It is well known that countries of the African continent are mostly poor and need the support of major world powers who in exchange for access to the African nations’ rich natural resources. The US and the PRC are considered the main players vying for influence in Africa these days: media mention them particularly often in relation to international African issues. Other actors, such as France, has much less resources and less influence. Against the backdrop of Chinese-American confrontation and the activities of former European colonizers, it is not very obvious that another party, Russia, is present and gaining strength in Africa.

Russian-African relations date back to Soviet times, when the USSR actively supported the decolonization movement that was launched after World War II and started providing all kinds of assistance to all the young African states that wanted to free themselves from the colonial powers that kept trying to maintain an economic grip on their former colonies. It’s commonly understood that war is the invariable companion of poverty and political unrest. It is therefore not surprising that in addition to actively developing economic ties with local states, and the assistance it provided in the construction of a large number of industrial and economic projects, the USSR exported military
hardware to local players, which brought the Soviet-African relations on a new level.

Since the 1950s, various types of Soviet military equipment, such as tanks, aircraft and warships, as well as Soviet military trainers, have appeared in Egypt, Algeria, Mozambique, Somalia, Ethiopia, and there have even been Soviet military bases in Angola. By the early 1980s, the USSR was cooperating with no fewer than 10 states on the Dark Continent in the field of defense. It should be stressed that we’re talking about cooperation in the defense sphere, while the overall list of African countries that received Soviet economic, scientific and technical assistance was much broader.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and its successor, the Russian Federation, was for a long time preoccupied with various domestic and regional issues that forced it to minimize its presence in Africa. At the time, the main players in the region were the US and China.

In time, however, Russia resolved its problems, strengthened itself and began to take a renewed interest in global politics. In the 2000s, the Russian Federation began to restore cooperation with African countries. Given that Russia has one of the most powerful armies in the world, that the defense industry is one of the strongest pillars of the Russian economy and that Africa is still a highly unstable region, it is not surprising that defense and military-technical cooperation have taken again a special place in the new Russian-African relations. The greatly increased threat of international terrorism, for which Africa is one of the main springboards, has also played a part.

By the early 2010s, the Russian Federation had re-established close cooperation with Angola, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Ethiopia and several other African states.

In the decade that followed, the Russian Federation also signed defense cooperation treaties with Zambia, Cameroon, Niger, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, the Republic of Chad and Eswatini. Many treaties involved the supply of arms, others involved the training of qualified military personnel.

Russia’s roles in the assisting the Central African Republic (CAR) has been widely discussed in the international media. This country has been embroiled in civil war for many years, it is riddled with terrorist groups and in dire need of a combat-ready government army. Russia’s cooperation with the CAR intensified after a meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2017. The Russian Federation began supplying small arms to the CAR and sent specialists to train government troops, including the president’s personal guard.

In October 2019, the Russia-Africa Summit was held in Sochi (a resort located in the Russian Federation), attended by leaders or heads of government of 39 African states. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who chaired the event together with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, announced that Russia was forgiving some $20bn in debts accumulated by African countries over the years of cooperation. Writing off debts that many African states simply could not physically pay, removed their fears of incurring more debt by developing cooperation with Russia and ushered in a new era of Russian-African relations.

As a result, in just five months after the forum, from October 2019 to March 2020, African countries made new orders of military equipment from the Russian Federation worth about $1bn.

At the end of 2020, 300 military trainers from the Russian Federation were sent to the CAR. Also, more than a hundred instructors arrived in the country in the summer of 2021. During their years in the CAR, the Russian military has achieved outstanding success in training local troops and providing security in their areas of deployment. The contribution of Russian specialists to the fight for security in the CAR is evidenced by the fact that in November 2021 a monument was unveiled in the CAR capital Bangui: a sculptural composition depicting CAR army fighters and their Russian colleagues together.

Meanwhile, in August 2021, Russia signed a military cooperation agreement with Nigeria that includes military equipment and training. The country also has serious security concerns: it is home to the powerful and violent Boko Haram terrorist group (banned in Russia), which in 2015 swore allegiance to the Daesh terrorist group (banned in Russia) and thus significantly strengthened its links with the international terrorist underground. To solve this problem, Nigeria also needs a strong, modern army, which Russia will help to train.

In January 2022 it was reported that Russian trainers are now also training troops of the Republic of Mali.

In conclusion, Russia’s positions in Africa are not yet as strong as that of China or the West, but there are strong preconditions for expanding them. The Russian Federation seems to place too much emphasis on defense
cooperation, while the PRC is conquering Africa with huge financial investments in areas of daily necessity, thus tying African countries to itself. But it should be noted that financial injections without control over the use of funds and loans without guarantees of repayment are a great risk, and large-scale investments always need to be protected by force. And when the PRC began its penetration of the Dark Continent back in the 1960s and 1970s, not yet expecting to soon match the West or the USSR, Chinese activity in Africa also consisted of supplying arms and military specialists to struggling regimes for independence. And already in 2017, the PRC achieved the opening of a naval base in the African country of Djibouti, on the coast of the Gulf of Aden. According to some reports, up to 10,000 Chinese troops are stationed at the base, and although the official version of their task is to provide security for navigation in the Gulf of Aden, such a force is quite sufficient for operations deep in the African continent, where Chinese nationals work and where expensive Chinese projects are underway. In addition, it is not known what percentage of Chinese professionals working in Africa may be members of the security forces that provide security for fellow citizens and PRC assets.

In view of military, terrorist and other threats in the African countries, which Russia faces, it is quite reasonable that the Russian Federation seeks to provide military support to friendly governments. Once their stability has been achieved, peaceful and mutually beneficial projects, such as uranium and gold mining, the construction of nuclear power plants, etc., can be launched, and the plans for Russian-African cooperation are numerous.

_Dmitry Bokarev, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook“. _