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Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa

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Introduction

After a decades-long absence, Russia is once again appearing on the African continent. The Kremlin's return to Africa, which has generated considerable media, governmental, and civil society attention, draws on a variety of tools and capabilities. Worrying patterns of stepped-up Russian activity are stirring concerns that a new wave of great-power competition in Africa is now upon us. U.S. policymakers frequently stress the need to counter Russian malign influence on the continent. On a visit to Angola in early 2019, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan said that "Russia often utilizes coercive, corrupt, and covert means to attempt to influence sovereign states, including their security and economic partnerships."¹ Advocates for a more forceful Western policy response point to high-visibility Russian military and security cooperation in the Central African Republic and the wide-ranging travels of Russian political consultants and disinformation specialists as confirmation that Russia, like China, represents a major challenge in Africa.

Yet is that really the case? Are Russian inroads and capabilities meaningful or somewhat negligible? Hard information is difficult to come by, but any honest accounting of Russian successes will invariably point to a mere handful of client states with limited strategic significance that are isolated from the West and garner little attention from the international community. It remains unclear whether Russia's investments in Africa over the past decade are paying off in terms of creating a real power base in Africa, let alone putting it on a footing that will expand its influence in the years to come.

Nevertheless, Russia increasingly looks to Africa as a region where it can project power and influence. President Vladimir Putin will welcome leaders from across the continent to Sochi in late October for the first Africa-Russia summit, a clear indication of the symbolic importance that Africa holds for the Kremlin right now.² It is clear that Russian inroads there would be far more limited but for the power vacuums created by a lack of Western policy focus on Africa in recent years. That state of affairs gives Russia (and other outside powers) an opportunity to curry favor with the continent's elites and populations. More than anything else, it is opportunism that propels Russia's relatively low-cost and low-risk strategies to try to enhance its clout and unnerve the West in Africa, just as in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Russia's Return to the Global Stage

Since 2014, when Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea upended the post-Cold War security order, its image on the world stage has undergone a major transformation. Previously thought of as a defunct superpower in retreat, Russia's ambitions and reach were largely confined to its immediate

periphery. However, it is now viewed as a serious actor in distant parts of the world, where its presence has not been felt since the heyday of the Cold War. The 2015 military intervention in Syria radically changed the course of that country's civil war and Russia's ability to project power in the broader Middle East. Russian meddling in the domestic politics of the United States, France, and Germany is treated as a clear example of the threat it poses to Western democracies. Russian diplomats and security personnel have been busy reestablishing old ties and establishing new ones around the globe.

Perhaps the most significant testimony to Russia's transformation from a "regional" to a "great" power, striving to reassert its influence globally, is in the United States' 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy. Both documents acknowledge the return of long-term strategic competition among nations.³ However, as myopic as the description of Russia as a "regional" power may have been, it would be equally shortsighted to accept at face value Russia's return as a true global power. Such a judgment must rest on a sober assessment of its capabilities available to its policymakers for pursuing their global ambitions and on the record of its involvement in regions beyond its periphery. Dwarfed by the United States and China economically and lacking a robust toolkit for long-range projection of military power—particularly an ocean-going navy and a sizable, deployable, and sustainable airborne troops capability—Russia has accomplished a lot to burnish its global power credentials on the cheap. In fact, many key features of its global posture are rooted in a clear desire to avoid becoming entangled in protracted conflicts, an eagerness to outsource risky or costly adventures to nonstate actors, and an economical use of resources in pursuit of opportunities as they arise.

New Tools, Old Playground

Nowhere has this posture manifested itself more visibly than in Russia's attempts to return to Africa—an arena it abandoned three decades ago, when the burden of global ambitions became too much to bear for the disintegrating Soviet economy. The Soviet Union enjoyed extensive relationships across Africa for decades through its support for national liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, or Guinea-Bissau, its involvement in the Ogaden or Congolese conflicts, and its courtship of Ethiopia's leftist regime.⁴ As the Soviet Union collapsed, these relationships came to an abrupt halt. The cost of maintaining them was completely nonviable for a post-Soviet Russia struggling to overcome cataclysmic political, economic, and societal challenges.

For over two decades after that, Russian activity in Africa was negligible, apart from intermittent appearances by thuggish arms dealers like Viktor Bout and globally minded businessmen like Oleg Deripaska and Viktor Vekselberg.⁵

Gradually, however, as the economy and domestic politics stabilized, and as the Kremlin's foreign policy horizons expanded, Russia began reestablishing a small foothold in Africa.⁶ In the mid-2000s, its outreach focused mainly on South Africa and the African Union—two entities it hoped could serve as partners to support its vision for a multipolar world. Russia then expanded its activities, buttressing its involvement in African peacekeeping operations and participating in the international anti-piracy task force off the coast of Somalia.⁷ Manifestations of increased Russian influence and presence in Africa have grown exponentially since. Relying on all instruments in its toolkit—political, military-security, economic, diplomatic, and informational—Russia has gamely sought to rebuild old ties and develop new ones.

The track record of the past five years is a prime example of how Russia's brand of activist and agile foreign policy can be done on the cheap and create the appearance of paying outsized dividends. The Kremlin frequently tries to take advantage of Europe's and the United States' missteps on the continent as well as of the growing wariness in Africa about China's oversized economic clout and ambitions. Yet as this survey of Russia's activism and priorities makes clear, the scorecard since 2014 provides telling examples of the limits of its power, the exceedingly modest size of its toolkit for pursuing its global ambitions, and its continued predilection for the showy and symbolic over concrete deliverables.

Although North Africa represents an integral part of the continent, Russia's strategy toward the region is generally guided by its broader goals in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Therefore, Russian policy in North Africa is not a major focus of this study, which concentrates principally on two other regions. The Horn of Africa represents an opportunity for Russia to secure a springboard for projecting power into the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Persian Gulf. In sub-Saharan Africa, its priority is on exploiting new commercial opportunities and securing diplomatic support for its positions in multilateral institutions.

A Useful Legacy

In many respects, Russia's reemergence in Africa is an earnest attempt to resume relations where they were left when the Soviet Union departed the scene. The Soviet Union was an influential actor in Africa for much of the Cold War. As part of its ideological confrontation with the West, it backed postcolonial independence movements and sought to exploit the colonial legacy to undercut Western influence on the continent and beyond. The Soviet Union sponsored large-scale military, cultural, and educational exchange programs across Africa, cultivating relationships with political, economic, and academic elites.

Moscow relied heavily on close security and intelligence relationships with leaders of African independence or resistance movements.⁸ Two postapartheid presidents of South Africa, Thabo

Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, went through military training in the Soviet Union as part of its outreach to the African National Congress during the apartheid era.⁹ Zuma's frequent meetings with Putin suggest Moscow eagerly tried to revive those Cold War-era ties and that the former South African leader was a receptive partner.¹⁰

Yet the Soviet Union's ties to Africa were a far cry from those of modern-day Russia. The Soviets provided significant economic assistance, including infrastructure, agricultural development, security cooperation, and health sector cooperation. Security assistance to postcolonial militaries in Africa, including the provision of weapons and equipment, training, and advisers, as well as the development of intelligence relationships, created a long-term legacy of Soviet hardware and operational culture throughout Africa. The Soviet Union embedded security personnel and advisers in several countries' military, intelligence, and political structures. Some of these ties have outlasted the Cold War. Today Russia is seeking to rekindle and build on these legacy relationships to regain a foothold in Africa.

The legacy of the Soviet Union's outreach to Africa has survived the Soviet collapse in other ways. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union opened the doors of its universities to African students, extending educational benefits along with Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. The Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, named after the first prime minister of Zaire and a vocal critic of the West murdered in a CIA-supported coup, was a showpiece of Soviet soft power for the postcolonial world.¹¹ Many prominent African politicians studied there, including some of the older generation, like former president of Namibia Hifikepunye Pohamba, as well as some younger ones, like former prime minister of Chad Youssouf Saleh Abbas and the Central African Republic's former president and rebel leader Michel Djotodia.¹²

Like the Soviet Union previously, contemporary Russia has tried to capitalize on a lack of association in the minds of many Africans with colonialism and imperialism. Marxist-Leninist ideology—which the Soviet Union sought to spread across Africa throughout the Cold War—was embraced by many, if not most, national liberation movements. The appeal of Marxism-Leninism obviously has faded since then. But the absence of a colonial or imperialist legacy and the record of support for national liberation movements amount to a reputational advantage Russia still enjoys in dealings with many African partners. Moreover, Russian officials eagerly portray U.S. democracy promotion efforts as a form of neocolonialism.¹³ This rhetoric holds appeal to authoritarian-style politicians and regimes where democratic governance is still fragile or under assault.

Taken together, these economic, political, historical, educational, and military-security ties create a useful springboard for rebuilding relations with African countries. However, while the legacy of this Soviet outreach to Africa is important, it only goes so far. With its economy struggling, Russia lacks deep pockets. Russian investor interest in Africa is quite narrow, focusing primarily on natural-

resource extraction and energy opportunities that often have already been thoroughly explored or exploited by other players. Cultural ties between Russians and Africans are now quite rare.

Russian strategic documents belie the recent charm offensive and clearly suggest that Africa is not a prime area of strategic interest for Moscow. Beyond noting instability in Africa and the importance of South Africa as a member of the informal BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) club, the continent receives little attention in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept or its National Security Strategy, although these documents are now several years old.¹⁴ Russia instead sees Africa as a vehicle through which it can weaken the West's dominance of global governance, find partners for its vision of a post-U.S. multipolar world, and find economic opportunities for Russian companies, particularly those closed off to Western markets because of sanctions.

Russia's Diplomatic Push

Opportunism is a hallmark of Russia's current foreign policy, and its behavior in Africa is hardly an exception. Russia's return to Africa in recent years has been facilitated in part by the drop-off in U.S. attention to the continent under President Donald Trump's administration.¹⁵ In 2018, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs was confirmed,¹⁶ and then national security adviser John Bolton sketched out a broad Africa strategy in a December speech at the Heritage Foundation. In keeping with the emphasis in the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy on great-power competition, Bolton highlighted the importance of containing Chinese and Russian influences on the continent.¹⁷ But the lack of senior U.S. engagement with Africa and the president's racially charged comments have created plenty of running room for Russia and other actors.¹⁸ The late 2018 decision to scale back U.S. troops in Africa similarly provides openings for Moscow in the security sector.¹⁹

At the very moment Trump fired secretary of state Rex Tillerson while the latter was on a diplomatic mission to Africa in March 2018, the Kremlin was launching a diplomatic surge that will culminate in the Sochi summit meeting in October. When Trump tweeted about his dismissal of Tillerson, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was on a five-country African tour.²⁰ Since then, neither Pompeo, Bolton, nor Bolton's successor Robert O'Brien have visited the continent nor devoted much attention to Africa-related policy issues.

Lavrov returned to Africa in June 2018 to visit South Africa and Rwanda.²¹ By October, Russia had signed multiple military, economic, and security cooperation agreements with a handful of African countries.²² Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev visited Angola, Algeria, and South Africa in summer 2018, where he warned of U.S.-inspired color revolutions and other Western plots to stoke chaos on the continent.²³ Putin made a low-key visit to Africa to attend the BRICS summit in South Africa in 2018.²⁴

A parade of senior African leaders has visited Moscow during the subsequent period, and a surprising number are granted courtesy calls with Putin and other senior officials. Twelve heads of state from sub-Saharan Africa have visited Russia since 2015—six of them in 2018 (see table 1). Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, the Kremlin’s special representative for the Middle East and Africa, is particularly active. The Duma hosted delegations from various African countries for an international parliamentary forum in July 2019, with one full day devoted to Russian-African relations.²⁵ During that event, Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin pushed anti-colonial narratives in his speech to African delegates, comparing Western policies toward the continent with Russia’s willingness to help “protect the sovereign right of African states to build their own future.”²⁶

TABLE 1

African Heads of State Official Visits to Russia, Since 2015

	Country	President	Dates
1	South Africa	Jacob Zuma	2015
2	Zimbabwe	Robert Mugabe	2015
3	Sudan	Omar al-Bashir	2015, 2017, 2018
4	Guinea	Alpha Condé	2016, 2017
5	Central African Republic	Faustin-Archange Touadéra	2018
6	Rwanda	Paul Kagame	2018
7	Gabon	Ali Bongo Ondimba	2018
8	Senegal	Macky Sall	2018
9	Zimbabwe	Emmerson Mnangagwa	2019
10	Angola	João Lourenço	2018, 2019
11	Congo	Denis Sassou Nguesso	2019
12	Mozambique	Filipe Nyusi	2019

SOURCE: Review of the Kremlin’s press service digest (available on kremlin.ru) for the period from January 2015 to August 2019.

Creating a Multipolar World

Africa plays an outsized role in Russia’s long-standing pursuit of a multipolar world order. Russian diplomats routinely look to it for potential partners in efforts to dilute the influence of the United States and its allies in international bodies. The same goes for the African Union (AU), the

Organization of Islamic Conference (with its large African membership), and African development organizations such as African Import-Export Bank (Afreximbank).

The United Nations (UN) is by far the most important arena for such Russian diplomatic efforts. Africa accounts for about one-quarter of member states, which helps explain the impetus behind frequent visits to Africa by senior Russian officials, the numerous “strategic partnership agreements” signed with African countries, and offers of debt relief. Debt relief has proven to be a useful tool, allowing Russia to count on backing from African partners on key UN votes such as the 2014 General Assembly resolution critical of the Russian annexation of Crimea.²⁷ Twenty-nine African countries voted against or abstained from that resolution; six did not show up for the vote. Russia has also relied on its African partners to support its position on key UN votes on Syria and a December 2018 resolution condemning Russia’s militarization of Crimea, the Black Sea, and the Sea of Azov.²⁸ Russia has cultivated authoritarian regimes in Africa as potential allies in blocking international efforts to promote human rights and democratic governance through UN-affiliated organizations and agencies.

Africa is allocated three rotating seats on the UN Security Council, generally referred to as the “A3.” The A3 seats are currently held by South Africa, Equatorial Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire. Recently, Russia has made a deliberate effort to court the A3, which has resulted in an informal alignment that frequently manifests itself on Africa-related issues, often where Russian interests are involved.

In January 2019, Russia partnered with the A3 in the Security Council to stymie UN efforts to examine the disputed election results in the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite a plea from Congolese opposition figures for an investigation and greater international involvement in the dispute.²⁹ In April, Russia and the A3 blocked a UK-drafted Security Council resolution that called for a ceasefire in Libya and condemned the actions of Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar.³⁰ Also in April, Russia supported A3 efforts to block a UN statement on the coup in Sudan and warned other Security Council members against intervening in the country’s internal affairs.³¹ Russia’s advocacy for the principle of nonintervention in internal affairs of sovereign states and its rhetorical calls for Africans—not Westerners—to resolve African issues have contributed to the growing synergy between itself and the A3.

South Africa has long occupied a special place among African countries courted by Russia. The Soviet Union played a crucial role during the fight against apartheid and forged close ties to the African National Congress (ANC) and other militant groups. Putin has visited South Africa three times since 2006, and the political ascendancy of Jacob Zuma, the ANC’s former intelligence chief, created a honeymoon period.³² Under Zuma’s leadership, South Africa was admitted to the informal BRICS group promoted by Russia as a counterweight to the G7.

The AU has been another important target of Russian diplomatic and security outreach in Africa and a tool for Russian diplomacy to counterbalance U.S. and European influence in Africa. Russia's advocacy for African peacekeeping solutions to African conflicts in the AU buttresses its defense in the UN for the principle of nonintervention and the primacy of state sovereignty, and its criticism of the United States for violating those principles elsewhere in the world.

Russia's participation in African peacekeeping missions or training exercises has facilitated its relationships with African militaries as well as arms sales, with security relationships also opening doors for potentially broader political relations and commercial access to natural resources.³³ However, Russia's actual participation in African peacekeeping operations is smaller than commonly believed.³⁴ Its contribution to the UN stabilization mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, makes up less than 0.2 percent of the mission's personnel, despite being the largest concentration of Russian personnel in any UN peacekeeping operation in Africa. Russia also offers scholarship programs to train African peacekeeping personnel and specialists at Russian military facilities.³⁵

The AU has facilitated Russia's participation as an observer at various African peace talks. In 2019, Moscow brokered a peace agreement between the government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and armed rebel groups.³⁶ The Russian security presence in the country ensured its critical role in the talks and allowed it to take over the mantle of security provider from France.³⁷ Russian propaganda outlets, including ones in Africa presumably funded by Moscow, actively push narratives about how it, not France, is creating stability in the CAR. Years of cultivating the AU provided Russia with the necessary legitimacy and political cover for its role in the peace deal.³⁸ However, it has also shown little interest in providing the development assistance needed to rebuild the war-torn country. While Russia played a role in bringing about the peace deal, questions remain about the agreement's failure to bring certain armed rebel groups to justice.

In January, presidential adviser Anton Kobayakov met with the president of the Afreximbank to plan a series of events aimed at bolstering Russian-African economic ties.³⁹ Russia hosted Afreximbank's annual shareholders' meeting in June, and preparations for an African business forum in Russia are under way, which will coincide with the Russia-Africa summit in October. The summit will bring African heads of state, business leaders, and representatives of African multilateral institutions to Russia with the goal of strengthening Russian-African business contacts. As of writing, thirty-five African heads of state have already confirmed participation, although the number will likely increase in the run-up to the meeting. These efforts are backed by the Russian government with involvement from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian Export Center, the Roscongress Foundation, the Russian International Affairs Council, and the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union. Kremlin adviser Yuri Ushakov, a close aide to Putin,

spearheads the preparations for the summit—highlighting the symbolic importance attached to Africa by Russia’s leadership and the Kremlin’s direct hand in the summit.⁴⁰

Limited Economic and Soft Power Tools

Russia has tried to tap the limited economic tools at its disposal to reestablish its presence in Africa. The continent’s booming population, need for stable long-term energy supplies, and abundance of natural resources hold a certain appeal for various Russian private and state-owned corporations, even though Russian players have few competitive advantages.

It is hard to overstate the structural constraints imposed on Russian ambitions in Africa by basic geoeconomic and geopolitical realities. Russia has arrived at the party quite late. It offers remarkably little that African states actually need. Its moves are far outmatched by those of China, the United States, Japan, and the European Union, whose aid and investments in Africa count in the many tens of billions of dollars.⁴¹ China, India, the United States, and Germany remain by far sub-Saharan Africa’s top trading partners.⁴² According to the World Bank, sub-Saharan Africa’s exports to Russia were worth about \$0.6 billion in 2017, while its imports from Russia amounted to about \$2.5 billion. This puts the total sub-Saharan-Russian trade turnover at about \$3 billion, which pales in comparison to the region’s trade with China and the United States, worth \$56 billion and \$27 billion respectively.⁴³

Russia is not a major source of economic development assistance to Africa. What it has been able to offer mostly comes in the form of debt relief, which Russian officials claim amounts to \$20 billion over twenty years.⁴⁴ However, even this figure pales in comparison to commercial loans that Chinese entities have extended across the continent. That figure has been estimated to be as high as \$143 billion between 2000 and 2017.⁴⁵

As a raw-materials exporter, Russia is structurally a competitor to many African economies. It produces few products that African consumers want. Furthermore, the modest size of Russia’s technology sector and lack of investment resources hardly make it an attractive partner for African countries seeking to modernize or build new infrastructure. Russia simply lacks the financial wherewithal to compete with the world’s top players in these sectors (see table 2). Given the stagnant outlook for its economy, it is difficult to see Russia becoming a major economic development partner in Africa.

TABLE 2

Sub-Saharan Trade Turnover in 2017

Trading partners	Total value of imports (in millions of U.S. dollars)	Share of total imports, as a percentage	Change in imports (2007–2017), %	Total value of exports (in millions of U.S. dollars)	Share of total exports, as a percentage	Change in exports (2007–2017), %
China	37,387	16.42	+62	18,520	8.73	-19
India	13,147	5.77	+57	19,685	9.28	+117
United States	11,741	5.16	-26	14,919	7.03	-136
Germany	13,442	5.90	-5	7,492	3.53	-3
United Kingdom	6,222	2.73	-32	6,479	3.06	-45
Japan	6,178	2.71	-39	5,287	2.49	-36
Russia	2,486	1.09	+97	608	0.29	+45

SOURCE: “Sub-Saharan Export and Imports by Country or Region 2017,” World Bank, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SSF/Year/2017/TradeFlow/Export#>.

Some of Russia’s greatest successes have been generated by trading favors with governments targeted by international sanctions for corruption or violations of human rights. Zimbabwe is one such case. Toward the end of Robert Mugabe’s presidency, Russia shielded Harare from sanctions in the UN Security Council and pursued political, economic, and security ties despite international criticism.⁴⁶ The other route to success has been the use of security relationships that helps to co-opt senior leadership in target countries, who then help unlock special access to the exploration of natural resources. This approach is prevalent in the Central African Republic and Sudan (see below).

One potential comparative advantage enjoyed by Russian commercial interests in parts of Africa with weak rule-of-law environments is that their pursuit of business opportunities is not encumbered by restrictions akin to the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. In a small number of places, Russian firms can take advantage of corruption and lack of transparency to build ties with local elites in pursuit of the country’s commercial or geopolitical interests. But Russian companies face still competition from China in pursuing promising business opportunities.⁴⁷

Major state-owned companies tend to dominate Russia’s economic outreach to Africa. Alrosa, the world’s largest diamond mining company, has focused on expanding operations in Angola and Zimbabwe.⁴⁸ (The company’s president is Sergey Ivanov Jr., the son of former Kremlin chief of staff Sergey Ivanov, a longtime aide to Putin who continues to hold a seat on Russia’s Security Council.)

State oil giant Rosneft, which is run by one of Putin's closest associates, Igor Sechin, is trying to expand its activities on the continent too.⁴⁹ It signed a cooperation deal with a Nigerian oil and gas exploration company in 2018 to develop up to twenty-one oil assets across Africa.⁵⁰ Rosneft reportedly has memoranda of understanding with or obtained licenses to work in multiple African countries, including Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Uganda.⁵¹ However, according to Rosneft's 2018 annual report, the company's only operating project is in Mozambique, which suggests there is a fair amount of exaggeration in narratives about its African expansion.⁵²

Rosatom, Russia's nuclear-power company, has been active in many parts of Africa and identifies it as a key growth market.⁵³ With limited domestic opportunities to grow its business due to a sluggish economy at home, it has been looking for opportunities abroad. Considering the nature of its business, such projects create extremely long-term relationships with clients since the construction and operation of nuclear-power plants are decades-long ventures. Rosatom has signed memoranda of understanding with at least fourteen African governments for potential nuclear and non-nuclear cooperation, including in such civilian nuclear sectors as medicine, agriculture, and hydropower projects.⁵⁴

Yet Rosatom has a history of overpromising and under-delivering. The number of deals it has signed in Africa counts mostly as a public-relations exercise, since the vast majority are simply not commercially feasible. At the moment, there are few signs of forward movement for Rosatom's vision for a series of nuclear-power projects in Africa, with the possible exception of a 4,800-megawatt nuclear power plant in Egypt. The construction of that plant has yet to begin as of this writing, although the government of Egypt approved a site permit for it in April.⁵⁵

Furthermore, in some countries robust civil societies have mounted responses to Rosatom's inroads, raising awkward questions for ruling elites involving corruption and other sensitive issues. The company's overreach in a deal to build power reactors in South Africa, reportedly worth \$76 billion, led to the collapse of Zuma's presidency in 2018.⁵⁶ Dogged opposition from grassroots environmental activists and civil society critics of the government led to legal and parliamentary challenges that eventually derailed the plan, which is now a central element of a far-ranging corruption investigation into the period of so-called state capture in South Africa.

Rosatom is also part of Russia's limited soft-power effort in Africa. It funds science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education programs, including scientific competitions for high-school and college students. Rosatom also offers scholarships for Africans to study in Russia.⁵⁷ These educational opportunities can be uniquely important for promising African students who lack the financial resources to study in Europe or the United States. Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov claimed in July that almost 15,000 African students now study in Russia,⁵⁸ but it is not clear how

many actually do. Given credible reports of violence against Africans in Russia in recent years, it is unlikely that such exchange programs provide a substantial boost to Russia's image on the continent.⁵⁹

An Antiquated Approach to Humanitarian Assistance

Unlike in the Soviet era, Russia's development and humanitarian assistance today is largely symbolic. For example, it has yet to pledge funds to the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Africa. Russia's pledged assistance for Ebola relief is less than half of what was delivered by the United States at the height of the crisis in 2014–2016.⁶⁰ However, it is eager to be seen as a major international donor in Africa, and it leverages state media outlets such as Sputnik and official statements to highlight the limited assistance it provides.⁶¹

Russian assistance to Africa is largely in the form of donations responding to humanitarian crises. This is different from when the Soviet Union provided large-scale technical assistance to anti-colonial movements and newly independent states as part of its ideological confrontation with the West. Russia scaled back those assistance programs in the 1990s and even today lacks a standalone international development agency. Plans to establish one through the Ministry of Finance were shelved in 2012. Russia has not signed the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) principles, is not a member of the GHD Group of 42, and has shown little interest in offering sustainable international development and technical assistance along the lines of what the U.S. Agency for International Development or other similar agencies do.

Most Russian humanitarian assistance is in-kind aid channeled through the Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM), often in response to a natural or man-made disaster. This approach has little in common with recent moves by major donors toward more flexible cash contributions to respond to humanitarian emergencies.⁶² The mechanisms utilized by EMERCOM have raised eyebrows for other reasons. It works largely in partnership with other international organizations, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Civil Defense Organization (ICDO), an intergovernmental organization “committed to developing structures and mechanisms to provide assistance and safeguard property to communities suffering natural or man-made disasters.”⁶³ With no members from the EU (except Cyprus) or North America, the ICDO is dominated by African and Eurasian countries with Russia playing an outsized role.⁶⁴ Until 2018, its secretary general was Vladimir Kuvshinov, a Russian citizen and former EMERCOM employee. Last year Swiss media accused him of nepotism, poor management, and misuse of the ICDO funds for personal gain.⁶⁵

The ICDO's current acting secretary general, Colonel Belkacem Elketroussi of Algeria, traveled to Moscow in June to push for the expansion of the organization's cooperation with and coordination

of EMERCON, including on upgrading ICDO African regional humanitarian assistance and a relief warehouse in Togo.⁶⁶ Russia takes a highly public role in the ICDO, seeing it as a vehicle through which it may be able to expand its working relationship with developing countries and to build goodwill. The Swiss media has also warned of malign Russian influence in the organization.⁶⁷ Kuvshinov reportedly has ties to a former Russian security service official, who also once worked at EMERCON and now runs businesses that have received lucrative contracts from it to implement international aid projects—all of which raises questions about how much of Russia’s aid budget for Africa actually makes it to the continent.⁶⁸

Cultivating Conservative Societies in Africa

With few people-to-people ties and limited knowledge of the Russian language among Africans, Russia’s soft-power attractiveness on the continent is narrow. Its corporate soft-power efforts are also infrequent.⁶⁹ Russian companies and diplomats in Africa seek to highlight these activities through RT, Sputnik, and Russian-friendly African media as examples of Russian largesse. Nevertheless, they pale in comparison to the assistance and charitable contributions made by the U.S. and European governments or private foundations.

Culturally-conservative activists have attempted to project Russia’s image in Africa as a defender of traditional mores against the imposition of “European values” by the West. Information on these efforts is limited, but the World Congress of Families (WCF), an organization with financial ties to the wealthy conservative Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeev, has been active in Africa.⁷⁰ Malofeev, who was sanctioned by the U.S. government for his funding of separatists in eastern Ukraine, has provided important financial support for Moscow’s outreach to Orthodox Christian populations as well as populist nationalist groups in Europe and the Balkans. Alexey Komov, a Malofeev associate, traveled to South Africa in December 2016 to participate in the launch of the anti-same-sex-marriage International Organization of the Family.⁷¹ The WCF has been critical of African women’s rights movements and promoted the argument that women’s reproductive health issues supported by international donors are tantamount to neocolonial efforts to limit Africa’s indigenous populations.⁷² Russia-friendly, perhaps even Russian-funded, propaganda outlets and NGOs on the continent help buttress anti-European colonial narratives and remind Africans of Russia’s lack of colonial legacies on the continent.⁷³

Malofeev, who is known for his deeply anti-Western views, has referred to Africa as the next geopolitical battleground between Russia and the West in an interview with Tsargrad, a conservative Russian media outlet he controls.⁷⁴

Using Traditional Military and Security Tools . . .

Guns have opened many more doors for the Kremlin in Africa than butter. Long a key market for the Soviet and Russian arms industry, weapons exports to Africa facilitate Russia's broader diplomatic efforts to cultivate military, political, and security ties and expand its influence in Africa. They make it possible to establish and sustain long-term relationships with its customers' rising military and political leaders, and help it compete for influence with the United States, France, and China.

While North African countries such as Algeria have traditionally been the most important destination for advanced Russian weapons, sub-Saharan African states reportedly have ordered \$3 billion in Russian military equipment, according to the Federal Agency for Military and Technological Cooperation.⁷⁵ The agency, however, has provided no details about the contents of those orders or any information about when those orders were made.⁷⁶ Russia is eager to write off debt of or provide financing to arms buyers.⁷⁷ According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia has supplied arms to eighteen countries in sub-Saharan Africa over the past ten years: Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, and Zambia (see table 3).⁷⁸

Russian-made weapons offer a number of advantages to customers in African countries. They tend to be cheaper than Western equivalents and are generally reliable.⁷⁹ Many African militaries have Soviet-era stocks that are compatible with modern Russian weapons. Russian arms contracts often include provisions to modernize or repair Soviet-era equipment, although it is not clear whether or where any of these facilities are operational.

A South African media report claims that a joint Russian–South African helicopter maintenance facility has operated in the country since 2013.⁸⁰ The Russian defense firm Kalashnikov reportedly wants to build a manufacturing center in the country as well.⁸¹ Details about these projects are scant, and cooperation between Russia and South Africa on defense manufacturing is somewhat surprising given that the latter has an arms industry of its own and the two countries sometimes compete in export markets. South Africa, however, is eager to modernize its industry and is seeking partnerships with European arms exporters as well, which means that Russia does not have a lock on expanding defense industry cooperation with South African arms manufacturers.⁸²

TABLE 3:

Russia's Arms Sales to Africa (Figures are Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Trend Indicator Values (TIVs)/in millions)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2009- 2018	2009- 2013	2014- 2018
Angola		27	98	63	63	251	0	251
Burkina Faso					14	15	1	14
Cameroon	27		11			45	7	38
Chad						7	7	0
Democratic Republic of Congo	7					14	7	7
Equatorial Guinea					7	7	0	7
Ethiopia						54	54	0
Ghana						41	41	0
Guinea						1	1	0
Kenya						20	20	0
Mali				23		23	0	23
Nigeria	58	87		24	24	192	0	192
Rwanda	14	27				41	0	41
South Africa	50					50	0	50
South Sudan		18	4			82	60	22
Sudan		51	51	24		349	224	125
Uganda						629	629	0
Zambia		14				14	0	14
Total	156	224	164	134	108	1835	1051	784

SOURCE: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

For Russia, joint manufacturing and repair facilities could help sustain African militaries' dependence on Russian arms.⁸³ For Russia's African customers, these facilities represent an opportunity to boost industrial production and create jobs. During his April visit to Moscow to attend an Angolan-Russian business forum, President João Lourenço announced plans to establish a manufacturing and repair facility for Russian arms in his country.⁸⁴ Incidentally, Lourenço studied at a Soviet military academy in 1978–1982.

Russia's arms sales offer the added benefit of not carrying human-rights conditions. Nigeria, for example, turned to it after Barack Obama's administration repeatedly blocked arms shipments to that country.⁸⁵ Russia does not make its arms sales or military cooperation contingent on adherence to democratic norms nor does it mind dealing with some of the continent's worst human-rights violators, including Sudan and Zimbabwe.⁸⁶

... With New Wrinkles

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union made the greatest inroads in the security sphere in Africa as a result of crisis situations.⁸⁷ More recently, Russia has tried to apply similar tactics albeit with mixed results. It has supplied weapons at a discount or for free to countries struggling with internal unrest.⁸⁸ Russia also supplied light arms to Mali in 2013, while the urgency of the threat from the Boko Haram terrorist group has pushed Nigeria and Cameroon toward greater military cooperation and training with it.⁸⁹

Russia's surge in the CAR had its genesis in a 2017 exemption to the UN arms embargo that allowed the African country to acquire a modest quantity of light arms.⁹⁰ Moscow capitalized on that exemption to expand its military and security presence there, largely at France's expense. In early 2018, the CAR saw an influx of Russian civilian and military trainers affiliated with the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organization linked to Russia's military intelligence agency and controlled by Kremlin insider Yevgeniy Prigozhin. As Kimberly Marten has demonstrated, Wagner is not a true private military company, but rather a quasi-private extension of the Russian military-security establishment.⁹¹ Technically speaking, private military companies are not allowed under Russian law. Wagner, which consists of 3,600–5,000 fighters, does not adhere to international standards for such companies.⁹²

In the CAR, Wagner reportedly provides security for senior officials and guards key economic assets in the country, including gold and diamond mines.⁹³ Russian companies allegedly tied to Prigozhin have acquired stakes in some of these facilities.⁹⁴ This for-profit self-financing arrangement enables Prigozhin to sustain Wagner activities and Russia to expand its security presence and political influence in the country at virtually no cost and little risk. Prigozhin-affiliated entities also finance

Russian public diplomacy activities in the CAR, including sponsorship of sporting and cultural events.⁹⁵

Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee in February, former commander of U.S. Africa Command General Thomas Waldhauser stated that Wagner is “heavily involved [in the Central African Republic], not only in training but also influence at the highest levels of government to include the president. . . . They’ve been able to work the situation so they can have mineral extraction and so forth.”⁹⁶ The national security adviser to the country’s president, Faustin-Archange Touadera, is Valery Zakharov—a Russian national, allegedly a former member of Russia’s security services and an associate of Prigozhin’s. His presence in the CAR is widely publicized, which illustrates the blurred lines between official and off-the-books activities.⁹⁷

Prigozhin’s influence in the CAR is increasingly beyond the formal reach of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Defense, highlighting the growing clout of the security services and quasi-private actors in pushing political, economic, or security agendas. It gives Prigozhin’s subordinates considerable latitude to act, even when their moves might not be completely in accord with the stated policies of the government or the niceties of international law.

While hard data is difficult to come by, Wagner also is reportedly active in Libya and Sudan.⁹⁸ In Sudan, a company reported to be linked to Prigozhin obtained prospecting rights for gold in late 2017, which coincided with the arrival of Russian military contractors to train Sudanese forces.⁹⁹ Then president Omar al-Bashir praised Russian-Sudanese military cooperation during a July 2018 meeting with Putin in the Kremlin.¹⁰⁰

For now Russia’s military footprint on the continent is rather limited. There are growing indications it has been looking to acquire a naval or logistics facility in East Africa in recent months. Basing arrangements could help support Russian operations elsewhere in the region and build an intelligence-collection platform to monitor the activities of U.S., Chinese, French, or Japanese forces.¹⁰¹ Russian entreaties for Djibouti to host a base have been unsuccessful, in large part due to consistent U.S. pressure. In August 2018, Lavrov announced plans to build a military logistics hub in Eritrea.¹⁰² The country offers many of the same advantages as Djibouti for potentially monitoring U.S., Saudi, and Emirati operations (among others) on and around the Arabian Peninsula and the security situation throughout the Horn of Africa.

Russia and Eritrea have yet to finalize that deal, and Lavrov’s premature announcement may have been a public-relations move. Somaliland, a self-declared breakaway territory in Somalia, has reportedly offered Russia the opportunity to obtain rights to a naval base on its territory, likely in return for formal diplomatic recognition.¹⁰³ Moscow has also reportedly reached a preliminary

agreement with Sudan on port visits.¹⁰⁴ Sudan was reportedly considering allowing Russia to build a military base, although the status of these plans became unclear after the fall of al-Bashir in April.¹⁰⁵

Since 2014, Russia has signed nineteen military cooperation agreements with African countries, including Angola, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Madagascar, Nigeria, Niger, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.¹⁰⁶ These vary in scale and scope, and include activities such as information sharing, counterterrorism cooperation, military sales, and security training. The bulk of them, however, appear to fall into the category of “symbolism over substance.”

Agriculture

Agriculture, agricultural machinery, and agricultural technology will be key agenda items at the Sochi summit. Since Russia’s break with the West in 2014 and its imposition of countersanctions on food and agricultural products from the EU, it has looked to Africa as a source of substitute imports.¹⁰⁷ Russia is a primary export market for African citrus products, with trade rising steeply after 2014, particularly from Morocco.¹⁰⁸ South Africa stepped up its exports of fish to Russia around the same time, largely in response to Russia’s ban on Norwegian salmon and other European seafood.¹⁰⁹ Russia is now among the world’s largest grain exporters and sees potential markets in Africa for its wheat, dairy, poultry, and pork.¹¹⁰ Thanks to the persistent weakness of the ruble, it has been able to undercut other grain exporters and increase its market share in several African countries in recent years.¹¹¹ Minister of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev, the son of Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, traveled to Africa in 2018 in an effort to expand trade in food products and promote agricultural-sector cooperation.¹¹²

Growing agricultural trade between Russia and several African states has been accompanied by the entry of Russian fertilizer producers into the sub-Saharan market. Russia’s privately held Eurochem is planning to use sulfate of potash sourced in Eritrea to produce nitrogen, phosphate, and potassium fertilizers in its plants in Belgium and Russia.¹¹³ Uralchem and Uralkali reportedly are in talks to build fertilizer distribution hubs in Zambia and Zimbabwe.¹¹⁴ Uralchem is the prime candidate to buy a stake in Zimbabwe’s troubled Chemplex fertilizer producer.¹¹⁵ As in the case of diamond mining, Zimbabwe’s isolation from the West means that Russia can be an attractive business partner, which eases Russian fertilizer companies’ entry into the country.

A Mixed Picture at Best

The jury is still out on Russia’s intensified outreach to Africa. Its record is as much a testimony to its increased global ambitions as it is proof of the gap that exists between those ambitions and the capabilities available to act on them.

Diplomatic, commercial, military, and security activity in Africa validates Russia's claim to a bigger role on the world stage than merely being a "regional" power. It still enjoys considerable political and diplomatic clout and can capitalize on legacy ties that date back to Soviet activism in Africa during the Cold War. At a time when high-level attention to Africa from the United States and EU member countries is in short supply, Russia has significant advantages when dealing with some governments. These advantages are amplified by the Kremlin's agile decisionmaking, lack of concern about human rights and democratic governance, and propensity for unscrupulous business practices.

However, Russia's record of engagement in Africa also highlights the limited toolbox available to the government to project power and influence in faraway and relatively unfamiliar regions or cultures. When it comes to hard power, Russia has only modest capabilities at its disposal. Its navy has yet to recover from the protracted period of neglect and underfunding following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Out-of-area naval activities have been marred by a string of embarrassing, and sometimes tragic, failures.¹¹⁶ The experience of Russia's successful deployment to Syria is also indicative of the limitations of its military when it comes to projecting power into hostile environments beyond the country's periphery. The size of the deployment was quite modest, as was the scale of ground operations, while the air campaign was conducted at high altitudes, apparently in order to minimize the risk to Russian aircraft even from the very limited air defenses available to the Syrian opposition.¹¹⁷

Further proof of Russia's modest capabilities and limited appetite for long-range power projection is found in its reliance on quasi-private security companies as a surrogate for active-duty military and security personnel. Russia has not undertaken any military deployments in Africa in a half-century and its military-security activities have been conducted exclusively with the help of contractors/mercenaries. The latter's single combat experience outside the conflict in Ukraine—that is, in Syria—is as much an example of their versatility as of their modest capabilities and limitations as a surrogate military force.¹¹⁸ This pales in comparison to the capabilities of the United States, which, for example, has been building a \$100+ million surveillance drone base in Niger as part of an effort to combat local militants, even as it draws down troop levels on the continent.¹¹⁹

Russia's soft-power appeal is also quite modest. Its great cultural and artistic traditions are generally not a major export beyond the country's periphery where Russian is still spoken. Yet, even in Russia's immediate neighborhood, the attractiveness of Russian culture and language is in decline.¹²⁰ Russian institutions of higher education may be attractive to students from many poor countries if admission is offered with stipends that can cover tuition and living expenses, but that too is a rather limited resource since Russian universities struggle to compete with their foreign counterparts as more and more Russian students are forced to pay for their education and many universities can

barely make ends meet.¹²¹ Other than the prospect of financial assistance, there is relatively little to attract students from Africa to Russian higher education.

Unlike the Soviet Union during the postcolonial era, Russia does not have an appealing ideology to offer to its partners in Africa. Shared opposition to U.S. and other Western nations' democracy promotion has been useful to Russia to build ties to some countries in Africa, such as Zimbabwe, Sudan, or most recently Egypt. Yet, many of those relationships appear to be transactional, guided by considerations of convenience, and relatively modest in scope—usually limited to arms sales, some form of security assistance, or business deals where Russian companies can take advantage of Western companies being limited by their governments' sanctions. This is not to say that these relationships cannot endure, but they are constrained by the fact that Russia can bring only modest resources to sustain them.

Russia's fading ideological appeal is also a victim of generational change that is taking its toll on the Soviet legacy in Africa. In general, African leaders who underwent training or were educated in the Soviet Union and may have shared a form of ideological kinship with it are either approaching or past retirement age and leaving the scene. Jacob Zuma, who had developed one of the closest, if not the closest, relationship with Vladimir Putin among African leaders was seventy-six years old when he left office in disgrace in 2018. Mmusi Maimane, the leader of the Democratic Alliance that holds the second-largest number of seats in the South African parliament, represents the next generation of African politicians. He is thirty-nine and was educated in South Africa and Great Britain.

The largest and most durable Soviet legacy in Africa resides in the stocks of Soviet and Russian weapons in the arsenals of many African countries. But Russian arms manufacturers have to compete with sellers ranging from China to Israel. Technological progress is likely to make the African market more, not less competitive, eroding Russia's comparative advantage over time as a provider of serviceable but low-tech weaponry.¹²²

At the same time, it would be incorrect to write off Russia as an important presence on the African stage. It still wields considerable political clout. Moscow boasts an agile and skilled diplomatic establishment and lacks ethical constraints in pursuit of its objectives. While Russian hard- and soft-power resources do not compare to those of its much bigger competitors, they are nonetheless significant when deployed in much smaller and poorer African environments. In African countries that are isolated by Western sanctions or receive only limited attention from the international community, Russia can play an outsized, predatory, or negative role. But, it is not about to emerge as a major military actor on the continent, let alone an economic powerhouse, especially when compared to China, the European Union, or the United States. In the few situations where Russia has achieved successes, they have been due to its ability to exploit, at times exacerbate, or capitalize on preexisting conditions rather than shape the environment and create those conditions.

Policy Implications

The United States faces important challenges as it seeks to promote democracy, peace, and prosperity in Africa. Key tasks include supporting fragile postconflict transitions and combating sources of instability and conflict, including dangerous terrorist and violent extremist groups. U.S. efforts should continue to prioritize addressing those long-standing challenges rather than being reoriented around the far narrower issue of countering Russian actions.

By no means is this to argue that the latter issue should be neglected or ignored. Rather, the best and most enduring way to counter Russian influence in Africa would be to focus on those root causes that leave some African countries vulnerable to Russian inroads. The experience of the Central African Republic shows that Russia's relatively modest toolkit can have disproportionate impact with long-term consequences on fragile societies in or at high risk of conflict and with poor governance.

This points to a multipronged approach for U.S. policy.

Focus on fundamentals. Recent U.S. policy mistakes and the lack of attention by senior U.S. officials have done considerable harm, and that needs to be corrected. Addressing corruption, poor governance, weak rule of law, communal tensions, and basic quality-of-life indicators should be the key component of U.S. policy in Africa, coordinated with other state and international donors and NGOs wherever possible. Investing in African populations and institutions is good place to start, as opposed to investing in individual leaders, which is what Russia does. The United States should focus on good-governance initiatives, addressing human-security needs, and pushing for sustainable economic development and investment. Such efforts will help re-build U.S. credibility on the continent.

Do not overestimate Russia's role in Africa. Russia is not the Soviet Union. It lacks the resources, the ideology, and the appeal of its predecessor. Its involvement in Africa is limited and guided by a combination of unrealistic ambitions and opportunism with the result often being that its policy ends up being subordinated to private interests and actors. A large part of Russian activity in Africa is noise meant to unnerve Europe and the United States. This falls far short of the image of great-power competition outlined in recent U.S. national security documents or the public statements of senior officials. Approaching Russia in this spirit carries with it the risk of not only creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, but also of legitimizing Russian actions and ambitions.

Expose malign actors. Not everything Russia does in Africa is a malign activity, but its role in corrupt schemes, support for oppressive regimes, and exploitative approach to its African partners need to be exposed. This should not take the form of chasing after every item of fake news attributable to Russia, but the deployment of a strategic narrative that highlights Russia's approach

to Africa, its toolkit, its principal actors involved, and the consequences of its engagement in countries like Zimbabwe, the CAR, Sudan, or South Africa. This should take the form of public-information campaigns, partnerships with local press and civil society organizations, and engagement with officials. The alternative—trying to debunk every item of fake news and disinformation—would be wasteful and unsustainable.

Disrupt increased alignment between Russia and rising African powers in international organizations. Russia is keen to find partners in its decades-long quest to dilute U.S. power and create a multipolar world. It uses a wide variety of tools, particularly debt relief and arms sales, to cultivate votes in key international bodies and play a spoiler role to the United States or its allies on key international issues. This clearly calls for stepping up U.S. diplomacy in international organizations and finding common ground on Africa issues with traditional partners on the continent and in Europe as well as other like-minded states. Correcting the United States' recent record of disengaging from multilateral institutions, including the United Nations and the African Union, is an important first step.

Expose Wagner and other paramilitary groups. The deployment of private Russian mercenary groups in Africa is troubling, but the United States has limited influence in most of the countries where they are active. The United States should expand public diplomacy outreach and advocacy efforts with African publics, African politicians, and the world at large to highlight how these organizations fuel corruption, have ties to organized crime, and operate beyond the reach of local and even Russian law, as well as international standards for private military contractors. Empowering African and Russian journalists to examine and publicize Wagner's and other Russian private military groups' activities will reduce Russia's ability to deny their presence, while raising awareness across the continent of how they operate. Targeted sanctions on Wagner and other Russian paramilitary groups operating illicitly in Africa are important in highlighting this threat; the United States should work with interested allies and partners to follow suit.

About the Author

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Until January 2015, Stronski served as a senior analyst for Russian domestic politics in the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research. He was director for Russia and Central Asia on the U.S. National Security Council Staff from 2012 to 2014, where he supported the president, the national security adviser, and other senior U.S. officials on the development and coordination of policy toward Russia. Before that, he worked as a State Department analyst on Russia from 2011 to 2012, and on Armenia and Azerbaijan from 2007 to 2010. A former career U.S. foreign service officer, Stronski served in Hong Kong from 2005 to 2007.

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