2026).

³⁸ TACC. Sudan completes review of naval base agreement with Russia. World, 12 febrero 2021. <https://tass.com/world/1575271> (accessed 08/02/2026).

the Sudanese conflict, including both the Sudanese government and the Sudanese Armed Forces, as well as the Rapid Support Forces, adopting a pragmatic approach aimed at preserving influence regardless of the conflict's outcome.

Despite the worsening security situation, Russian sources reported an intensification of energy cooperation in 2024, including official invitations to Russian companies to explore new oil fields in areas considered secure and plans for gas exploration off the coast of the Red Sea³⁹.

Atlantic projection

Russian strategy seeks not only to expand and strengthen relations with Sahelian countries but also to consolidate influence points along Africa's Atlantic coastline. The objective is to take advantage of growing cooperation with countries in the Gulf of Guinea. For example, recent agreements on naval access and military cooperation with Togo have granted Russia "privileged access" to regional ports, expanding its logistical network and potentially enabling operations along maritime corridors connecting Africa and Europe.

This type of cooperation, together with growing ties with countries such as Guinea and Mauritania, has been interpreted as part of a broader attempt to position Russia in the western Atlantic space, although no formal naval bases have yet been established in the region. This is perceived as an element of Moscow's strategy to project maritime power and increase influence by linking the Sahel–West Africa belt with key maritime routes and strengthening its presence outside the traditional European sphere.

These actions are framed within the Russian vision of expanding its reach beyond the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea, exploiting spaces where Western presence has declined. Overall, it appears that the Kremlin seeks to establish a broader projection that includes the African Atlantic arc within its geostrategic calculus⁴⁰.

³⁹ «Пути к миру и безопасности» № 2 (65) 2023. Москва: Национальный исследовательский институт мировой экономики и международных отношений имени Е.М. Примакова Российской академии наук (ИМЭМО РАН), осень–зима 2023. https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/magazines/puty_miru/2023/02/FullText-0222023FINAL.pdf (accessed 08/02/2026).

⁴⁰ ROGER, Benjamin; JÉGO, Marie. *Russia's navy now has privileged access to the Gulf of Guinea*. *Le Monde*, 25 noviembre 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2025/11/25/russia-s-navy-now-has-privileged-access-to-the-gulf-of-guinea_6747826_124.html (accessed 20/02/2026).

Conclusions

Overall, Russian presence in the Sahel responds to a logic of systemic competition with the West. Moscow does not seek to replace Western powers in terms of development or governance but rather to position itself as a security guarantor and alternative political partner. This strategy has had a significant impact on regional balances, weakening traditional international cooperation frameworks and redefining security dynamics in Africa. The analysis of Russian penetration in the Sahel thus helps to understand not only Russia's African policy but also its broader vision of the international order and the instrumental use of military power in peripheral theaters.

From the Russian perspective, its presence in the region results from a combination of geopolitical, economic, and security factors. The Kremlin presents its actions as a response to requests from countries seeking assistance in combating terrorism. In official discourse, Moscow insists that it provides support without political pressure or conditional conditions, in contrast to Western countries, especially the former colonial power in the region, France. Sahelian governments are often portrayed as valuing cooperation with Moscow precisely because it avoids elements of coercion, leverage, or intimidation.

Economically, Moscow seeks to secure access to strategic resources and relatively stable markets. The Sahel contains significant mineral, gold, hydrocarbon, and agricultural potential. Russian initiatives in the region, particularly the preliminary cooperation agreements with Rosatom, illustrate the interest in integrating value chains related to uranium and nuclear energy. Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish between memoranda of intent and projects with secured financing and implementation schedules, which conditions the assessment of Russia's ability to transform intentions into sustained productive presence.

According to Russian strategic logic and analyses by research centers monitoring Russian foreign policy, Moscow prioritizes building relationships that generate sustainable geostrategic, economic, and political advantages in Africa. This prioritization is articulated across several closely interconnected dimensions. On the one hand, the expansion of ties with receptive governments aims to secure access to critical infrastructure, bases, and maritime ports that enhance Russian power projection beyond the European continent.

In economic terms, this approach is linked to promoting reconstruction contracts, strategic natural resource extraction, and nuclear energy projects. Russian academic and analytical forums emphasize that the presence of state-owned enterprises such as Rosatom and the signing of cooperation memoranda for nuclear projects demonstrate an explicit intention to integrate Russia into sectors beyond arms sales or security services. In this context, the Spanish Ministry of Defence noted in a February 2023 report that Russia is developing nuclear energy projects in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Angola, Zambia, and South Africa. Infrastructure and mining industry projects are more concentrated in Uganda, Guinea, Zimbabwe, and South Africa rather than in the Sahel.

Politically, Moscow promotes diplomatic alliances in which its actions are framed as defense of sovereignty and a multipolar international order against what Russian official discourse describes as Western hegemonic interests. This component is not secondary, since the narrative of “cooperation without political conditions” forms part of Russian public diplomacy to justify involvement in regions where Western influence is declining and where governments may welcome an alternative perceived as less intrusive.

The restructuring of Wagner Group into the Africa Corps has been described by specialized analysts as a move toward a more institutionalized and visible form of Russian presence, in which the state directly assumes roles previously outsourced. This increases transparency in terms of accountability but also raises the Kremlin's political exposure.

This model offers advantages for Moscow, including greater direct control, improved coordination between diplomacy and state commerce, and the ability to negotiate contracts and agreements with local governments under more favorable conditions. However, it also entails challenges and risks. By integrating these forces into a recognized state structure, Russia loses the plausible deniability associated with private contractors, increasing political and legal responsibility in cases involving allegations of human rights violations, contractual breaches, or unforeseen consequences of its presence.

Furthermore, strategic positioning studies indicate that the sustainability of this model will depend on Moscow's ability to balance its geoeconomic interests with local legitimacy and regional stability. Literature analyzing the expansion of the Africa Corps interprets that while state control may reduce reputational risks associated with private actors, it

may also increase pressure on Russia in scenarios where its military or economic activities conflict with international norms or the interests of other external actors.

Taken together, this hybrid framework of multilateral relations, state-institutionalized military projection, reaffirmed diplomatic alliances based on sovereignty discourse, and broad cooperation, including defense, energy, and education, signals a long-term bet on the African continent. Within an increasingly competitive global geopolitical context, the Russian state seeks to transform short-term opportunities into sustainable strategic presence.

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