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# MAINTAINING AN INTELLIGENCE EDGE IN AFRICA IN THE FACE OF GREAT POWER CHALLENGES

by Ashliyn Burgos

## A Shifting African Intelligence Landscape

The withdrawal of U.S. military forces this year from Niger and Chad is reinforcing the public perception that the United States is losing its competitive edge in Africa, especially given the deployment of Russian forces in their stead. This loss is having explicit and real-time effects on U.S. force posture and capabilities—including intelligence—across the continent. Near-peer U.S. adversaries Russia and China are creating inroads with African nations that challenge U.S. placement and access, increase obstacles to intelligence operations, and pose counterintelligence risks.<sup>1,2</sup> The Intelligence Community (IC) will be challenged to adapt to maintain effective indications and warning (I&W), strategically counter adversaries, and reinforce trust with African counterparts. As part of a U.S. whole-of-government approach, the IC can:

- Leverage collaborative relationships across a spectrum of African and non-African organizations to better gain insights into activities and trends on the continent that impact U.S. engagement.
- Broaden information sharing with African counterparts, particularly commercially available and publicly available information (CAI/PAI), as an alternative to classified intelligence sharing agreements.
- Combat adversarial public and private narratives that seek to undermine U.S. relationships with African nations.

## Adversaries: Stepping into the Void

While Africa has always played a role in U.S. national security discussions, its prioritization in the IC and Department of Defense (DoD) has been uneven. Exceptions over the years have been during crisis situations or as part of the Global War on Terrorism. Under-prioritization of the continent has provided opportunities for adversaries to degrade U.S. efforts—opportunities they have taken full advantage of. Our near-peer adversaries are actively and strategically engaging

with African partners. According to a 2024 Gallup report, receptivity in African countries to the United States fell between 2022 and 2023, while receptivity increased during that same time to Russia and China.<sup>3</sup> We must reverse this trend if we hope to maintain and improve our partnerships on the continent.

## Russian Military and Paramilitary Expansion

Russia's competition with the United States for influence in Africa dates to the early Cold War. In the 1960s, the Soviet Union created relationships with recently independent African nations that were still navigating statehood and governance after breaking from Western colonial powers. In recent years, Russia has successfully reinvigorated its relationships with some African countries still struggling with internal security and governance challenges, such as in the Sahel. Russia has swiftly built strong ties with Mali, Burkina Faso, and now Niger, following military coups in 2021–2023. Earlier this year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov traveled the continent in separate yet correlated efforts to foster and deepen Russian relationships with African nations, including Chad, Republic of Congo, Guinea, and Burkina Faso.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken toured Africa, visiting Nigeria, Angola, Cabo Verde, and Cote d'Ivoire.<sup>5</sup> However, outreach efforts by high-ranking U.S. officials have yet to fully counter recent Russian engagement.

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**As the United States grapples with a diminishing influence in Africa amid the increasing assertiveness of Russia and China, the IC and DoD face a critical challenge in adapting to the shifting landscape.**

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By expanding on more traditional military-to-military ties, Moscow has increased its use of paramilitary groups like the new Russian Africa Corps, which has been displacing the Wagner Group on the continent. Founded by the now-deceased Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Wagner Group was a private military company serving, by proxy, as an extension of the Russian government—a model now copied by the Africa Corps.<sup>6,7,8</sup> General Andrei Averyanov, a high-ranking Russian military intelligence officer, and Yevkurov were given the dual responsibility of leading this new endeavor. Since then, they have held engagements across the continent with nations that hosted Wagner operations, including Libya, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, and Mali.<sup>9</sup>

These efforts create an opportunity for Moscow to promote intelligence diplomacy with various host-nation governments. Such diplomacy presents significant counterintelligence concerns for the United States, especially given the Africa Corps' connection to Russian military intelligence. Niger's decision earlier this year to allow Russian military personnel to co-locate with U.S. military personnel at Airbase 101 in Niamey is a worrisome example.<sup>10</sup> This decision followed Niger's and Russia's public announcement in early 2024 of strengthening military cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

#### **China's Economic and Counterterrorism Outreach**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has also been an aggressive and influential presence in Africa since the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> The PRC's presence in Africa is most recently synonymous with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and economic investment. Africa in 2023 became the largest recipient of Chinese BRI engagement, equaling a monetary value of \$21.7 billion.<sup>13</sup> Africa also holds a unique relationship with the PRC as the host of the first and only overseas Chinese military base, People's Liberation Army Support Base-Djibouti (PLASB-D), located in the Horn of Africa.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, the same year that PLASB-D was established, China

initiated an anti-piracy campaign in Africa and worked to develop a presence on the continent, making Djibouti's strategic location to conduct Noncombatant Evacuation Operations and proximity to the Red Sea valuable.<sup>15</sup>

The PRC Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs in April of this year attended a counterterrorism (CT) meeting with representatives from nearly 30 African nations to discuss Chinese interest in providing CT support to African partners.<sup>16</sup> Since 2022, the PRC has aimed to become a major player in the CT mission space. Chinese President Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative, which states that CT capacity building—with a specific focus on African countries—should be prioritized, is an example of this.<sup>17</sup> The Chinese Communist Party's Global Security Initiative is one of the latest national security-focused efforts that furthers China's ability to increase placement and access through CT training and operational support to African host-nations. Additionally, like Russia, the PRC's highlighted national security initiatives also present an opportunity for the PRC to begin intelligence sharing with African nations.

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#### **Counterintelligence Concerns**

The efforts that Russia and China are pursuing on the African continent provide the two nations various counterintelligence (CI) wins. CI is often a misunderstood and highly secretive domain within the IC. Counterintelligence involves extremely nuanced actions from foreign actors—often intelligence organizations—

that span overt or covert and defensive or offensive intelligence activities. Overtly, U.S. adversaries can gain a CI advantage in Africa through intelligence diplomacy. Such diplomacy offers a direct opportunity to establish an intelligence relationship that may be unknown to the public but is overt between the two governments. This is a strategic gain for an adversary, because an intelligence relationship with an African nation creates several risks for the United States regarding sharing sensitive information, conducting mission-essential operations, and equally building rapport with host-nation officials. On the African continent, China is undoubtedly the largest threat to the United States from a CI perspective. China's PLA Support Base in Djibouti is closely located to the U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) base, also in Djibouti, allowing PLA personnel to target U.S. activities or persons. Notably, Chinese harassment of U.S. military operations there has included the use of lasers to interfere with U.S. aircraft.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most concerning CI gains by U.S. adversaries is the use of foreign influence, specifically through disinformation, to dominate and substantially change African discourse and sentiment in their favor. The spreading of disinformation—conducted via lying, leaking, seeding, or smearing campaigns—is an offensive CI tactic pursuant to the broader aim of deception.<sup>19</sup> If done well, disinformation campaigns can manipulate the public to believe, accept, and act upon a false narrative to the detriment of the campaign's target.

According to a study conducted by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Russia is the top propagator of disinformation in Africa, with China second.<sup>20</sup> Moscow is credited with 16 publicly known Africa-focused disinformation campaigns, spread across 22 countries on the continent. As of March 2024, the Chinese Communist Party currently has five publicly known disinformation campaigns, spread across 11 different African nations. Notably, the U.S. Department of State in February 2024 exposed Russian intelligence services for their ongoing support to the Africa Initiative—an

information agency focusing on Africa-Russia relations—that subsequently spread disinformation across Africa pertaining to the United States and European nations.<sup>21</sup>

The growth of Huawei 5G technology across the continent is a widely discussed CI concern, emanating from the PRC. Similar to broader PRC efforts to expand its presence in Africa, Huawei in 2022 stated it would increase investments in Africa, focused on “digital transformation”, and that Africa [in 2023] will open the 5G era.<sup>22</sup> The U.S. Federal Communications Commission harshly criticized Huawei for allowing the Chinese government to access its systems and conduct offensive technical surveillance on a given target.<sup>23</sup> For context, the PRC retains an all-encompassing national security law that requires Chinese companies “to comply with the mandates of the [Chinese] security and intelligence services.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Huawei is required by law to provide data or other operational intelligence support collected by the company's technical surveillance capabilities to PRC intelligence services. Considering the Federal Bureau of Investigation's determinations that Huawei technology can capture and disrupt restricted DoD communications, the expansion of this technology into Africa poses a risk to U.S. information and operations on the continent.<sup>25</sup>

### **Is Western Paternalism to Blame?**

Western paternalism (whether actual or perceived), coupled with Western foreign policy decisions, has given U.S. adversaries an avenue to tap into anti-colonialism and anti-paternalism sentiments in Africa—and to portray themselves as the better alternative to the United States.<sup>26</sup> The idea of such paternalism, as it relates to Africa, evokes the imperialist past and history of many Western nations making decisions for rather than with host-nations. The actions of the United States via the IC, no matter how well intentioned, are often scrutinized and seen as decision making on behalf of African nations solely to advance larger, American geopolitical goals. Ongoing U.S. efforts to avoid the same mistakes of other



Western partners in Africa should take this notion into account. It should be noted that the United States is not the only Western nation viewed as a paternalistic actor in Africa. Many European nations, including France, the United Kingdom, Portugal, and Belgium, hold larger and arguably greater imperialist and paternalist ties to Africa. In coastal West Africa there is well-documented disdain for the French—whose military forces have been forced to leave Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali.<sup>27</sup> Washington likewise is not immune to the residual effects of its own, and its partners', actions.

Declassified examples of controversial U.S. Cold War intelligence activities in Africa—including providing operational support to the Angolan Civil War; assassination plotting against the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the now Democratic Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba; and funding Lumumba's longstanding autocratic successor, Joseph Mobutu—provide historic roots for perceiving Western paternalism in U.S. actions.<sup>28,29,30</sup> In all of these instances, the United States used its IC to counter and degrade the Soviet Union's activities in Africa. This history fuels the often-perpetuated claims that the United States views African nations as either pawns in an ongoing Cold War chess match or as strategic steppingstones for Middle East military basing and CT operations.

As details of U.S. intelligence activities in Africa become widely publicized, and continually declassified, our adversaries can capitalize on these historical events to evoke skepticism of U.S. motives and initiatives in Africa. They also can promote alternative narratives that frame U.S. aid as neo-imperialist endeavors rather than genuine assistance.

### Options for Engagement

Although the African security landscape and U.S. force presence are shifting constantly, the IC and DoD still have opportunities to maintain information flow, reassert themselves as key partners, and stall or deter relationships between African nations and U.S. adversaries.

### Leveraging Collaborative Relationships

The IC's leveraging of its relationships with African and Western governments and non-government entities can support U.S. I&W efforts that keep analysts and policymakers apprised of developments across the continent. Growing anti-U.S. sentiment, limited resources, and loss of access create barriers for the United States to address, let alone collect on, issues plaguing its African partners and the continent. Offsetting these challenges through collaborative engagement with actors who have a presence or amicable relations in Africa provides an opportunity to maintain effectiveness without fully assuming the financial, logistical, and administrative burdens that typically arise with unilateral collection initiatives.

Africa Integrity Indicators (AII) is a non-governmental organization that houses a database of aggregated information on governance, assessing political, social, and economic data from across the continent.<sup>31</sup> U.S. partnership with AII could offer the IC information that informs continuous I&W efforts and provides insight into potential leadership command and control capabilities, signs of democratic backsliding, and insurgency exacerbators.<sup>32</sup> Alternatively, the United States could partner with organizations such as Refugee Unite, a nonprofit focused on connecting refugees and displaced persons with their loved ones.<sup>33</sup> Such partnerships could inform IC analysts' understanding of refugee migration patterns and identification of trends in conflict-fueled displacement in Africa.

### Sharing Information

The explosive growth of CAI/PAI provides the IC a unique opportunity to promote intelligence diplomacy and strategic information sharing with foreign partners in Africa, building on ongoing U.S. efforts. The IC in March 2024 released its Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) Strategy for 2024–2026 that lays the groundwork on how sharing U.S. OSINT can further its strategic-level goals.<sup>34</sup>

The strategy specifically highlights how U.S. OSINT capabilities can support the growth of foreign partner relationships. The IC can provide streamlined CAI/PAI on myriad topics, including terrorism and insurgent activities, political issues, defense capabilities and technologies, economic development, and environmental degradation by U.S. adversaries.

The goals of this strategy, coupled with efforts by DoD and other U.S. government entities, can further the shared security-related interests of the various IC departments and agencies. Recently, the United States expanded its relationship with Cote d'Ivoire through economic endeavors, including new bilateral engagements between the Department of Commerce and the Department of Treasury.<sup>35</sup> The exchange of CAI/PAI through this relationship can simultaneously inform Ivorian partners and U.S. IC analysts, while also reinforcing U.S. commitment to intelligence diplomacy.

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### **Combating Adversaries**

There is opportunity for the IC and DoD to deter African nations from establishing security partnerships with adversaries by strategically conveying adversary pitfalls and malign inconsistencies. This effort would also support countering dis- and misinformation—a topic of ongoing discussions between U.S. IC and DoD leadership. For example, USAFRICOM in May 2024 hosted the Morocco-based African Lion exercise, the Command's largest joint, all-domain, and multi-component exercise with more than 10,000

participants.<sup>36</sup> Following African Lion, USAFRICOM Commander General Michael Langley publicly stated that the main reason behind Africa's turn to a major U.S. near-peer adversary, presumably Russia, is Moscow's disinformation and misinformation focused on anti-U.S. sentiment in specific regions.<sup>37</sup> General Langley's comment aligns with a 2023 statement by Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, in which she noted that the United States was not as successful in combating Russian disinformation on the African continent as it had been in Europe.<sup>38</sup>

The IC can highlight to African counterparts the pitfalls of partnering with U.S. adversaries, focusing on pre-existing concerns or security interests in Africa. During the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, for example, African nations sought answers on how the war in Ukraine would impact their relationships with Russia.<sup>39</sup> Moscow was unable to answer these questions and quell concerns, providing a potential opportunity for the United States to convey Russia's inability to be a reliable and trustworthy partner to African nations.

A more internal, whole-of-government U.S. approach—that could be used in tandem with external outreach to African partners—is to reinvigorate and increase U.S. government public messaging or “calling out” of adversaries on known falsehoods or inconsistencies. Taking a clear-cut stance against adversaries seeking to exploit African partners or perpetuate potentially malicious lies allows the United States to discredit adversaries and reinforce trust with African nations.

Through the public messaging approach, the United States would work from pre-existing tools and communication avenues, with the ability to use messages in the form of demarches or press releases from the Department of State, public statements from DoD, and even unclassified or releasable memos from the IC. The United States, as an example, could focus on the PRC's contradicting narrative of being a champion for Global South states, even as PRC companies are actively engaged in illegal timber smuggling in Mozambique.<sup>40,41</sup>

### Time for Strategic Recalibration

As the United States grapples with a diminishing influence in Africa amid the increasing assertiveness of Russia and China, the IC and DoD face a critical challenge in adapting to the shifting landscape. The recent withdrawal of U.S. forces and the growing presence of near-peer adversaries underscore the urgency for a strategic recalibration. To counteract this decline, it is imperative that the United States strengthen its partnerships across the continent through enhanced collaborative relationships, expanded information sharing, and a robust counter-disinformation strategy.

The United States must act in a timely manner to give itself the strategic advantage of pre-empting and counteracting adversary relations with African nations before they deepen. By leveraging CAI/PAI, engaging with diverse partners, and actively combating adversary narratives, the United States can mitigate the risks posed by Russia and China, reinforce its strategic position, and rebuild trust with African nations. Addressing the legacy of Western paternalism and its repercussions for U.S.-African relations will also be crucial in shaping a more equitable and effective engagement strategy. As geopolitical dynamics continue to evolve, a proactive and adaptive approach will be essential for maintaining and advancing U.S. interests in Africa.

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