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The Hydra's gambit

As thousands marched through Niger's streets, waving Russian flags, the echoes of the St. Petersburg summit resonate in distant corners of Africa

In the choppy waters of geopolitical realignments, a chilling Hydra has emerged from the depths, its many heads symbolising the increasing influence of the Wagner Group in Africa. Like the mythological beast, the private military company Wagner and its sponsor, Russia, have a complex relationship where it is often hard to discern who is controlling whom. Each manoeuvre of this entity, in a continent far removed from Moscow, has implications reverberating through global power corridors.

The recent coup in Niger and the subsequent Russia-Africa summit brings this nexus into sharp relief. Amidst the chaos of the coup, the conspicuous presence of Russian flags waved by the putschists' supporters was not overlooked. While no solid evidence connects Wagner or Russia directly to the coup, one cannot ignore the opportunistic undertones. This upheaval seemingly aligns with their strategic interests, fostering instability that allows an entity like Wagner to flourish, much like a Hydra thriving in tumultuous seas.

In Hydra's anatomy, the tentacles are connected yet autonomous. Similarly, the Russia-Wagner nexus seems to follow the same principles. On the one hand, Wagner is seen as Russia's shadowy arm, working behind the scenes to bolster Russian interests in countries like Mali and the Central African Republic. But on the other, there is an emerging narrative that Wagner may have begun charting its own course, independent of the Kremlin. The St. Petersburg summit gives weight to this hypothesis.

Who is the puppet master?

The Russia-Africa summit, the second of its kind since 2019, encapsulates Vladimir Putin's political manoeuvring. In a world where Africa is often perceived as the receiver of aid or the subject of exploitation, Putin's approach is distinct. By spotlighting African leaders,

treating them as equals and potential partners, he undermines the West's traditional influence on the continent.

In his strategy to promote a multipolar world order and combat 'neocolonialism', Putin has adroitly used soft power tactics to woo African leaders. Debt write-offs and grain donations appear benevolent, yet they serve as strategic tools, pivoting Africa's reliance from its traditional western allies to Russia.

At the summit, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's remarks about the Ukrainian conflict and its impact on African countries provided a fresh perspective. Notably, Putin's gesture to discuss the issue with the concerned African countries reinforces the narrative of shared decision-making and respect for African sovereignty and thus twisting the narrative: Russia is a friend, Russia is a partner, Russia listens to you, leaders. I, Vladimir Putin, I hear you, I listen to you like no other western leader did before.

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While Putin's strategy appears to be winning some battles, the war is far from over. The fiasco of the failed Wagner rebellion in Russia underscores that the Hydra may not be as unified as it appears. This incident raises pertinent questions about the future of Wagner's operations on the continent.

So, is Putin the puppet master behind the Hydra, or has the beast become too big to control? Is the Russian leader simply surfing on the Hydra's waves, capitalising on opportunities as they arise, or is he steering the beast according to his grand plan?

The Russia-Wagner dynamics in Africa remain complex, often blurring the lines between sovereignty, self-interest and global power politics. The Hydra of Wagner and Russia, while apparently entangled, may well represent multiple, distinct entities. It could be one central creature with many independent heads, or several interconnected beasts, each with its own agenda. This ambiguity reinforces its mystique and potency.

For every cut head two more emerge

As this narrative unfolds, we are reminded of Hercules' legendary battle with the Hydra. Each head he cut off resulted in two more growing in its place, demonstrating the monster's resilience. While the West and traditional African allies may succeed in severing one or two heads of this modern Hydra, they must recognise that a multi-pronged, sustained

approach is needed to keep this beast in check.

The coup in Niger provided a fresh canvas for this complex Russian play. As thousands marched through Niamey's streets, waving Russian flags, and denouncing former colonial power France, the echoes of St. Petersburg resonated in this distant corner of Africa. Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Russian mercenary group Wagner, hailed the coup as good news and offered his fighters' services, thereby signalling another head of the Hydra materialising.

Although the Kremlin has expressed concern over the coup, calling for a rapid restoration of law and order, the endorsement from Prigozhin, often considered Putin's right-hand man, cannot be overlooked. The coup leaders' recognition, the refusal of western countries to accept the new leaders, and Prigozhin's voice message to the junta show the emergence of another strategic head of the Hydra.

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Africa, in this geopolitical drama, is not a mere spectator. It is both the battlefield and a key player, with its choices determining the shape of the future order. And as the Hydra continues to influence the continent's tides, the world watches keenly, aware that the ripples will not be confined to Africa's shores.

Just as the Hydra in Greek mythology thrives on chaos and feeds off resistance, its geopolitical counterpart, embodied by Russia, appears to grow stronger with every attempt by the West to pull African leaders away from Moscow's influence. Yet, for every new head that sprouts in this beast's ongoing saga, there lies an opportunity for vigilance and deeper understanding.

Russia's motives and manoeuvres in Africa, ever evolving and complex, demand a comprehensive lens and a critical approach to dissect it. Every summit, every coup, every instance of support or condemnation, is but a piece of a grand geopolitical jigsaw. Only by fitting these pieces together can we hope to unveil the true face of the Hydra before it recoils back into the shadows.

Observers and players in this intricate geopolitical chess game must remain wide awake. For while the Hydra may retreat, it is undoubtedly planning its next move, biding its time. It’s an evolving dance of power, strategy and survival - a challenge to the status quo that cannot be ignored. We must keep our eyes on the chessboard, ready to respond to the Hydra's next gambit in this ever-unfolding game of geopolitics.



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