



Central African Republic: Russia Rehashing Cold War Tactics in A New Proxy War?

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Executive Summary

The Central African Republic (CAR) has experienced years of political instability, violence, and insecurity. Elections in December 2020 were meant to bring some stability, however, a coalition of rebels formed and launched attacks in the election build-up and post-election. In a swift response to President Touadéra's request for assistance, Russia deployed additional troops. France also stepped in conducting a military flyover despite having cut nearly all military assistance ties with CAR. The involvement of these powers in the CAR against the background of their own tensions led to a portrayal of the situation in the CAR as a proxy war of some sort. This article argues that this analysis is not a reasonable one, but that Russia has largely filled the gap left by France's exit.

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Analysis

Over the years, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been the sight of multiple intervention attempts by various countries. The U.S. had maintained ties to CAR up until 2016 when it ended military operations in the nation. By 2017 the U.S. had withdrawn its military presence in its entirety.

France, the former coloniser of the CAR, previously had military troops in the country, but, like the U.S., pulled out in 2016. However, 300 personnel remained to be part of European military training, aiming to assist the rebuilding of the Central African Armed Forces/Forces armées centrafricaines (FACA). France still maintains ties with the country through investment and aid, making it currently the most influential foreign power in the CAR.

The other power involved in the mix, albeit on a smaller scale, is Rwanda. Rwanda has secured important resource deals with the CAR and the two countries have committed to building security and economic development. Rwanda further has military personnel stationed in the CAR forming part of the UN peacekeeping mission that was deployed in 2014.

However, since 2017 the power that has stepped in on a large scale is Russia. The removal of forces by France in 2016, despite ongoing rebel violence, created an opportunity for Russia to step in and fulfil a long-term goal of Putin's — increasing geopolitical influence in Africa. Until that point, in the race of global powers vying to assert dominance over the continent, Russia had not had great success.

France was certainly surprised by Russia stepping in to build a relationship with the CAR. Historically, France was the only “great” power to be involved in the country but after the withdrawal in 2016, a gap was left that Russia capitalised on.

Setting the stage for the recent interventions

The CAR has a history filled with political instability, violence, and coups. The first coup attempt in recent history, albeit unsuccessful, was in 2001. Two years later, in 2003, François Bozizé successfully overthrew the government with his forces and was subsequently sworn in as president.

In 2012, a rebel coalition was formed that then overthrew Bozizé and forced him to flee the country and take refuge in neighbouring Cameroon. After the overthrow of Bozizé by rebels, the CAR was thrown into three more years of political turmoil and instability. Current president Faustin-Archange Touadéra was eventually elected president in 2016.

In December 2019, Bozizé returned to the CAR and put forward a bid to run for president in the December 2020 elections. This announcement spurred on protests, signalling the start of a tense election build-up. Bozizé was accused of staging a coup before the election and is said to be aligned with and a supporter of the rebel coalition named “Coalition of Patriots for Change”. The coalition carried out multiple violent attacks and seizures of towns close to the capital in the build-up to the election.

Cries for help

On 23rd December 2020, the CAR government requested assistance from Russia to combat the rebel coalitions attacks. Russia responded with a dispatchment of 300 additional military instructors. The Russian foreign



ministry announced that they were watching the events closely and were seriously concerned at the declining security situation in CAR.

These Russian personnel joined approximately 15 000 UN peacekeepers¹ — who have been based in the [country](#) since 2014 — and Rwandan military personnel that was also dispatched at the request of CAR. France sent warplanes to the CAR to conduct a flyover mission after President Emmanuel Macron denounced the violence in the election build-up. Despite this external assistance, insecurity and ongoing violence prevented voting taking place in 29 of the 71 sub-prefectures in the CAR. On election day, more than [14%](#) of polling stations remained closed after threats by rebels. Many did not vote out of fear or they could not get to an open polling station, and a coalition of opposition groups have called the election a fraud.

Despite this, it was announced on the [4th January 2021](#) that President Touadéra had provisionally won a second term. The Russian military instructors remained in the country until 15th January 2021, assisting with the post-election violence.

Russia's Interest

13 countries have a military presence spread across 23 countries on the African continent with France and the USA having the most military personnel. Of those 23 countries, Russia only has a presence in one.

Nowadays, establishing a military base in an African country is an [indication of friendly relations](#) and, in most cases, bilateral agreements have been signed.

Russia's [relationship](#) with the CAR initially began through various arms deals and military training partnerships. The Central African Armed Forces (FACA), the CAR's military, have been under an arms embargo signed by the United Nations since 2013. In 2017 an exemption was granted, allowing Russia to supply FACA with weapons and training by military personnel and "civilian instructors". It has not been confirmed but many believe that these "civilian instructors" are mercenaries of the Wagner Group.

The Wagner Group, who has close ties to the Kremlin, is further in charge of protecting President Touadéra. Russia also has increased influence through President Touadéra's national security advisor, Valery Zakharov, a former Russian military intelligence official.

In return for Russia's assistance, President Touadéra offered to host a Russian military base— a move that would be of significant strategic benefit for Russia and one that will likely happen during Touadéra's second term. Today, President Touadéra has become Russia's strongest ally in the region and him seeing them as a partner is substantiated by his requests for assistance.

[In another power move, Russia assisted in facilitating a peace agreement](#) in 2019 — the "Khartoum Agreement" — between the CAR government and 14 rebel groups. Diplomatic negotiations have not been Russia's strong suit in recent years, since last having mild success as the Soviet Union in the 1980s, assisting the U.S. in mediating agreements between Angola, Cuba, and South Africa.

¹ The mission is known as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MUNISCA)



Since the signing of the Khartoum Agreement, Russia has promised to offer assistance in maintaining this peace agreement going forward. Russia has struggled to cultivate a reputation as being a diplomatic negotiator and Khartoum Agreement was deemed a great success in Moscow.

Russia further hoped that through intervention, it could signal to the CAR's neighbours that it is ready to assist, using it as a springboard to a relationship with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda.

Not a proxy war

Russia may be successful in growing its influence on the continent, through its first steps taken in the CAR; however, the ongoing situation is not a proxy war.

A proxy war is defined as "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies²". When considering this definition alongside other analyses that have emerged recently on the conflict in the CAR, one can understand why it possibly could be considered a proxy war. The icy relations between Russia and France back home have further contributed to this rhetoric. However, this is not a fair evaluation of the situation and if anything overshadows the actual conflict.

France's military even dismissed claims during a press conference that Russia had taken its current position of importance in CAR through usurping.

During the era of the Cold War, the U.S. and Russia used several countries on the African continent to fight out their grievances on African soil, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Angola. During the Congo War and the Angolan Civil War, Russia provided arms and military advisors, in contrast to the U.S.' tactic of providing financial aid. Russia seems to be going back to their Cold War methods now, once again providing advisors and arms.

The main difference is that the current intervention is economically and diplomatically driven and not ideologically as it was during the Cold War.

Russia was enticed by early access to the CAR's minerals should the country reach a level of stability where economic activity can take off, a level of stability Russia hopes to help the CAR reach. In 2018, in return for military assistance, Russian companies received [concessions](#) for mineral exploration in the CAR. These concessions allowed for the establishment of Lobaye Invest Sarlu, a Russian owned mining company that currently has a presence in at least four CAR cities.

In [June and July of 2018](#), only months after the agreement was signed, mining permits were granted to Lobaye Invest Sarlu to look for gold and diamond deposits. The deal was two-sided, as the CAR government hoped the stability and increased military presence around mines could enable the country to sell more diamonds and hopefully decrease the illegal trade run by rebel groups.

² Andrew Mumford (2013) Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict, The RUSI Journal, 158:2, 40-46



If the intervention by Russia in the CAR is deemed successful by other African leaders, Russia may increasingly have African powers knocking on their door for assistance increasing diplomatic relations with other African countries. If the intervention fails, the opposite will occur, pausing Russia's continued attempts to expand influence on the African continent.

Despite France's surprise at Russia's increasing involvement in the CAR and continued offers of aid in various forms, even militarily in December, France has not denounced Russia's involvement or expressed disdain with it. The tensions between Russia and France escalated after the poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny, however, it would not make policy sense for France to try tackle Russia on foreign soil.

If anything, the involvement of all these powers has overshadowed the domestic root causes of the issues in the CAR and shifted focus to military interventions by multiple players. This is one of the main reasons why CAR, despite all the assistance that has been provided, has not come very far in its state-building and peacebuilding.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.

About the Author of this Issue

Talya Parker holds a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa and currently works as an Operations Associate for Ceravoid, a commercial intelligence and risk management firm based in Cape Town. Ms. Parker is passionate about Political Risk and Intelligence on the African continent and offers an understanding of African risk from an African perspective.



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