Since the announcement of the Russia-Africa Summit which was held in October of 2019, western media like BBC, and policy tanks like the Brookings Institute have mulled over President Putin’s “ambitions” on the African continent. The picture being painted is that Russia is anxious to return to the good old Soviet days and that Putin’s geopolicy hinges on arms sales and soft power moves. Meanwhile, the US and European financial alliance back killers in business suits across the old continent. Nowhere is this more evident than in Cameroon.

Back in 2012, Transparency International put Cameroon at position number 144 out of 176 countries ranked for corruption. In February of 2020 alone, Cameroon’s armed forces murdered at least 21 civilians, according to this report from Human Rights Watch. Cameroon has been run with an iron fist since 1982 by President Paul Biya, who is backed by the leadership of France, which trains and supplies the same military massacring innocent civilians there. The United States, over the past five years, has given Cameroon more than $216 million in US counterterrorism training and support as well. So, I wonder how much of that sum went to training their warfighters the difference between combatants and non-combatants? Sorry, it had to be said.

France, the United States, and now China are the leading investors in Cameroon. At last count, there were 175 French companies dealing in key economic sectors in the country including; oil, timber, construction, mobile telephony, transport, banking, insurance, and many more. It’s fair to say that Cameroon under Biya, is the stereotypical neo-colonialistic nation in Africa. This is indicated in part by the fact that Biya is currently the longest-ruling non-royal leader in the world and the oldest ruler in Africa. Biya is so corrupt and so joined at the hip with western money elites he was able to get by with paying six ex-US congressmen to certify his elections as valid.

The imagery of this brutal dictator smiling and shaking hands with American presidents at the White House is
sickening for me. Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and a laundry list of nations are under sanctions intended to starve people and cripple governments, while the leading democracies of the world play footsy with the worst people on the planet. Biya is known to stay for months on end in Switzerland or taking posh France holidays costing upwards of $40,000 a day, while his people literally starve. Cameroon had a Gini coefficient of 46.6 as of 2014. The distribution of wealth in the country is atrocious, the 25th worst in the world by many estimates. Against this backdrop of corruption and medieval rule, the US and French investors reap huge rewards from the legacy of a stricken people.

Comparing Russian and Chinese expeditions into Africa with French and US moves is like comparing legitimate bankers to loan sharks. Take a look at the summary of the “2019 Investment Climate Statements: Cameroon” by the US State Department:

“Cameroon’s ranking in the World Bank’s 2019 Doing Business Report – 166th out of 190 countries – and Transparency International’s 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index – 152nd out of 175 countries – accurately reflect a business climate growing more difficult. The most important factors that affect the business climate are dysfunctions within public administration, corruption, and poor infrastructure. These challenges contrast with the country’s huge potential in terms of untapped natural resources and its strategic position as the gateway to landlocked neighbors.”

Yes, the United States Government is telling American companies to “go ahead and bribe some Cameroon officials,” because the environment and the potential are there. At least, this is one way to read in between US policy narrative lines.

The list of American and French investors in Cameroon is pretty long, but the recent news that Chief Executive Officer of Geovic Mining Corporation Mike Mason intends to invest at least $400 million dollars in Cameroon’s cobalt sector within the next four years seems like a good highlight. This is especially true when you see a photo op of US Ambassador to Cameroon Peter Henry Ballerine with Mason and President Paul Biya. I won’t delve into the US Federal federal appeals court case in Washington involving the IMF, Geovic and Cameroon leaders allegedly involved in a scam to embezzle tens of millions in Cameroon public funds. Interestingly, a deal for this cobalt sector big from China was wiped off the table quite suddenly. I wonder if China’s expanding influence in Cameroon and other African nations plays a role in all this?

News from Voice of America, interestingly, tells us that Cameroon and President Paul Biya are being put under pressure to better the country’s human rights record! Really, the US State Department is using this sleight of hand, I kid you not. After decades of heavy-handed dictatorship, suddenly the United States decides to spank one of the world’s most brutal leaders? This has to be because Donald Trump is the righteous cowboy with the big white Stetson and the glistening palomino pony, come to the rescue. OR. China making mutually beneficial trade and investment deals in Cameroon must have caused a stir of conscience in Washington? Excuse me, but if I were the billionaire dealmaker president of the world’s biggest economy, what would stop me from running games to help US investors in Cameroon with sanctions and diplomatic levers? You are right, nothing would. So, the Trump administration has changed the trade status with other “contentious” African nations as well. The changes are NOT because of human rights or visa problems either. Only the criminally naive could believe this after so many years. Trump has been in office for almost 4 years now, and all of a sudden he grows an Africa conscience? No, these other nations have shunned US investment interests in preference to China and other nations as well.

Finally, I am sitting here wondering if I should continue this report by linking President Trump’s new pick for the head of the Department of Interior David Bernhardt, with Noble Energy the company drilling offshore of Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, and Gabon? So as not to bore you, suffice it to say there are many looking hard at Bernhardt’s and Noble’s role in America’s Gulf of Mexico oil exploration and regulation issues. On the other hand, most people reading newspapers or watching TV in America would rather know it was Putin and Russia taking over Cameroon and the rest of Africa with arms sales.

Sorry, I had to leave it at this.

Phil Butler, is a policy investigator and analyst, a political scientist and expert on Eastern Europe, he’s an author of the recent bestseller “Putin’s Praetorians” and other books. He writes exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”