

Russ-Afrique?

RUSSIA, FRANCE, AND THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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The French government has been taking a balanced and often supportive diplomatic and economic approach to Russia in recent years, so Moscow should logically be trying to cement good relations with Paris amidst current tensions with the West. Yet since 2017, in the Central African Republic (CAR)—a poverty-stricken, violence-ridden country with enduring ties to France where neither the USSR nor Russia ever played much of a role—Russia has targeted France in what Moscow portrays as a geopolitical competition. This memo describes the situation and explores the variety of motives that Moscow might have for challenging France in CAR, even though no definitive explanation is possible with the currently available evidence.

Connaître Bien et Aimer Quand Même (“To Know Well and To Like Nonetheless”)

Germany, not France, was the driver of European Union (EU) sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine crisis, and some French politicians have occasionally expressed doubts about renewing them. Yet France has officially [supported](#) the sanctions from their start in 2014 through today. France has also taken an active role in NATO’s beefed-up deterrence measures against Russia, for example by [sending](#) a combined arms battalion in alternating years to Estonia and Lithuania annually since 2017. French President Emmanuel Macron furthermore [uncovered](#) a Russian hacking and disinformation campaign against his candidacy during France’s 2017 elections and fought back successfully.

Yet amid official displeasure with Russia, Paris has managed to maintain a relatively cordial approach toward Moscow. [According](#) to an anonymous French official, “It’s about pragmatism, not appeasement... You work with the Russians as much as you can, without compromising your position on critical issues.”

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For example, in December 2018, Paris hosted a major annual bilateral trade and finance conference, with a joint declaration of a “new Franco-Russian partnership for tomorrow’s economy” and the [goal](#) to “develop long-term cooperation in strategic economic fields.” Six hundred French firms are present in Russia, and Total S.A., the huge oil and gas conglomerate (where the French state [retains](#) a very small ownership stake) is currently Russia’s [largest](#) single foreign investor. In 2019, Total [purchased](#) an additional stake in a Russian liquid natural gas project. France also [plays](#) a crucial role in ensuring EU support for the controversial Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline, whose investors include the Engie Group (where the French state [maintains](#) an almost 24 percent stake). French trade with Russia increased last year by 11 percent, and major educational and [cultural exchanges](#) continue.

In June 2019 France (alongside Germany) [led](#) the successful effort to reinstate Russia’s full membership in the Council of Europe human rights organization, where Moscow’s voting rights had been suspended since 2014. And while the P-3 states of France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States often [coordinate](#) their approaches to United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decisions before approaching Russia and China (the other two veto-wielding states on the UNSC), throughout the international [crisis in Libya](#), France and Russia have often been on the same side, in contrast to the UK (the U.S. position has varied over time). France’s approach to the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel has focused on fighting extreme Islamist jihadism, given the threats it has faced at home in recent years, lending Paris a degree of strategic commonality with Moscow.

CAR Chase

Nonetheless, Moscow’s recent actions in the Central African Republic seem designed explicitly to challenge Paris.

CAR was a French colony until 1960, and France has maintained strong security interests there ever since, with military bases through 1997 and repeated military interventions (if more recently all multilateral). In 2012, sectarian militias fueled anarchic violence in CAR. The next year, the UNSC, at France’s [initiative](#), authorized both an international peacekeeping mission and the French deployment of a supporting (and temporary) 2,000-personnel military operation (“Sangaris”) whose mandate was to restore order and disarm the militias. While Operation Sangaris was [controversial](#), the French presence led to a sharp decline in violence that, as Lise Morjé Howard [shows](#), unfortunately escalated again once French troops withdrew in 2016.

In 2017, CAR’s newly elected president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, a French-educated professor and university administrator with a reputation as a peace-seeking reformer, appealed to the UNSC’s Sanctions Committee to amend its arms embargo against the country, to allow the state’s military forces to receive weapons to defend themselves. CAR’s military was already being trained by a UN-authorized EU mission (the EUTM).

Touadéra first staked his hopes on France, which in August 2017 floated a proposal to send CAR 1,400 AK-47s [seized](#) by the French navy in a multinational anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia. Russia [vetoed](#) that idea (despite [unanimous support](#) for France's proposal by the other Sanctions Committee members), arguing that weapons confiscated while enforcing one UNSC embargo should not be used to offset another. Following a [September](#) 2017 meeting with Touadéra on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and an [October](#) meeting between Touadéra and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Sochi, Russia offered to donate its own light weapons to CAR instead. The Sanctions Committee (including France) [unanimously](#) agreed.

But in December 2017, Moscow's weapons donation suddenly turned into a much more significant—and unilateral—Russian security presence in CAR. Moscow sent in 170 “civilian trainers” alongside 5 uniformed military personnel, informing the UN that in addition to their training mission they were being used to [guard](#) the delivery of building materials for Russian hospitals (and the hospitals themselves) in CAR. These “civilians” were [Wagner Group](#) forces employed by Putin's close ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, a major Russian military contractor who had been imprisoned in Soviet times for organized crime activities, but has since developed a business empire with Putin's strong support.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) [describes](#) the rather astonishing range of Russia's new unilateral security activities in CAR. Moscow is [training](#) CAR “special purpose forces,” without integrating them into the EUTM or its UN-based legal norms and human rights [standards](#). This provoked strong French objections in the UNSC that have had no effect on Russian behavior. Russia is providing bodyguards for Touadéra and his retinue, dislodging the Rwandan guards who were already there. In a truly unprecedented move, Moscow furthermore assigned Valery Zakharov (a former Russian military [intelligence officer](#)) as Touadéra's new resident national security adviser. It is possible that these arrangements are designed to ensure Touadéra's continuing cooperation.

Russia also helped negotiate diamond and gold mine contracts for Prigozhin in areas under the control of rebel militias, with the Wagner Group securing them.² Zakharov then reached out to those militias in a negotiation process which competed against the UN-recognized African Union (AU) mediation process in CAR. Under international pressure, the Russian peace efforts (led by Zakharov in neighboring Sudan, with Prigozhin flying in militia leaders on his private airplane), were eventually connected to the AU effort in Bangui, and they did lead to an accord. Russia deserves credit for jump-starting a process that was foundering. But the ultimate results are contested and unstable, according to the ICG: Touadéra has allowed a large number of rebels to join CAR's government and military forces with minimal vetting and oversight.

² See: Kimberly Marten, “[Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 561, January 2019.

Russia has not completely displaced France. Paris keeps a small force in Bangui to help CAR forces safeguard the airport. It [sent](#) two Mirage jet-fighters in a flyover of an area threatened by militias, in a deterrent show of force in January. France gives significant [support](#) to both the UN MINUSCA peacekeeping mission, including a [drone](#) detachment of 90 troops, and the EUTM in CAR (where it [took](#) rotating command in July 2019). And in December 2018, the UN finally [sent](#) the 1,400 weapons France captured off Somalia to Bangui, after Russia [argued](#) that everyone providing training in CAR (i.e., including Moscow) should be able to send weapons as long as the UN was notified. Meanwhile, Russia [signed](#) a military accord with CAR in August 2018 that envisions training CAR officers in Russian defense academies, and many [more](#) Russian weapons, trainers, and uniformed military personnel have arrived on the ground recently.

Russia simultaneously launched an apparent disinformation campaign against France. In June 2019, the Russian Federal News Agency ([linked](#) to Prigozhin) [published](#) a story [claiming](#) that the infamous murder in July 2018 of three Russian journalists (employed by exiled Putin opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky) who went to CAR to investigate the Wagner Group was actually planned by a French intelligence officer, working with the French special services and Khodorkovsky himself. (The Frenchman was also accused of bombing a cathedral in Madagascar.) The article concluded, implausibly, “French special services tried to harm Russia’s activities in Africa in order to remove a competitor.” (The story was reposted on a South African news site ([CAJ News Africa](#)) with a CAR journalist’s Bangui byline.)

Prigozhin has obvious motives to smear the French for the murders that Khodorkovsky’s organization has [accused](#) Prigozhin himself of orchestrating. After all, France has led the efforts to reassert UN and EU control over his military trainers in CAR. But Prigozhin is not alone. A similar volley was launched four months earlier on the floor of the UN Security Council by Russian diplomat Dmitry Polyanskiy. Polyanskiy’s [statement](#) was made in response to a UN report that a few Russian trainers in CAR were accused of brutally torturing a local man suspected of being a rebel militia member. (The UN report was [publicized](#) by the independent French AFP news agency, which is [partially funded](#) by the French government and has three French government representatives on its board.) Polyanskiy asserted that the man who claimed to have been tortured later retracted his claim on television and “confessed that it was a provocation in which he was forced to participate by [the] Attaché of [the] French Embassy.” Polyanskiy alleged French special services had threatened to kill the man if he did not say that Russian forces had caused his injuries, and added that the man’s neighbors confirmed his story. This was an extraordinary statement for Russia to make while seated at the UNSC across from its French counterpart.

The Mystery of Russia's Motives

Given Russia's incentives to woo French support closer to home, especially in its key natural gas industry, these actions are puzzling. CAR ranks at the [bottom](#) of the UN's Human Development Index and Touadéra still [lacks control](#) over most of the country, which remains beset by violence. Why would the Kremlin care so much about CAR—and be acting so unilaterally and competitively in a place where it had no prior interests? It is possible that Russia's various polices are uncoordinated, but unlikely since both the foreign minister and a ranking UN diplomat are involved.

Some analysts have portrayed Russia's presence as a reassertion of the Soviet Cold War role in Africa. Indeed, Zakharov himself [argued](#), "Russia has been in CAR since 1964... And now we are back." But the USSR had a minimal role in CAR. The highlight was a 1970 state visit to Moscow by CAR's bizarre self-proclaimed "emperor," Jean-Bedel Bokassa, which led to a joint communiqué emphasizing the two states' anti-colonial, anti-apartheid stances but promising only educational and cultural exchanges.³ There is no evidence of any security or arms sales relationship before 2017.

Russia's motives could be [status-based](#): trying to re-establish a reputation for itself as a global power. Given Russia's relative lateness to recent global investments in Africa and the paucity of resources it has to offer in comparison to China, the US, and the EU, there may be few other opportunities for it to establish a foothold.

Moscow's motives might even be strategic, if one applies some rather convoluted logic (and Khodorkovsky's team has [made](#) a similar claim). CAR is at the geographic center of Africa, and [establishing](#) a base there, or at least flyover and landing rights, would ease access to the rest of the continent. Russia also has a security presence in Sudan (to CAR's northeast), which in turn abuts Libya and Egypt, where Russia is also present; and Moscow recently agreed to [send](#) military personnel to service its weapons in the Republic of Congo (to CAR's southwest). Perhaps Russia hopes to create a corridor linking the Mediterranean to the South Atlantic across Africa's landmass, something colonial France tried and failed to do in the Fashoda Incident of 1898. Yet Russia has limited long-range force projection capabilities and likely [will](#) for the foreseeable future—and presumably weapons donations and military training alone would have been sufficient to assure both Moscow's reputational goals and access rights in CAR.

Perhaps Russian interests (or Prigozhin's personal interests) in CAR's diamond and gold mines are so financially overwhelming that they are directing Kremlin policy. Yet [according](#) to Ned Dalby of the ICG, diamonds in CAR are spread shallowly over a wide geographic area, not in concentrated lodes, and have always been mined artisanally in a labor-intensive method using sieves. (Gold is also mined [artisanally](#) there.) Diamonds

³ "Sovmestnoe Sovetsko-Tsentrāl'noafrikanskoe Kommuniike," *Pravda*, July 12, 1970, pp. 1 and 4.

have made a great deal of money for a few traders at the top (often based in West Africa, Chad, or Lebanon), who have consolidated numerous small-scale local operations in personal networks going back decades. That does not sound like a welcoming business model for an outsider like Prigozhin to enter. The UN Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts [reported](#) that since 2016, some “foreign operators” (including Chinese businesses, with their own private security forces) “have obtained permits to exploit diamond and gold sites... in a semi-mechanical or industrial manner.” Even then, though, CAR lacks the transportation infrastructure needed to get industrial equipment (and even basic supplies) imported easily, much less sent to outlying areas. Russian participation in the AU’s plans to build a transcontinental railroad might eventually ease the infrastructure problem, and Russia has indeed [proposed](#) this, in cooperation with Sudan. At the moment, though, the world faces a [diamond glut](#).

If Russia (or Prigozhin) has nevertheless found a way to make money off the mines, that would bring the puzzle pieces together. Access to the mines requires cooperating with the militias; getting mining and export permits (and the ability for foreign armed guards to enter the country) requires cooperating with the state; and bringing the state and rebels together in a peace accord pays off the (former) rebels by giving them unusual access to power in the capital, while getting the relevant diamond districts certified as conflict-free in the [Kimberley Process](#) (needed for access to the legal diamond global supply chain). Having Russian forces on the ground meanwhile deters any uptick of militia fighting in key mining areas.

Conclusion

Despite this best guess, we may never know for sure why Russia has chosen CAR, of all places, to take a stand against France. The potential future gains for Moscow seem far outweighed by the immediate risks of a poor investment choice, not merely for Prigozhin and his men but for the Russian defense ministry, now saddled with an unstable new client state. Meanwhile, Moscow risks driving away Paris at a time when it most needs friends in the West. If Russia cannot restrain Prigozhin’s greed and its own unilateralism to cooperate more fully with the UN and EU security missions, the biggest victims may end up being the people of CAR. It will truly be tragic if the country’s one hope of a multilateral lifeline is severed by Russia’s new rivalry with France.