Russia in the Central African Republic: Exploitation Under the Guise of Intervention

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The Central African Republic (CAR) is a country in conflict and despite UN actions, it remains exceedingly violent, unstable and unable to alleviate the conditions that place it at almost the very lowest 2017 Human Development Index ranking. Recently Russia has stepped up to intervene with provisions and training. Draped in a guise of assistance with UN Security Council approval, Russia is fulfilling its own ends. While arms sales increase Putin's support in the Russian military-industrial complex domestically, training allows for Russian actors to be placed in country. The arming and training CAR's government forces as well as rebel factions enables Russia to influence all sectors while leveraging these opposing sides to further develop a powerful Russian stronghold in CAR. Russian personnel in CAR, with additional to troops in nearby Sudan, provide state actors to direct activities for Russia's benefit in rebel controlled areas with great natural resource value. The 2018 diplomatic agreements specifically allow Russia to access CAR's natural resources and clearly identify Russia's economic interests in CAR. The impact of controlling CAR's resources is enhanced by Russian seaport access in Sudan. Combined, internationally approved Russian arms and personnel for training create the means for Russia to exploit CAR's conflict. Russia gains influence over both the CAR government and rebels, access resources, and builds strategic and logistical strength in CAR as well as on the Red Sea, all, while dynamically balancing Chinese interests in the African continent.

Keywords: Central African Republic; Russia; arms; resources

“The French are hated as the old colonial power. American troops have left. It’s a free country for the taking” (Losh & Mathews, 2018).

In recent years, Russia has become increasingly involved in the Central African Republic (CAR). This involvement has caught attention, prompting the international community to look fondly upon Russia for its intervention and provision in CAR. However, through further examination, it becomes apparent that Russia's activity in CAR is valuable to Russian interests and thus, not as selfless as it initially appears. In order to understand the extent of Russia's personal gain, the foundation of the current climate must first be understood. Involvement with the government and the rebels provides Russia with a strong means of control within the country. Through increasing personnel and establishing infrastructure within CAR, Russia creates an ideal environment to access CAR's vast stores of natural resources. With increased access to natural resources, Russia establishes itself as a counter to China. Together, these factors enable Russia to exploit the conflict in CAR to "establish a presence for itself in Africa's geostrategic heartland" for Russia's own gain and power (Korybko, 2017).

The desire for total political control and the struggle for power are themes which permeate many past and present conflicts worldwide. The Central African Republic is no exception. In the shadow of French colonization, CAR did not become an independent nation until 1960 (BBC, 2018). A mere five years after CAR gained its independence, its first president was ousted by the army commander who declared himself president for life (BBC, 2018). This transition of power marked CAR's entrance into extreme political turmoil, which continues today. In 2013, this ongoing power struggle came to a head as religious tensions culminated in Seleka—Muslim rebel—seized power in the primarily Christian country. Soon after, in 2014, “anti-balaka”—Christian militias—rose up and pressured Seleka rebels to hand power to a transitional government (Figures 1 & 2). Eight months after the Seleka coup in 2013, the UN Security Council finally approved “the deployment of a UN peacekeeping forces … [to] … support [French and] African Union troops already on the ground” (BBC, 2018). Despite the presence of UN peacekeeping forces, extreme violence, based along the lines of religious pretexts, continued.
This ongoing conflict and extreme violence have left a devastating mark on the population. Over one million persons are internally and externally displaced (Figure 3) (FAO, 2018). The impact of this displacement is twofold; it threatens the safety of CAR’s population, while simultaneously further destabilizing the surrounding states of Cameroon, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Congo, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Moreover, with two million people facing food insecurity, CAR is on the brink of a devastating famine (FAO, 2018) (AFP News Agency, 2018). Compounding the existing food insecurity, the lack of economic and infrastructure development is preventing CAR’s population from accessing the available resources necessary for economic growth. Though CAR is rich in gold, diamonds, and other rare earth minerals, 75% of individuals continue to rely on agriculture for income, and do not benefit from the many natural resources present in CAR (IPIS, 2017) (FAO, 2018).
The deployment of 12,000 UN peacekeepers to mitigate the violence in CAR stabilized the country enough to allow Faustin-Archange Touadéra to win the 2016 presidential election (Figure 4) (Calzoni, 2018). However, despite the presence of UN Peacekeeping forces and the provision of UN humanitarian aid CAR’s condition continues to deteriorate, placing it almost at the bottom of the 2017 Human Development Index, ranking 188 out of the 189 countries listed (UNDP, 2018). This dire situation is due in part to 75% of the country being currently under the control of 14 different rebel groups (Calzoni, 2018). Moreover, these circumstances illustrate that “international deployments have failed to create a sustainable peace” (Losh & Mathews, 2018). Internally displaced persons, refugees, food insecurity, infrastructure, and lacking economic structures compound one another; culminating to create an imploding country—rich in natural resources—spiraling towards ruin and unable to stabilize itself.

Figure 3: A fraction of CAR's internally displaced peoples gather at Bangui’s M’poko International Airport (Greco, 2015).

Figure 4: UN peacekeepers from Gabon patrolling the town of Bria in CAR on 12 June 2017 (AFP News Agency, 2018).
The spiraling collapse, in spite of the presence of UN peacekeeping forces, prompts discussion of additional means of intervention. Specifically, in the fall of 2017, the increasing turmoil prompted Russian offers of stability to CAR through arms and training (Losh & Mathews, 2018). Russia appealed to the UN “to make an exception to its arms embargo on the Central African Republic so that Moscow could send weapons to two EU-trained battalions of its [CAR] military” forces (Korybko, 2017). By volunteering to intervene in CAR, Russia gains international prestige. Russia, benefits itself, in complying with UN Security Council requests regarding arms imports, as “Russia plans to store them [the arms] in new containers under tight security” with serial numbers “for each unit so that they can be traced in the event that they end up in the wrong hands” (Korybko, 2017). Adhering to the UN Security Council request to secure and track arms, Russia’s engagement is legitimately recognized internationally, but not controlled by the UN Security Council. Notably, since “Russia’s engagement [in CAR] is independent of the U.N.,” Russia will undoubtedly “have a freer hand to operate or play kingmaker if the peacekeeping mission withdraws” (Plichta, 2018). Ultimately Russian involvement in CAR provides Russia with a positive image of international provision and intervention—however, it is unlikely that Russia is acting from purely altruistic motivations.

International mistrust of Russian motives has increased through Russia’s involvement with the current government in CAR as well as the many rebel groups operating in the area. Further examination of Russia’s relationship with both of these entities uncovers Russia’s presence in CAR as a benefit to Russia itself. Russia has provided multiple incentives for the CAR government—and particularly the current president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra—to work with Russia as opposed to other countries, namely, the United States or France. These incentives include the provision of arms, training, and protection by Russia to Touadéra who is already “mistrustful to the Western military presence in the country” (Plichta, 2018). Due to the tremendous conflict, CAR’s government has no financial means to build its own security. “Russia’s aid in arming the CAR’s military is a huge boon for the chronically underfunded state” (Figures 5 & 6) (Plichta, 2018). In addition to arms, Russia

Figure 5: CAR soldiers wielding Russian rifles and rocket launchers (Sputnik, 2018).

Figure 6: Members of CAR’s armed forces trained by Russian advisors demonstrate their skills at “a ceremony to mark the completion of [their] training” (Kelly, 2018).
has become continually more involved in military training and funding in CAR; specifically, “Russian instructors…may give Touadéra the military he needs to combat the rebel groups across the country” (Plichta, 2018). Furthermore, “Russian guards also help protect the President from coup or assassination” (Plichta, 2018). Together these components create an atmosphere of indebtedness to Russia within CAR’s government—dramatically increasing Russia influence over Touadéra (Figure 7).

Specifically, “Russia is using [this] relationship with the legitimate government as a foothold in the country to establish contacts with rebel leaders” (Calzoni, 2018). Russia is actively training CAR military forces at the Berengo palace; these Russian activities have provoked CAR rebels to increase their own arms caches (Losh & Mathews, 2018) (Schreck, 2018). This statement underlines that, while Russia specifies its weapons shipments and training as a means to stabilize CAR, a UN report published in July 2018 stated “that new weapons obtained by government forces have motivated rebel militias to boost their own stockpiles” (Schreck, 2018). Moreover, the report cited “serious outbreaks of violence, including … areas where the situation had previously improved,” illustrating how Russia’s imports of arms have not stabilized the country, but instead have further destabilized it (Schreck, 2018).

It is critical to note that Russia has been involved in the equipping and training of these same violent rebel groups, specifically, “a force of about 500 Russian soldiers that has been stationed near Um Dafug on the border between South Darfur in Sudan and the Central African Republic” (Dabanga, 2018). During the five-month period the Russian training units were stationed in Um Dafug, “military training for … 600 Seleka Muslim rebels from CAR and Sudanese soldiers” was conducted (Dabanga, 2018). While this training is extensive, including advanced weapon training, vehicle instruction, and paramedic training, the Russian government does not highlight its involvement (Dabanga, 2018). This desire to appear uninvolved is identified in “cellphone footage … of Russian soldiers contacting rebels in northeast CAR” in which a Russian soldier specifically “points to the [rebel’s phone] camera: ‘Stop filming please’” (Losh & Mathews, 2018). Even though Russia does not publicly highlight their military training activities in CAR, Russian agents are present in areas held by rebels. Russian support of these rebel groups increases Russia’s influence in CAR—currently, both the government and rebel forces are receiving arms and training from Russia.

Additionally, “Russia is exploring the possibilities of the mutually beneficial development of Central African natural resources,” (Schreck, 2018). As Russia continues to establish ties to both the government and rebel forces—playing one against the other—its presence grows. Recently, in May of 2018:

Anonymous sources within rebel groups in the CAR…claimed that they had been approached by “Russian figures” offering to mediate in their conflict with the central government. A similar offer was made to the government itself, but was rejected by Bangui, according to a government spokesman. The Russian Foreign Ministry hasn’t commented on the reports. (Sputnik, 2018)
This heightened control ultimately benefits Russia through arms sales, state actors in a geostrategic area of Africa, and mineral wealth. Specifically, while Russia's arms sales within CAR is "part of its [Russia's] 'military diplomacy' to promote regional stability," these sales also enable Russia to wield significant international influence (Korybko, 2017). Russia is a player "especially in places with Western power vacuums. War zones featuring Russian guns are a showroom for courting prospective buyers" (Losh & Mathews, 2018). This is evidenced in CAR as rebels are seeking to increase their own arms stores as a response to increased arms being provided to the CAR government: "For Putin, booming arm sales help tighten his grip at home, reinforcing an important backer of his rule: the Russian military-industrial complex" (Losh & Mathews, 2018). In addition to arms sales, Russia has international permission to place Russian state actors in CAR— instructed to train and equip rebel forces.

The initial agreement between Russia and CAR included “five military officers and 170 civilian instructors, along with more than 5,000 AK-47s, sniper rifles and grenade launchers” (Calzoni, 2018). On 19 October 2018, “Russia said … it planned to send additional military equipment to Central African Republic (CAR) and deploy 60 more instructors to train the country’s armed forces, escalating its most significant military foray in Africa in decades” (Ross & Tsvetkova, 2018). This puts a total of 235 Russian personnel in CAR; however, questions arise concerning whether these individuals are active duty military or contracted Russian security forces. Investigations into this matter have resulted in the murder of three Russian journalists in CAR, late in July 2018. However, information indicates that a Russian based security firm, Wagner, is contracted in CAR:

Wagner forces may be present with both rebels and government forces in the CAR... While Wagner attempts to suppress investigations into its activities, the information available suggests an outfit that plays an increasingly crucial role for Moscow both abroad and at home. But even as this strategy has allowed Russia to rack up military successes without risking its own ground forces. (Hauer, 2018)

In addition to the secrecy shrouding the exact number of Russian personnel training rebel groups from CAR in Sudan, one-third of the Russian soldiers who had fought in Syria are now stationed in Sudan (Neuville, 2018). These facts indicate Russia's intentional increase of state actors present in the region.

In addition to increasing the number of military personnel and state actors present in the region, Russia is in the process of securing a naval supply center on the Red Sea. Russia has gone to great lengths to ensure international understanding of this construction project as a supply center as opposed to a naval base. Russian ambassador to Sudan, Vladimir Giltov, in a meeting with the President of Sudan said, “I would like to make it clear that talks are not about building a naval base, but about a supply center for Russian warships in the Red Sea” (Sudan Tribune, 2018). This transportation center will provide logistical support, allowing Russia to capitalize on CAR's natural resources. Certainly, this "supply center“ would provide an excellent point for Russian equipment to pass through, specifically, equipment necessary to begin extracting CAR’s rich mineral resources, to include oil; “[t]he Central African Republic is rich in oil, diamonds, gold and uranium that Russia can extract, and the CAR government could need expensive Russian equipment to mine and process raw materials” (Calzoni, 2018). A Red Sea port would logistically energize Russia’s ability to access CAR's mineral wealth for “Moscow has … made no secret of its economic interests in the country's natural resources” (Schreck, 2018).

When "Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Touadera [sic] in the Russian city of Sochi in October… the officials 'reaffirmed their countries' resolve' to bolster bilateral ties 'and pointed to the considerable potential for partnership in mineral resources exploration' and energy” (Schreck, 2018). However, CAR gave “the prospecting-mining exploration concessions” to Russia (Schreck, 2018). Russia is positioned to gain greatly from CAR's uranium alone. According to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), “only about 60 percent of the current need [for uranium] is covered by the promotion. The remaining demand must be covered by stockpiles, reprocessing and disarming nuclear weapons. In 2006, 39,603 tons of uranium were mined worldwide, but demand was 66,500 tons and will continue to increase in the coming years” (WISE, 2018). As one of the leading global uranium producers, Russia sees enormous growth potential in CAR. While Russia sees immense economic gain in these mining endeavors, the majority of these extremely profitable resources are under rebel control. For example, the area “teeming with diamonds and gold, … is controlled by an armed group called the Popular Front for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic [FPRC]” (Losh & Mathews, 2018). However, in addition to diamonds and gold, uranium has also been discovered in this rebel-controlled area.

In central CAR, the ongoing conflict has prevented international mining companies from extracting uranium from a known, established mine in Bakouma. Interestingly, the Bakouma mine ownership reveals Russia's competition for uranium in the region. Only 10% of the Bakouma mine is owned by the CAR government, the other 90% is held by Uramin Incorporated (WISE, 2018). Forty-nine percent of the Uramin portion is held by China Guangdong Nuclear Power Company (WISE, 2010). A French company, Areva NC, owns the remaining 51% of Uramin, whose investors include Japan and the Kazakh government-owned KazAtomProm (WISE, 2010). In 2017, just as Russia was intervening in CAR, a second Chinese company sought to buy Bakouma shares from Areva NC, and failed to do so (WISE, 2010). Whether Russia’s involvement
in the rebel-held Bakouma area influenced this decision is unknown. Clearly, China did not gain a greater stake in CAR’s Bakouma uranium mine. Uranium has also been found along CAR’s southern border, between Mobaye and Bangassou (IPIS, 2017). However, oil has been identified in CAR’s north-east corner. This oil is predominantly in Um Dafug, near the location where the Russians have been training Seleka rebels (Dabanga, 2018). These uranium and oil rich areas are all under rebel control. “Russia is negotiating with rebel leaders for access to important reserves of natural resources located in territories outside of government-controlled areas”; actions underlining why it is in Russia’s interest to form alliance with rebels (Figure 8) (Calzoni, 2018).

In maintaining authority over the rebels, who control the resource-rich areas, Russia can build both infrastructure and economic strength while balancing China’s strategic focus in the region. With Moscow and Beijing in a “shared rivalry against the United States...[these] two powers will try to divide the spoils of the African continent” (Calzoni, 2018). China is already invested in the continent of Africa and interested in developing the Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road. Through this investment, China is exercising its own military diplomacy maneuvers, and Russia fears the potential scale of China’s economic power. Thus, Russia is seeking to balance Chinese power in the region and in doing so, provides “strategic value to China in an effort to equalize the two states’ partnership with one another” (Korybko, 2017). Russia’s investment of security and economic development in CAR would gain Russia this strategic value. Furthermore, the developing Russian naval supply center on the Red Sea allows Russia a “northern mainland-maritime interface on the Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road” (Korybko, 2017). On the other hand, Russia may be strategically planning to develop its own “axis of influence through Sudan in the north and southwards into Angola”, according to an anonymous senior United Nations security official in Bangui (Losh & Mathews, 2018). This axis may prove a counter to China’s Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road, which seeks to link Nigeria with Ethiopia—through the Sahara—however this route may be more economically profitable if traversing CAR (Korybko, 2017). Thus, the motives behind Russia’s endeavors to secure CAR for the UN Security Council frame Russian strategic gains as a counter to China in the region.

Clearly, CAR is a dysfunctional country and Russia is profiting from its instability in many ways. By intervening in CAR, Russia gains positive international attention. However, the arms and training that Russia uses in its military diplomacy directly produce Russian financial growth. This financial gain from Russian arms assures political support for Putin within the military and industrial sectors domestically. Yet, the provision of Russian arms to CAR’s government motivates CAR’s rebel factions to build their own weapon stockpiles, and Russia does not hesitate to provide arms to these rebels as well. Logistically, Russia is leveraging the training needs attended with these arms to build up Russian forces in the region, with additional backup troops and naval support based in nearby Sudan. By training and arming the CAR military, Russia’s actions of military diplomacy fulfill international intervention while appeasing UN concerns for the region. Yet, conversely,

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**Figure 8:** A map depicting the distribution of CAR’s resources (IPIS, 2017). Note the Bakouma mining site in the southwest portion of the country.
these activities generate more rebel tensions that Russia then meets with more arms and engagement to ultimately gain access to rebel-controlled areas rich in natural resources. Consequently, access to these resources will multiply Russia's wealth and influence in the area, creating a strong and strategic means to balance China's interests in Africa. Combined, these activities reveal that despite a selfless guise of intervention and aid, Russia is gaining greatly by its involvement in CAR. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Artyom Kozhin, voiced to CAR’s government and the international community, “we believe these projects will help stabilize the economic situation in CAR, promote the construction of the infrastructure, and serve as a basis for drawing additional investment to the country’s economy” (Schreck, 2018). Yet, Russia’s intervention ultimately benefits Russia.

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