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Research article

Russian Foot on the Central African Republic's Soil: An Example of a Tactical Alliance

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Abstract

The article evaluates cooperation between the Central African Republic and the Russian Federation from the perspective of forming a tactical alliance. The article conceptualises the term tactical alliance and the aims of both partners, and analyses how these aims were fulfilled under the umbrella of the tactical alliance. The authors evaluated four dimensions of this alliance: 1) military and security cooperation, 2) weapons delivery, 3) resources exploitation and 4) international support. The article comes to the conclusion that a tactical alliance was formed by the unofficial cooperation that started between the CAR's government and private companies backed by Moscow in 2017, while later (in 2019) the cooperation was officially established between the states and their representatives with its peak in December 2020. While the alliance may be seen as rational, the authors expect that this type of opportunistic alliance might not survive after the initial reasons for its formation disappear, especially provided that the partners are asymmetrical and geographically far from each other.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, the Central African Republic, alliance, alliance building

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Introduction

It might be undeniable that the world is becoming more unstable. Fourteen years have passed since the publication predicting the growing potential for conflict and instability in 2025 and these predictions seem to be valid (NIC 2008). Thus, it might be expected that uncertainty will rise with more potential seats of conflict. Some authors (Rapley 2006; Dobos 2021) warn that uncertainty and chaos should be a part of the new status quo affecting both traditional and newly emerging players. In this context, it is important to note that while stronger and more stable states also face difficulties, the states that are identified as failed are the most vulnerable to the volatility of the world as they often lack the internal resources to individually face the challenges (Grimm, Lemay-Hebert & Navy 2014: 205). However, the failed states are also part of the global system, even though they are usually described as subordinated entities with very limited powers to decide (Grimm, Lemay-Hebert & Navy 2014). The failed states, while not being the creators of the international order, may still have diverse tools to use globally accepted frames, in which they can seek various benefits based on the actual situation and their needs. One of these tools is seeking an alliance with a stronger state that would be able to guarantee or help the state's or the regime's survival.

The main purpose of alliances is to improve the security of its members, it is especially relevant in the case of an asymmetric alliance, where the weaker state strikes up an alliance with a stronger state that is able to provide security guarantees or deter other/internal/external actors from challenging it. While it makes sense for the weaker state to look for an ally that would be a safety guarantor for itself, it is also understandable that the stronger state should also have a motivation to ally with a weaker one. Morrow (1991) suggests that nations, particularly great powers, can use alliances to further their pursuit of changes in the foreign policy status quo and that the attractiveness of an alliance, regardless of whether it is between symmetrical or asymmetrical partners, is determined by one state's capacity to compare the benefits of the ally's ability to advance its interests to the costs of advancing the ally's interests. When the former exceeds the latter for both countries, they will be compelled to develop an alliance. Altfeld (1984) suggested that there is always a rational choice behind any alliance. The rationale behind it is the calculation of the costs and benefits of a potential alliance. According to Altfeld, military alliances lead to increased security and decreased autonomy. Weaker states who desire security guarantees from a stronger ally may be willing to offer concessions, such as deployment of military bases on its territories, natural resource extraction licenses or support in

the international arena, such as voting in the UN, among others, in return for an alliance.

Alliances can advance diverse but compatible interests (Siegle 2022). External or internal motivations for forming alliances, as well as strategic, tactical, natural and historical prerequisites, can all be considered. While certain alliances can be relatively natural as a result of a common enemy, geographic proximity or the proximity of political regimes, others may catch the international community by surprise as a result of their improbability and lack of a prior history of cooperation.

Tactical alliances are usually short-term cooperation with a concrete aim often based on personal ties, thus possibly the most straightforward kind of state cooperation. When a tactical alliance is formed, its primary goal is to counter an imminent threat or enemy that has the ability to undermine a state's most critical interests. Another reason for forming a tactical alliance is to get the maximum profit from economic cooperation in a short time. Because they allow states to handle a pressing issue, tactical alliances are often opportunistic in character, instrumental in nature and personalised in the terms of guarantees. Leaders typically justify their decisions on the basis of the current situation on the ground and the imperatives of *realpolitik* (Ghez 2011). One example of a tactical alliance is the growing cooperation between seemingly incompatible parties such as Russia and the Central African Republic (CAR). These two countries not only lack previous ties but are also geographically distant from each other.

For years, Russia has engaged in a series of multifaceted outreach projects (Borshchevskaya 2019) and has created a number of footholds in Africa, including in the Sahel region. The Russian presence in Africa has grown in recent years, and since 2015 Russia has signed more than 20 military cooperation agreements with African countries (Hedenskog 2019). In addition to pursuing natural resources, Russia has placed private military contractors and consultants in various African governments, including the Central African Republic. Following permission by the United Nations Security Council in 2017 (News 24 2017), which permitted Russia to supply the CAR government with light weaponry and ammunition, Russia's expansion into the war-torn and deeply impoverished Central African Republic (CAR) has become the subject of great media interest. The Russian supply of AK47s, sniper rifles and grenade launchers was delivered in the company of hundreds of 'civilian experts' from the country's defence ministry. These 'experts', according to several open-source investigations, including one conducted by the Russian opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, were actually mercenaries linked to the private military company Wagner, which is in turn linked to a Russian businessman with close ties to President Vladimir Putin (Severin 2019: 72).

Despite the fact that it has no prior colonial experience in Africa, Russia also challenges France's traditional presence in the region, with the goal of forming tactical alliances with regimes to whom it can provide some benefits, such as military assistance, in exchange for collaboration. Africa, thus, is a 'theatre' for Russia's geostrategic interests rather than a destination itself – a perspective reflected in the means that Russia employs (Siegle 2022).

The Central African Republic, on the other hand, which had been through a civil war with devastating consequences, was the one that approached Russia for assistance in its fight against insurgents. Russia has swiftly grown its influence in the Central African Republic (CAR) in recent years, leveraging military assistance to position itself as President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's closest supporter.

Prone to coups, rebellions and communal strife, the CAR has been engulfed in conflict for over twenty years (Bax 2021). In this context, the states allied on the basis of satisfying their immediate or short-term needs, and while Russia sought to expand its military and economic influence in Africa (WPR 2018), Touadéra's regime was in need of military security to get hold of the capital city Bangui. In return, Touadéra was able to provide access to mineral resources of the CAR for Russian business interests (Bax 2021). For the time being, it is unclear how long this cooperation will survive; however, it is clear that it is a tactical alliance between a failed state in need of security assurances and a stronger state willing to provide military assistance in exchange for economic, political and military concessions. The purpose of this article is to attempt to evaluate and provide answers to the question: what are the short-term benefits of collaboration between Russia and the Central African Republic for both countries? The alliance seeking theory was utilised by the authors in order to understand the nature of this cooperative effort. In order to clearly identify the benefits and provide a solution to the research question, the authors conducted an extensive investigation of available reports and studies to identify the essential components of cooperation and to answer the research question. Also, it should be highlighted that when the authors mention one of the countries, they refer to the regimes of the state, not the entire nation, because this cooperation is tactical and takes place between the regimes of Vladimir Putin and Faustin-Archange Touadéra.

The article begins with a conceptualisation section pertaining to the tactical alliance and then moves on to discuss the strategical objectives of both countries. The last chapter examines whether the long-term strategical objectives of the discussed tactical partners may overlap in order to lay the groundwork for a long-term alliance to be established.

What is an alliance – theory and conceptualisation

Alliance seeking is the concept used in international relations to explain cooperation with long terms aims. For the purposes of this study, we use the term alliance in its broadest sense to refer to a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more states, involving mutual expectations of policy coordination on security issues under certain conditions and to some extent (Barnet & Levy 1991: 371). Despite the fact that the tactical alliance is sometimes dismissed by alliance seeking theories, it appears to be one of the most frequently used forms of cooperation. In order to respond to the main research question, the authors decided to use the concept of a tactical alliance, which they believe is the most appropriate for explaining the grounds for cooperation amongst our chosen states. Furthermore, the development of this notion will enable us to see not just the final result of the cooperation, i.e. the short-term benefits, but also the process that the states go through in order to obtain those results. The empirical study, conducted by the authors, demonstrated how and why the alliance was formed, as well as the significant steps that were taken that resulted in benefits for both states as a result of the alliance.

Such cooperation is focused either on external threats (other states, non-state groups with outside origin or borders protection) or internal factors (threat of state failure, non-state groups with internal origin). Typically coalitions are formed either in the form of *bandwagoning* or *balancing*, and they can be either offensive, defensive or a combination of the two tactics. *Bandwagoning* is described as choosing the stronger partner to ally with while *balancing* usually means allying against the stronger ones (Piccoli 1999). Theories of balancing explain the conditions that motivate a state to balance against another state or a coalition of states (Levy 2004). However, Schweller (1994) highlighted that these two concepts do not oppose each other in terms of ensuring the highest security, but, instead, they are more complementary, and while *bandwagoning* is focused on maximising gains and obtaining values coveted, *balancing* is focused on minimising losses and protecting the values already possessed. These losses and gains are more visible with Czechowska's (2013) division of external alliance based on two principles – *stricto* (as an obligation) and *largo* (to achieve a goal). While successful balancing must be in the form of an obligation, successful bandwagoning can be used to achieve a goal.

On the other hand tactical alliances, as the definition suggests, are created to tackle the short-term tactical goal, an imminent threat or to gain immediate benefits in line with the state's vital interests (Ghez 2011: 6). The tactical alliances are pragmatic and negotiated to achieve concrete objectives even if the states share no previous history of cooperation or alliance (Abdel Aziz 2019). A tactical alliance is created based on shared interests and/or shared enemies. This means

that whenever the threat to one of the members disappears, changes or is redefined, the alliance in its primary way has no reason to be viable. This also means that a tactical alliance does not preclude conflict between the members either in the future or during the existence of the alliance. A good example of it was the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between the USSR and the Nazi regime. On the other hand, a tactical alliance can be part of a wider and broader strategy, especially when one member of the coalition is incomparably stronger (Ghez 2011: 6).

To summarise, a tactical alliance is a coalition formed in order to counter a specific threat for both (if it is a coalition of two) parties. It is practical, usually short-term, and has clearly defined objectives. After achieving the goals which the alliance was formed for, there is a low likelihood that the alliance will survive, and in the worst-case scenario, the former allies may become antagonistic to one another. On the other hand, when the threat persists, the possibility of creating a long term strategic alliance is raised. In our case, both states have different but complementary goals to form an alliance. Russia's aim is to ensure success in three domains 1) resource exploitation, 2) military cooperation and arms export and 3) the CAR's backup or abstention in voting against Russia in the international arena. In return, Russia ensures the fragile statehood of the Central African Republic headed by F. Touadéra, while offering independence to France and the possibility of delivering resources to the global market. The statehood of the CAR is endangered by non-state groups, who are controlling the majority of the CAR's territory. As the following paragraphs show, the alliance is beneficial for both actors and it has the potential to become a strategic alliance with a very low possibility of conflict between two involved parties. This may happen only under the circumstances that the essential conditions endangering both parties interest persist. Otherwise, the alliance has a very low possibility of surviving.

The history of bilateral relationships

The USSR established relations with the Central African Republic in the 1960s after the country obtained independence from France. Relationships between the two countries were particularly favourable under the reign of the self-proclaimed emperor Bokassa, who was collaborating with the governments of the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the abolition of the bipolar order resulted in a stalemate in ties.

The first indication of incumbent President Touadéra's willingness to work with the Russian Federation as a partner can be traced back to 2017 when Russia played a prominent role in the UN Security Council's discussion and relaxation of the arms embargo (France 24 2020) on the CAR. Since 2017, many sources (Fasanoti 2022; Fabricius 2022; Parens 2022; Ramani 2021) have indicated that a private military corporation (the Wagner group) had been conducting oper-

ations in the country. The summit in Sochi, Russia, in October 2019, with 43 leaders from African countries and Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, marked a watershed moment in the development of relations between Russia and the Central African Republic. The president of the Central African Republic, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, was in attendance to represent his country. The existence of strong ties was demonstrated during the uprising in the Central African Republic prior to the presidential elections in December 2020, when the administration directly requested assistance from Russia and Rwanda (Roland 2020; BBC 2020a, 2021). Moreover, in order to foster better relations, the Central African Republic revoked its recognition of Kosovo in 2019 (Travers 2019; Sputnik 2019) and abstained from voting during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, according to a press release (Cascais 2022).

The CAR perspective

The Central African Republic is one of the world's poorest countries and a prime example of a failed state. Its level of stability is declining since it is located in an unstable region and is controlled by a dozen fighting military-political forces. One of the key prerequisites for failure in the Central African Republic is the recent civil war. Despite gaining independence from France during Africa's Year in 1960, the CAR failed to establish a centralised administration capable of exercising power over the entire state's territory. In 2021 it was reported that the central government controls approximately one-third of the country's territory, with the remainder controlled by various rebel factions (BBC 2021). Furthermore, the country has been in a state of perpetual, low-intensity conflict since 2012. More than 600,000 refugees are estimated to have fled the country to neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and the DRC, representing more than 10% of the population (Vergnes 2020). However, these figures cannot be validated due to a lack of official statistics and the central government's inability to supply such data. Since 2014, the UN operation MINUSCA has been one of the largest UN missions, employing around 12,000 people (UN Peacekeeping 2020). Seleka (and former Seleka groups), Anti-Balaka, MLCJ, MPC and 3R are among the most well-known rebel factions that are or have participated in the destabilisation of the Central African state (IPIS 2018). However, the infra-fractional condition is likewise unstable, and certain coalitions are transient (IPIS 2018).

Regarding the concept of relative peace highlighted by President Touadéra in a few interviews and speeches, the CAR President ensures that peace and stability are at the heart of the Central African Republic's national interests, as seen by his UN speeches between 2017 and 2019 (Touadéra 2017, 2019). The President expressly requested assistance from the world community in training his security forces in order to restore stability to the country and reclaim control of

the entire area under the supervision of international forces (Touadéra 2017), similar phrases about his will to protect his citizens by all means he repeated in France's 24 interview in 2021 (France 24 2021).

Given that a sovereign state's capital is the cornerstone of its existence, its importance is so high that the struggle for it brings together a diverse range of opposition parties against the government. The same may be said for the revolutions that have occurred in the run-up to the presidential elections at the end of 2020 (The African Report 2021). Initially, the regime accused the previous president, Bozizé, of eroding national unity and plotting to destabilise the country with the help of France (Roger & Dougueli 2021). These feelings are based on previous French actions. The region remains strategically important for France, but with Russia's expanding presence, France's influence is being challenged. Having great clout over its former colony, France was able to organise a coup d'état in 1979, when the conditions for possible cooperation between Khadhafi's Libya and self-proclaimed emperor Bokassa arose. Furthermore, France has intervened in the country numerous times, the most recent being in 2012 (Sundberg 2019). In this context, it is necessary to mention that, unlike France, Russia is not perceived as a potential disrupting force but as a party interested in mutually beneficial cooperation, such as security insurance in return for economic benefit.

Another challenge to the state is posed by several organisations that dominate different regions of the country. Each of these groups seeks to build its own, independent from the central government administrative unit. The Republic of Logone, which declared unilateral secession in 2015, is the most notorious. Despite this, Louisa Lombard suggested that the region's secession was merely a ruse to garner international attention and discussions ahead of the presidential elections later that year (Aljazeera 2015). According to this viewpoint, the existence of groups is not restricted, and territorial ownership is dynamic. Such a problem, however, is viewed as a danger to national unity and territorial integrity. Furthermore, during his UN speech, Touadéra cited the arms embargo and a lack of well-equipped security forces as the key obstacles to protecting his own territory (Touadéra 2019).

When the CAR's administration sought Russian assistance during the turbulence preceding the presidential elections in December 2020, the world media was taken aback. While the western media speculated about why the CAR's president asked for Russian assistance, President Touadéra mentioned in one of his interviews that his country had enormous needs both in terms of security and equipment as well as when it came to the training of police officers, gendarmes and forest rangers (Olivier 2021a). He also mentioned that the CAR asked for assistance from all countries of goodwill and also from the EU but it was Russia who responded. In the same interview, the president emphasised that his

country needed peace more than anything else and the agreements with Russia were a means to ensure it and not allow the country to plunge into civil war once again. Thus, in just the three years since the signing of a military cooperation agreement between these two countries in March 2018 (Hedenskog 2018), Russia has become one of the major pillars of the Central African Republic's security, while simultaneously benefiting from resource extraction from the country. It is unclear if Russia chose to benefit from this relationship just for economic reasons or to gain political leverage; yet, its very existence challenges France's dominance in the minds and hearts of Africans (Meagher 2015).

Despite Russia's growing military and economic presence in the region, President Touadéra frequently portrays Russia as the 'helping hand' that ensures the state's security by sending weaponry, training soldiers and calming volatile regions with its own military detachment. In such an environment, Russia was positioned by the ruling elites as the external stability guarantee with the international community's approval.

The Russian perspective

The continent of Africa plays an interesting role in Russian foreign policy despite its geographical distance from Moscow. Russian diplomats were able to establish diplomatic ties with both South Africa and Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century (Besenyo 2019), avoiding the Scramble for Africa and competing with the British Empire in the strategically important Suez Canal region (Besenyo 2019). The Soviet Union focused its diplomatic efforts on Egypt, Northern Africa and Lusophone countries. Because Africa is not seen to be a critical direction of Russian foreign policy, the Russian foreign policy toward the continent will be characterised by a sinusoid of interest and withdrawal.

The Russian economy, on the other hand, is heavily reliant on the costs of natural resources and their price on the global market. Being one of the world's biggest exporters of natural resources, Russia's foreign policy considers Africa to be a zone where collaboration with African states may be mutually beneficial in the long run, given the Western world's reliance on natural resources in general. Russia is concerned that African countries may cut the cost of natural resources, which would result in economic troubles for the country. The reason why Russia is attempting to gain control over those resources while simultaneously providing mutually beneficial cooperation to the leaders of African states becomes more understandable when viewed from this perspective. Possible cooperation will gain Russia the ability to exert influence over the countries that have natural resources while maintaining control over the number of resources produced and their price on the market, allowing Russia to benefit both politically and economically (Fitumi & Abramova 2010).

Following its withdrawal from Africa in the 1990s, Russia was able to reclaim its former position in the continent at the start of the new millennium. The period where Russia was referred to by the African press as 'a country that turned back to the continent' (Besenyo 2019: 134) was followed by the period when embassies and consulates started to reopen between 2001 and 2005. However, even after returning to the continent, the Central African Republic did not rank well among the countries that comprised Russia's newly constituted African policy vector. According to the overviews strategic paper (Fitumi & Abramova 2010), the cooperation between Russia and the Central African Republic was not even addressed – strategic countries were mostly petrol producing countries from North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Algeria), Guinea Gulf (Angola, Nigeria) and countries with previous strong political ties such as Guinea (Conakry). In this case, the cooperation and even alliance between Russia and the CAR have emerged as a completely new phenomenon.

After the relaxation of the arms embargo on the CAR, the UN Security Council approved a Russian training mission (Lister, Shukla & Ward 2019), though it did not specify nor approve the deployment of PMCs (Private Military contractors). In early 2018, Russia delivered not only weapons, but also, as they were called, 'instructors' to train local cadres to use weapons that Russia supplied to the CAR. The deliveries were carried out within the framework of the decision of the UN Security Council Resolution N 2339 (2017) on the CAR. As of August 2018, Russian specialists had trained six hundred military personnel of the Central African Armed Forces and the Presidential Guard. In March 2018, the Russian Embassy in the Central African Republic reported on the graduation ceremony of 200 Central African military personnel who had completed a two-month military training course under the guidance of Russian instructors in the Berengo camp, the former residence of Emperor Bokassa, Lobaye Prefecture (Zajcev, Maslov & Timofeeva 2018). Allegedly, Russia also trained CAR troops in Sudanese camps (Borshchevskaya 2020). According to an investigation by the French news magazine *L'Obs* (Bouessel & Sari 2018), the trainers in the CAR are employed by the Sewa Security Service, which is, in turn, the daughter company of a St. Petersburg firm (created in November 2017) called Lobaye Invest (the region just outside the CAR capital).

The CAR became a precedent to demonstrate how relatively easy and cheap Russia exercised its global power status in a remote country. Mercenaries from the Wagner group, who are called instructors by Russia, were deployed in the country along with Russian security advisers who were installed as the president's top security advisers (Olivier 2021b) with direct payment through official contracts for resources exploitation (Bax 2021; Ramani 2021). The ongoing consideration of the Russian official military base in the country (Daily Sabah 2020)

may be a sign that the Russian presence in the country is not just a military experiment but rather Russia found in the CAR a new window of opportunity within the globally accepted narrative of the pioneering fronts and the new scramble for Africa and decided to compete with France (Bach 2013). The FOI report mentions that since 2015 Russia's main interest in renewing its engagement in Africa has involved arms exports, imports of natural resources and the projection of power (Hedensskog 2018).

The global perception of Russia as a competing force to France in the Central African Republic is not limited to the military and security sector. For instance, reports highlight that Russia has strong interests in resource exploitation including tropical woods, gold, uranium and diamonds. In July 2018, the Africa Intelligence paper reported that Russia received the rights to develop the Ndassima (Matthis 2021) goldfield, one of the largest goldfields in the country, in exchange for ensuring security in the surrounding area. According to an African news service (Marten 2019a), in June 2018 Lobaye Invest received a three-year gold prospecting license and in July an additional one-year gold and diamond prospecting license by the CAR Ministry of Mines. The rumours about Russian involvement intensified after the first Summit Russia-Africa in November 2019 held in Sochi. The story behind it was framed as dominant Russia and submissive African states. What may be significant is that such framing serves the national interest of Russia, which is to be globally perceived as a power competing with another superpower (France) in its sphere of influence (Marten 2019b).

Discussion: what are the mutual benefits?

The following paragraphs evaluate the cooperation from the perspective of the tactical alliance, how it was formed and what benefits it brings to both parties. As we have seen from the cases, two states have enough prerequisites to form a tactical alliance that would be beneficial for both of them. As the authors mentioned, a tactical alliance is a coalition formed in order to achieve a specific security aim or to counter a specific threat for both parties. It is practical, usually short-term and has clearly defined objectives. The aim of this part is to define and evaluate the objectives of the cooperation and threats for both parties. We evaluate what the benefits are for the protagonists involved and what obstacles they are facing. The authors decided to divide those benefits into the following categories: 1) protection of the regime against imminent threats, 2) arms and weapon delivery and military training, 3) natural resources exploitation and 4) cooperation in the international arena. Each of these categories is later divided into the time period based on crucial events: 1) Agreements negotiated in Khartoum, 2) Summit in Sochi, 3) the turmoil before presidential elections.

Between 2015 and 2017 Russia signed over 20 military cooperation agreements with African states, the Central African Republic being among them. Moreover, in 2016 Valery Zakharov became the national security adviser for President Touadéra (Hedenskog 2018). Russian support largely assists President Touadéra's administration in asserting and maintaining domestic control. It enables it to continue outsourcing its security apparatus while also protecting him from another coup. Locally dubbed 'Russian instructors', Wagner men fought against rebels in Bambari, a town in which they had been documented training CAR troops in anti-rebel tactics (El-Badawy et al. 2022). In 2019, Moscow brokered a peace agreement between the government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and armed rebel groups (Stronski 2019). According to M. Olivier from The African Report, this happened in Khartoum and the issue was to broker a deal, otherwise, they are asked to fight with rebels. Such a deal could be created based on a shared division of resource exploitation, in short – the government, the rebels and the Wagner group would each gain access to some part of the resources. The Khartoum Agreement was thus signed on 5 February 2019 (Olivier 2021c). Another important changing point for the CAR and Russian relationship came in December 2020, when rebels formed an anti-government coalition and the former president F. Bozize was accused of supporting them. As a reaction to this, incumbent President Touadéra's government asked for help directly from Russia and Rwanda, who had the biggest deployment in the MINUSCA mission. The Russian security presence in the country ensured its critical role in the talks and allowed it to take over the mantle of security provider from France (Plichta 2019). Many other Francophone countries in the region implied that this Russian strategy had been successful as can be seen also in the recent (2021-2022) example of Mali (Thomson 2021). On the other hand, Russia's limited experience in the Central African Republic and the present narrative depicting it as France's rival, yet without a colonial legacy, is giving Russia a scope for manoeuvre. From this perspective, Russia has the potential to be perceived as a tactical partner not only in the Central African Republic but also in other countries in the region and to try to restore the influence and the reputation that the Soviet Union once had in Africa. Another advantage for President Touadéra is that it raises concerns among the other Western backers, which gives the CAR space for leverage. The CAR's more established partners have responded to Russia's interest by expanding their own support for the country. In an effort to counter Russian influence, they have increased the amount of development assistance offered to Bangui. Thus, this limited Russian military involvement gives President Touadéra the ability to have immediate, even if the short-term, benefit of retaining his power. Additionally, it drew the interest of the world towards its country and allowed Touadéra to manoeuvre.

When it comes to military aid and weapons delivery, the implications for both states are clear. For Russia, the delivery of small arms under a bilateral defense accord with official status to train the army is a small price to pay to gain mining rights in Africa amid President Vladimir Putin's push to revive Soviet-era influence on the continent (The Moscow Times 2021), whereas for the CAR's government it is an additional aid to combat those who are against it, in times when there is a UN resolution sanctioning the sale of weapons to the CAR for other international arms producers. Between 2014-19, the African continent – excluding Egypt – accounted for 16% of Russia's major arms exports, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (BBC 2020b). It is thought that more than 1,000 Wagner troops have been deployed to the Central African Republic (CAR). Moscow also dispatched military equipment, including rifles, rocket launchers and heavily armoured vehicles, to the capital Bangui in 2018 (El-Badawy et al. 2022). The notorious Wagner group has been accused of severe human rights violations (Reuters 2021) in the CAR, yet as long as the so-called military advisers provide support for the incumbent president, train the president's military servicemen and repress its rivals, the violations go without repercussions. Since December 2020, the Central African government has been relying more on official interstate cooperation and trying to hide the involvement of Private Military Contractors. The use of non-state actors to solve certain tasks during armed conflicts is a common practice, and Russia can hardly be called a pioneer in this area. However, unlike typical mercenaries, who are often seen as hired guns, PMCs operate as a more risk-averse option for ensuring the security of territory and protecting lucrative commercial relationships and contracts.

The arrival of the Wagner group which is registered in the CAR under the name of the company Sewa Securities, overlapped with the Russian Lobaye Invest company being awarded diamond and gold mining licenses. The company has an affiliation with the Kremlin-linked oligarch Evgeny Prigozhin, who is reportedly funding the Wagner group. Apparently, Russia's alliance with the CAR has an opportunistic character. Russia's economy lacks some resources which are abundantly found in the African states, including the CAR. An opponent of the current government says (Olivier 2019) that more than 100 permits in the gold and diamond sectors were granted to the Russians without consultation with the National Assembly. However, in one of his interviews for France 24 in 2021 President Touadéra mentioned that the resource mining sector was free for everyone to enter (France 24 2021). Resource extraction in return for limited military aid, which is, as Paul Stronski (BBC 2020), a senior fellow at the US-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, mentioned, self-financing through the work by guarding key resources, is the basis of the alliance not just between Russia and the CAR but it also appears to be

working tactics in Russian foreign policy regarding other African states. By holding mining licenses for natural resources, Russia not only has the ability to use those resources for its own purposes, but it also gets some leverage to control the prices of those resources on the global market (Fitumi & Abramova 2010). This mutually beneficial approach, when Russia is helping with the president's status quo protection while having control over mining fields and mining concessions was confirmed at the Summit in Sochi at the end of 2019. Given Europe's reliance on natural resources, this strategy, though not directly harmful, has the potential to undermine price stability. An increase in its influence in the Sahel region allows Russia to exert greater control over human migration routes. During periods of antagonism between Russia and Europe, this might also be utilised as possible leverage to generate humanitarian and/or political crises in Europe.

And last but not least, establishing short-term alliances with African countries, such as the Central African Republic in this case, allows the Kremlin to strengthen its position on the international stage. The African continent contains 55 countries, which create more than one-fourth of the UN members. Even though they do not compose a homogenous bloc, Russian involvement in certain of them might be an important part of their liberating and anti-post-colonial narratives. Despite other mentioned forms of cooperation, the case of the Central African Republic is the latest one and was directly connected with the exchange of the ambassador. According to M. Olivier, this change happened at the beginning of 2019, with the appointment of Vladimir Titorenko, who is able to keep a good relationship with individual representatives of the government (Olivier 2021b). This change of orientation in the Central African Republic's external policy towards Russia was recently demonstrated during the UN vote in the wake of the Ukraine invasion in March 2022. Many African countries, including the Central African Republic (CAR), refrained from voting against Russia, inadvertently supporting the Russian position and demonstrating how African preferences have shifted (Adeoye 2022). In the case of the Central African Republic, it might be directly observed also in their withdrawal of the recognition of Kosovo without any justification for derecognition (Travers 2019; Sputnik 2019).

Conclusion

To sum up, the CAR-Russian Federation relationship could be described as a tactical asymmetrical alliance that gained importance in a short period of time. Starting as a personal alliance between the president and representatives from the PMC in 2017, it has since evolved into a tactical collaboration between the two countries in a few key areas.

The authors of this article attempted to identify the major steps associated with the formation of a tactical alliance using the example of the Russia-Central African Republic collaboration. As a consequence of their investigation, the authors came to the conclusion that the identification of crucial reasons for collaboration would be the first step in bringing the states (even those with a short history of cooperation) closer. It is necessary to build informal cooperation with non-state entities, such as enterprises, as a next step before moving further. The third step is the formation of formal interstate relations, which is mostly accomplished through the participation of specific individuals. And the final step, when the core problem has been resolved, is either the breakup of the tactical alliance or the advancement of cooperation to a higher (strategic) level, which would eventually result in it becoming more institutionalised and less personal.

While dealing with rebels who endangered the Central African Republic's sovereignty was critical for the Central African Republic's regime, it was critical for Russia to swap limited military aid for resource mining concessions. With the passage of time, Russian-born military professionals and security consultants began to be appointed to key strategic posts inside the president's inner circle. The most well-known of them is Valery Zakharov. In 2018, the mining concessions were handed to the Lobaye group as the major protagonist with the goal of maintaining security.

Official Russian representatives' engagement started in early 2019, according to secondary sources, with the appointment of the new ambassador Titorenko. As a result, Touadéra participated actively in the Sochi Summit at the end of 2019. On the other hand, when the Central African Republic waived its recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, this international collaboration was exploited for Russian profit.

In the following years, the goal of transforming the relationship between two governments to an internationally accepted level became clear. The probable apex of those measures may be traced back to December 2020, when Touadéra's administration openly requested Russian assistance in the face of a rebel coalition attacking Bangui, the country's capital.

In this case, we can conclude that relations developed on the premise that Russia, seeking opportunities to expand its influence in Africa and obtain concessions in the exploitation of natural resources, took advantage of the proposal of the Central African Republic's president F. Touadéra, who was looking for a tactical ally to outsource its security concerns while maintaining his presidency. This sort of tactical alliance, on the other hand, incorporates elements of both bandwagoning and balancing techniques.

President Touadéra benefits from bandwagoning tactics to maximise the benefits for himself, while also balancing the French influence with the Russian

presence. With increased presence, the relationship evolved into an interstate asymmetrical alliance that supports mutually beneficial collaboration on both sides rather than immediately facing a direct threat.

The cooperation between Russia and the Central African Republic, in our opinion, is tactical and has limited potential to grow into a strategic alliance. Because the Central African Republic will always prioritise state survival and Russia will always prioritise potential dangers in its immediate neighbourhood, a stable partnership is difficult to materialise.



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