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# Russian presence in West Africa



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## 1. SUMMARY

In recent years, Russia has **steadily expanded its military presence** in Western Africa, capitalizing on the withdrawal of Western forces and the region's increasing political volatility.

We focus on how Moscow has circumvented Western sanctions to supply weapons, deploy military personnel, and consolidate influence across strategic African nations. As regional governments seek new partnerships, **Russia offers military aid, security assistance, and grain deals** in exchange for geopolitical leverage.

## 2. EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN PRESENCE

Russia's engagement with Africa dates back to the Cold War, but **its modern resurgence gained momentum around 2017 with the rise of private military companies like Wagner Group**. These mercenary units initially offered security to embattled governments, particularly in the Central African Republic and Libya. As Western presence diminished in West Africa, Russia filled the vacuum.

Between 2022 and 2024, Moscow transitioned from proxy actors to more official representation, **establishing military agreements and logistical hubs** in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso. The Russian Ministry of Defence formed the 'Africa Corps' to formalize its operations. Arms shipments, including tanks, artillery, and armoured vehicles, were **covertly delivered using cargo vessels registered under sanctioned Russian entities**. These vessels often turned off transponders to avoid detection and used indirect maritime routes, stopping in Mediterranean or West African ports such as Conakry and Bata before proceeding to final destinations.

**Intelligence sources and satellite images have shown that the equipment was transferred inland from coastal ports using convoys of military trucks escorted by local forces and Russian personnel**. In the case of Mali, Russian cargo ships docked at the port of Dakar and offloaded containers marked for 'civilian use' which were then moved by road under heavy security to military installations near Bamako. Once in Mali, **these shipments were unpacked and distributed among newly built Russian-supported bases**, where local recruits were trained by Russian instructors.

## 3. CURRENT SITUATION

As of mid-2025, **Russian Su-24 fighter jets have been stationed at airbases in Mali**, and regular cargo deliveries continue to supply arms and equipment. The Russian flag is visible on military vehicles and personnel, **signalling direct Kremlin involvement rather than outsourced operations**. The Africa Corps has reportedly recruited local soldiers and integrated former Wagner operatives, creating a hybrid force with both local and Russian command structures.

In addition to hardware, **Russia has transferred radar systems, fuel depots, and communication infrastructure**, allowing greater autonomy and coordination in operations across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Russian advisors embedded with local forces assist in counterinsurgency operations and regime protection, **with frequent joint exercises carried out in remote desert regions**.

Russia's influence extends beyond military engagement. It has secured support from local regimes by offering **grain shipments amidst global food insecurity and by endorsing military juntas** in exchange for access to resources and strategic locations. Moscow presents itself as a stable, non-interventionist ally willing to work with any regime that aligns with its interests.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Russia's military presence in Western Africa **is no longer a covert operation**. It is a deliberate geopolitical strategy exploiting security vacuums, weakened Western ties, and economic hardship. By embedding military assets and forming transactional alliances, **Moscow is building a new sphere of influence** that challenges Western diplomatic and security interests in the region.

**The deployment of advanced weaponry and infrastructure through elaborate maritime routes reveals a highly organized strategy that prioritizes long-term regional presence.** However, the sustainability of this strategy will depend on Russia's economic resilience, the continued permissiveness of host governments, and the reaction of regional and global actors who may reassess their policies considering Russia's assertiveness in Africa.

This is a disgrace **for French interests in the region** which were highly supported by Spanish efforts. It is also a sign of the **decay of European presence and influence** in the region.

In Mali, the security situation is degrading. Separatists groups in the North and attacks carried out by terrorists groups (mainly JNIM) are worsening the situation.

Despite continued Russian military backing, the Africa Corps faces manpower limitations, while JNIM continues to expand its territorial control. **As a result, Mali's security situation is expected to deteriorate further over the coming months, creating conditions that could bolster JNIM's efforts to form an anti-junta coalition and escalate security threats in and around Bamako.**

If no changes are introduced in the country the degradation is likely to spill over the region. Niger and Burkina Faso, which are also approaching Moscow, are easy targets for instability and war.

**Instability will bring new and increased waves of migrants** fleeing the region, looking for a better future in Europe. Even if Russia could control the situation, migration will be at the discretion of Russian military in the region. As Belarus does in Poland border region, **this is not going to work in favour of Europe, let alone the European countries which are the first line of arrival.**

Moreover, the US is not expected any more in the region. Europe is not paying attention to its Southern flank, as well as NATO, focused on Russia. Meloni

highlights that NATO needs to focus more on Africa and the Global South, **as Russia could increase its presence in eastern Libya** following the collapse of an allied regime in Syria. Over the past two years Meloni has raised the issue of Russia's presence in Africa with her allies and called on NATO to strengthen its presence on the continent but to no avail.

Macron is lately focusing on the **Gulf of Guinea** after French failure in the Sahel region.

Spain is missing and reluctant to increase the military budget to meet NATO demands. Trump might consider moving the US troops presence in Spain to Morocco. Closing down US military bases in Spain would punish Spain (as it rejects to meet NATO demands) and is likely to get better conditions and freedom of use in Morocco.

Although it might be an **economic blow for the Spanish population** who live in the surrounding areas of US bases, **it is likely to have a positive impact** on the worrying security situation approaching from the South.