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The Africa Corps

BRIEFING NOTE

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PURPOSE STATEMENT

This briefing note provides an analysis of Russia's Africa Corps ("Африканский корпус" or "Afrikanskiy Korpus") as a tool of the Russian state to solidify its influence and provide an alternative military presence to that of Western powers. It examines how the Africa Corps – succeeding the Wagner Group (hereafter Wagner) – operates under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defence as an instrument to further consolidate and legitimize Russia's presence as part of a long-standing trend (Stanyard, 2025; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). While the Africa Corps is present in several African countries, this briefing note focuses on its presence in the Sahel states of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. In particular, it examines the Africa Corps' military activities and influence campaigns, alongside the impact of its presence on regional stability.

Over the past decade, the Kremlin has constructed and deployed an intricate network to undertake a wide range of activities, culminating in the formation of the Africa Corps in 2023. Drawing on the remnants of Wagner, the Africa Corps is estimated to comprise around 10,000 troops recruited from Russia, Belarus, and various African states (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). It is estimated to have retained 70-80% of Wagner soldiers (Notte, 2025; Timbuktu Institute, 2025). While specifics relating to its internal structure are obscure, there is a large consensus that it is overseen by those in the Kremlin's inner circle (Stanyard, 2025; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). As the Africa Corps' operations are broad, this briefing note focuses on its advancement of soft power initiatives in the form of educational, media, and cultural programs to reinforce Russian influence.

THE SECURITY PROBLEM

The founding of the Africa Corps in 2023 marked a strategic shift in the Kremlin's approach to military and influence operations in the region. In comparison to Wagner, the Africa Corps provides the Kremlin with more centralized control over operations, allowing for an expansion of influence through both soft and hard power (Caprile & Pichon, 2024). Hard power initiatives, which have remained similar to Wagner's, are carried out through counterterrorism operations, military training, and measures intended to prop up the juntas (Robert Lansing Institute, 2025). However, credible allegations of human rights abuses and summary

executions have accompanied these measures (Human Rights Watch, 2025a). Soft power operations, on the other hand, have taken the form of educational and religious initiatives, alongside mis- and disinformation campaigns (Stanyard, 2025; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

While the shift from Wagner to the Africa Corps has changed elements of the organization, it has had little tangible impact on countering jihadist attacks; the frequency of civilian casualties and injuries has continued to increase as the jihadist threat continues to expand. In Mali, the transition to the Africa Corps "coincided with a sharp escalation of violence on several fronts" (Francisco, 2025), amounting to an 81% increase in violence involving Russian mercenaries and a 65% increase in reported fatalities (Serwat & Nsaibia, 2024). This included alleged atrocities by Africa Corps soldiers alongside the Malian army as part of ground offensives purportedly targeting Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) (Francisco, 2025; Appendix A). Similar allegations of atrocities have been recorded in Niger and Burkina Faso (see Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

In addition to kinetic operations, the Africa Corps also has extensive soft power capabilities which are undertaken through its media wing, the African Initiative. The African Initiative is self-described as aiming to "mutually expand the knowledge of Russians and Africans about each other" (AFRINZ, 2023). The organization began its operations in tandem with the Africa Corps and is broadly considered to be a Russian state-run organization, with many of its employees alleged to be tied to Wagner and Russian intelligence agencies (Le Service de Vigilance et de Protection Contre les Ingérences Numériques Étrangères, 2025). It has become a key part of the Africa Corps' strategy, providing social and cultural influence to increase the perceived legitimacy of Russian operations in the Sahel through media partnerships, cultural exports, and educational initiatives. For example, in 2024, the organization began delivering educational programs about Russian history and culture as well as first aid training to children in Burkina Faso and Libya (Appendix B, Figs. B1 and B2).

The African Initiative also disseminates pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, partnering with local organizations to promote Russian language and culture through African radio shows, as well as building ties with local social media influencers and bloggers (VIGINUM, 2025). These bloggers, as well as 'ghost reporters', who use stolen identities of African journalists to exaggerate the success of Russian-backed forces, have also been observed promoting Russian disinformation (Ritzen, 2025; DAIDAC, 2025). And while anti-Western and anti-French misinformation campaigns reflect established grievances among the Sahel states, the Africa Initiative has inflamed these narratives to foster closer relations with non-Western states (Parens, 2025).

KEY EVENTS & BACKGROUND

The death of former Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin and other senior officials on 23 August 2023 presented an opportunity for the formation of the Africa Corps as an entity that allowed for centralized operations under stricter state control (Kunkel and Ellis, 2025). While some of Wagner's military approaches have been retained within the Africa Corps (Notte, 2025; Timbuktu Institute, 2025), it now operates with increased oversight and chains of command embedded in the Russian state, with particularly strong involvement from Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov and several high-ranking foreign intelligence officers (Blackburn, 2024; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Indeed, replacing Wagner with the Africa Corps provided a way for the Kremlin to maintain its presence in the region without the burden of European Union sanctions that had been imposed on Wagner for alleged human rights violations (European Council, 2021; UN Security Council, 2021).

While the Africa Corps has taken over some Wagner initiatives, such as counterterrorism operations (Robert Lansing Institute, 2025), it now focuses primarily on regime security and support, and military training, as opposed to carrying out kinetic operations against jihadist groups (Notte, 2025). This can be observed through measures such as an August defence summit hosted by Russia with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The purpose of this was to formalize expanded military collaboration, which was actualized through the signing of a Defence Cooperation Memorandum (African Security Analysis, 2025).

IMPLICATIONS

Increased anti-Western narratives may result in further erosion of relationships between African and Western nations, as well as increased rejection of Western-aligned assistance, both military and non-governmental (Appendix C). This year, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in January and the International Criminal Court in September; both are indicative of the juntas' shifts away from institutions perceived as Western-affiliated. French troops have also increasingly been withdrawn from the region since the juntas came to power, and in September, Paris suspended counterterrorism operations with Mali. In a similar light, in August, Burkina Faso expelled the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-backed Target Malaria (Africa Defense Forum, 2024). Such transitions are also suggestive of a desire by the trio for increased autonomy within their alliance (Appendix D, Figs. D1 and D2).

Such shifts raise concerns about the potential for reduced independent checks and balances on military juntas, furthering the risk of human rights violations and crimes against humanity, such as those perpetrated in Mali by the Africa Corps and state security forces (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025a). The withdrawal from the ICC in particular has concerned human rights groups; Human Rights

Watch framed it as "jeopardiz[ing] access to justice for victims of atrocity crimes [and] putting all civilians at greater risk" (2025b).

Russian support for authoritarian and junta leaders in the Sahel could also facilitate further erosion of regional stability and democratic norms. Moscow's support for extraconstitutional power claims, paired with targeted disinformation campaigns and political interference, appears aimed at influencing the outcome of recent elections in nearby nations including Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire (Appendix E; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). This may signal the potential for increased, or at the very least sustained, political interference, especially around elections.

The Africa Corps' role in illicit economies, including the smuggling of extractives and exploitative resource capture, has been positioned as fuelling local anger toward the forces (Stanyard, 2025; Appendix F). This risks further destabilizing local economies and raises the likelihood of increased confrontation, which is liable to turn violent. The extractives sector, namely gold, is a major part of the economies in countries where the Africa Corps has a presence, but large parts of it operate informally or illicitly, thus providing opportunities for exploitation. Gold mining has become a key part of the Africa Corps' income stream with estimates placing its earnings through illegal gold mining at more than US$2.5 billion since 2022 (Ecofin Agency, 2024). The militarization of resource extraction therefore not only finances the group's military activity but also entrenches war-economy dynamics that perpetuate conflict, destabilize economies, and alienate local populations.

Appendix A

Figure A1

The Africa Corps purported targeting of ISSP and JNIM



Note. @OSINTWarfare, 2025a; @OSINTWarfare, 2025b; @OSINTWarfare, 2025c. Collected October, 2025 by CASIS Vancouver

Appendix B

Figure B1

The Africa Corps' Educational Initiatives



Note. First aid training being delivered to schoolchildren in Burkina Faso's Nagri Municipal Secondary School by an African Initiative representative (AFRINZ, n.d).

Figure B2

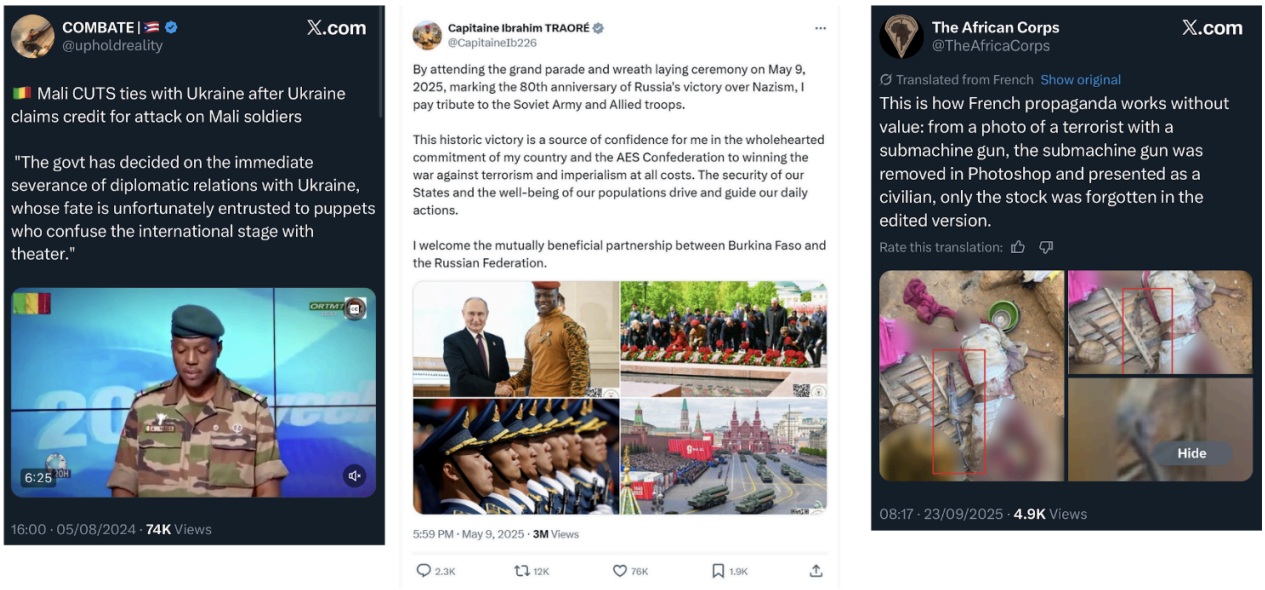


Note. Schoolchildren after a "friendship lesson" delivered by the African Initiative, in which Russian culture, history and national heroes were discussed (AFRINZ, n.d).

Appendix C

Figure C1

Anti-Western Narratives and Pro-Russian Sentiment

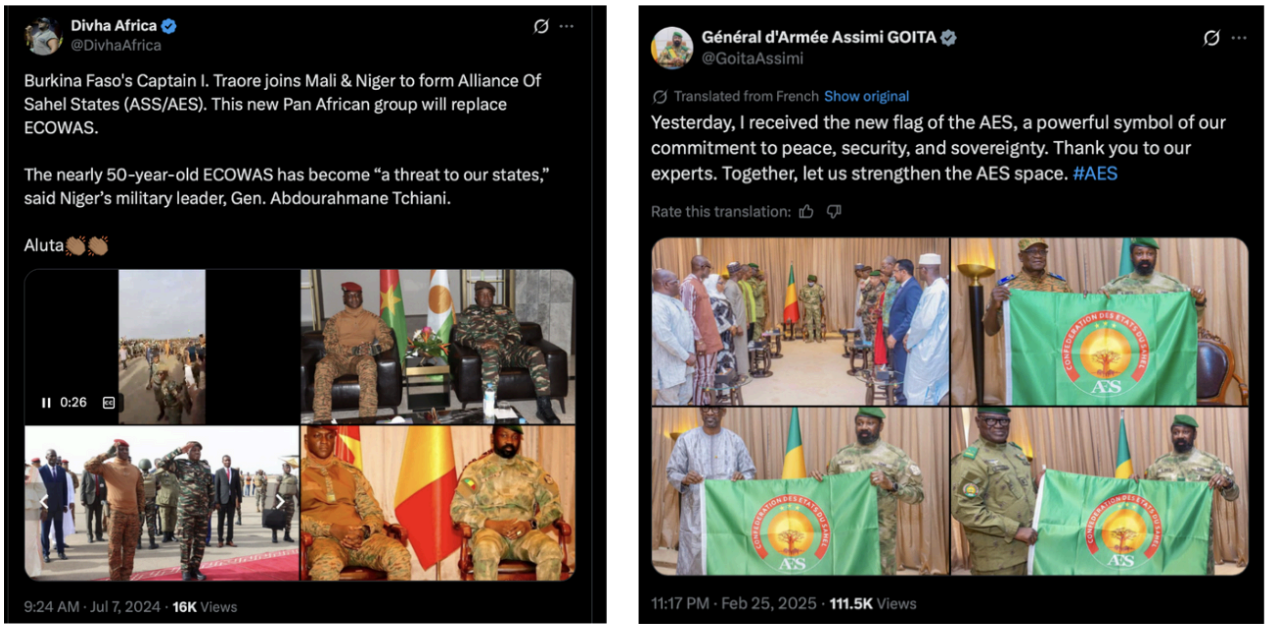


Note. @upholdreality, 2024; @CaptaineIb226, 2025; @TheAfricaCorps, 2025. Collected October, 2025 by CASIS Vancouver

Appendix D

Figure D1

Increased Autonomy Within the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)



Note. @DivhaAfrica, 2024; @GoitaAssimi, 2025. Collected October, 2025 by CASIS Vancouver

Figure D2



MINISTÈRE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR, DE LA RECHERCHE ET DE L'INNOVATION

CABINET

BURKINA FASO
La Patrie ou la Mort, nous Vaincrons

BURKINA FASO
La Patrie ou la Mort, nous Vaincrons

Ouagadougou, le 22 AOUT 2025

Communiqué

Le ministre de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation (MESRI) informe le public burkinabè qu'à la suite de la décision N° 2025-000011/MESRI/CAB/ANB du 18 août 2025 et de la Décision N°2025-096/MESRI/SG/CNRST/DG du 22 août 2025, il est mis fin à toutes les activités du projet Target Malaria sur toute l'étendue du territoire national.

Les enceintes contenant les moustiques génétiquement modifiés sont sous scellés depuis le 18 août 2025 et tous les échantillons seront détruits suivant un protocole indiqué. Les moustiques mâles biaisés génétiquement modifiés sans impulsion génétique lâchés dans le village de Souroukoudingan, Province du Houet, Région du Guiriko ont été soigneusement traités par les services techniques compétents.

P/ Le Ministre, et par délégation,
Le Secrétaire général

Le Secrétaire Général

Pr Samuel PARE
Chevalier de l'Ordre de l'Etalon
Chevalier de l'Ordre des Palmes académiques

Note. MESRI, 2025.

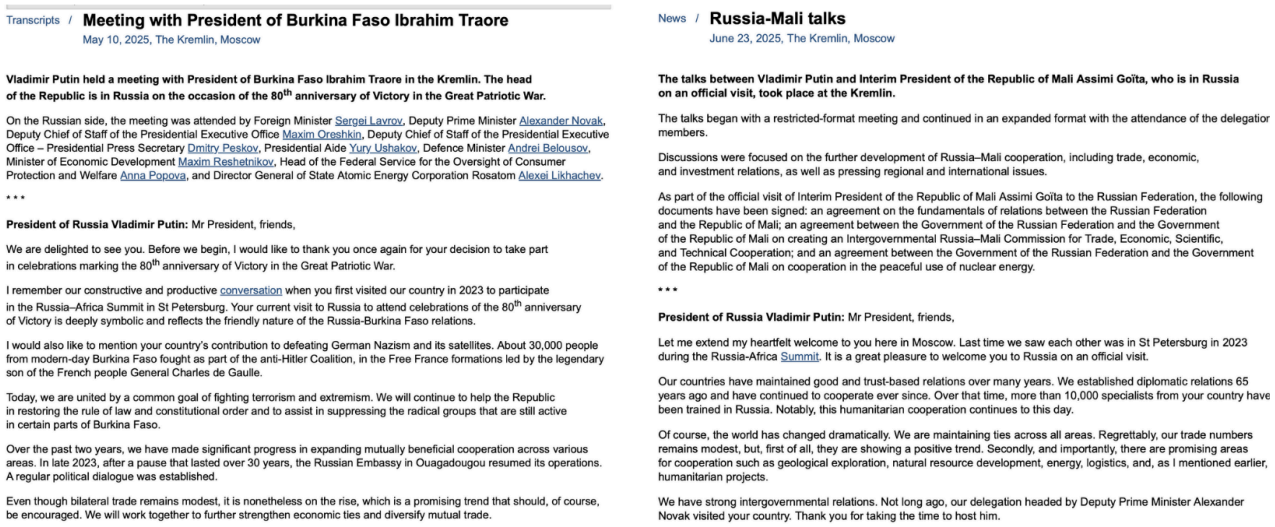
Translation:

> 'The Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MESRI) informs the Burkinabè public that, following Decision No. 2025-000011/MESRI/CAB/ANB of August 18, 2025, and Decision No. 2025-096/MESRI/SG/CNRST/DG of August 22, 2025, all activities of the Target Malaria project are terminated throughout the national territory. The enclosures containing the genetically modified mosquitoes have been sealed since August 18, 2025, and all samples will be destroyed according to a specified protocol. The genetically modified, biased male mosquitoes without genetic impulses released in the village of Souroukoudingan, Houet Province, Guiriko Region, have been carefully handled by the competent technical services'. (Translated by CASIS Vancouver).

Appendix E

Figure E1

Russian Support of Extraconstitutional Power



Transcripts / **Meeting with President of Burkina Faso Ibrahim Traore**

May 10, 2025, The Kremlin, Moscow

Vladimir Putin held a meeting with President of Burkina Faso Ibrahim Traore in the Kremlin. The head of the Republic is in Russia on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War.

On the Russian side, the meeting was attended by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Maxim Oreshkin, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office – Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, Presidential Aide Yury Ushakov, Defence Minister Andrei Belousov, Minister of Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov, Head of the Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare Anna Popova, and Director General of State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom Alexei Likhachev.

* * *

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Mr President, friends,

We are delighted to see you. Before we begin, I would like to thank you once again for your decision to take part in celebrations marking the 80th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War.

I remember our constructive and productive conversation when you first visited our country in 2023 to participate in the Russia–Africa Summit in St Petersburg. Your current visit to Russia to attend celebrations of the 80th anniversary of Victory is deeply symbolic and reflects the friendly nature of the Russia-Burkina Faso relations.

I would also like to mention your country's contribution to defeating German Nazism and its satellites. About 30,000 people from modern-day Burkina Faso fought as part of the anti-Hitler Coalition, in the Free France formations led by the legendary son of the French people General Charles de Gaulle.

Today, we are united by a common goal of fighting terrorism and extremism. We will continue to help the Republic in restoring the rule of law and constitutional order and to assist in suppressing the radical groups that are still active in certain parts of Burkina Faso.

Over the past two years, we have made significant progress in expanding mutually beneficial cooperation across various areas. In late 2023, after a pause that lasted over 30 years, the Russian Embassy in Ouagadougou resumed its operations. A regular political dialogue was established.

Even though bilateral trade remains modest, it is nonetheless on the rise, which is a promising trend that should, of course, be encouraged. We will work together to further strengthen economic ties and diversify mutual trade.

News / **Russia-Mali talks**

June 23, 2025, The Kremlin, Moscow

The talks between Vladimir Putin and Interim President of the Republic of Mali Assimi Goïta, who is in Russia on an official visit, took place at the Kremlin.

The talks began with a restricted-format meeting and continued in an expanded format with the attendance of the delegation members.

Discussions were focused on the further development of Russia–Mali cooperation, including trade, economic, and investment relations, as well as pressing regional and international issues.

As part of the official visit of Interim President of the Republic of Mali Assimi Goïta to the Russian Federation, the following documents have been signed: an agreement on the fundamentals of relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Mali; an agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Mali on creating an Intergovernmental Russia–Mali Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation; and an agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Mali on cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

* * *

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Mr President, friends,

Let me extend my heartfelt welcome to you here in Moscow. Last time we saw each other was in St Petersburg in 2023 during the Russia-Africa Summit. It is a great pleasure to welcome you to Russia on an official visit.

Our countries have maintained good and trust-based relations over many years. We established diplomatic relations 65 years ago and have continued to cooperate ever since. Over that time, more than 10,000 specialists from your country have been trained in Russia. Notably, this humanitarian cooperation continues to this day.

Of course, the world has changed dramatically. We are maintaining ties across all areas. Regrettably, our trade numbers remains modest, but, first of all, they are showing a positive trend. Secondly, and importantly, there are promising areas for cooperation such as geological exploration, natural resource development, energy, logistics, and, as I mentioned earlier, humanitarian projects.

We have strong intergovernmental relations. Not long ago, our delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak visited your country. Thank you for taking the time to host him.

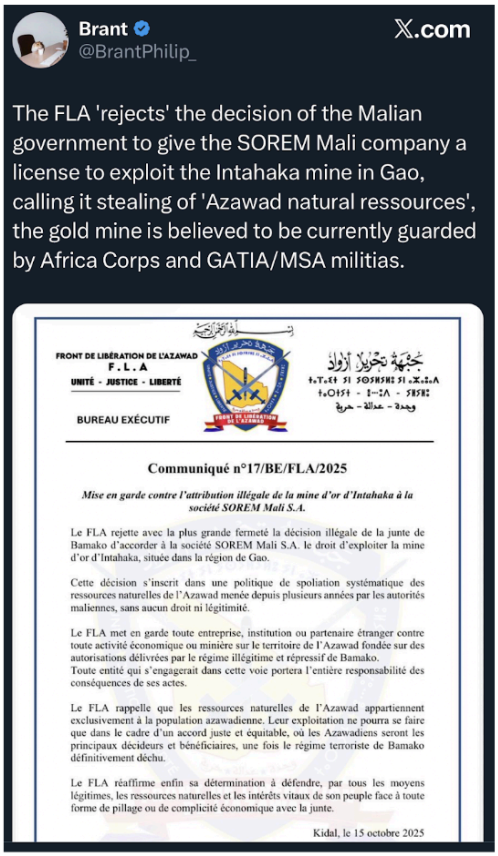
Note. President of Russia, 2025.

Appendix F

Figure F1

Africa Corps and Extractive Resource Economies





Note. @PhilipObaji, 2205; @BrantPhilip_, 2025. Collected October, 2025 by CASIS Vancouver

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