

Why Does Russia Want to Sell Arms to the Central African Republic?

By [Andrew Korybko](#)

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Russia's "military diplomacy" in the war-torn Central African Republic is designed to stabilize part of Africa's "Failed State Belt" and set the stage for Moscow to eventually move its peacemaking efforts to the continent's next cauldron of chaos in the neighboring Congo, all with the intent of reasserting its historic Great Power role in Africa and providing more strategic value to its relationship with China.

Russian Arms In Central Africa

Some unexpected news surfaced earlier this week when it was [revealed](#) that Russia requested 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 military by the beginning of next week. Even more [surprisingly](#), the Western members of the UNSC reacted positively to this idea, though they asked that the measure be temporarily put on hold until they receive more details about how Russia plans to prevent these arms from inadvertently falling into the hands of the country's rebel groups. They already seem satisfied to find out that Russia plans to store them in new containers under tight security, but they'd like to know the serial numbers for each unit so that they can be traced in the event that they end up in the wrong hands.



EU military training mission in Central African Republic

"Military Diplomacy"

Technical specifics about this news aside, many people are scratching their heads and wondering why Russia's involving itself in one of the world's most impoverished and conflict-wreaked countries, especially since the Central African Republic has been in a state of civil war since late 2012 that has since come to carry civilizational-religious overtones in degenerating into senseless Christian-Muslim killings. As with all of Russia's arms sales abroad, this one is also part of its "[military diplomacy](#)" to promote regional stability, which in this particular context means to support government forces in defending themselves and their citizens against rebels and death squads. The idea is that the enhancement of the government's military capabilities could then allow it to secure the population centers from rebels, destroy terrorists and death squads, and finally return to the [prior peace agreement](#), which could then ultimately see the incorporation of a power-sharing component with the minority eastern-based Muslim rebels that possibly leads to a lasting "federal" ([internally partitioned](#)) "solution" to the country's long-running crisis.

Should Russia's Central African foray into "military diplomacy" be a success, then it might be able to emulate this model in the neighboring Congo, which has [predictably](#) been beset by [Hybrid War](#) ever since President Kabila delayed what would have been his country's first-ever democratic transfer of power in late-2016. The spiraling situation in one of Africa's largest and most strategically positioned states holds the dire risk of turning into another all-out civil war along the lines of the 1990s conflict that was tellingly referred to as "Africa's World War" and eventually contributed to the deaths of an estimated 5 million people. It might be too late to avert a disastrous repeat of this scenario even in part, but Russia could be calculating that its Central African experience in "military diplomacy" might be of assistance in this regard if it can use its expected gains in Bangui to eventually reach a similar arms deal with Kinshasa that could give the edge to government forces and prevent the country's collapse.

"Balancing" With China

All of this is ambitiously visionary and could serve to signify Russia's return to the African continent from which it largely withdrew after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but the obvious question of intent and expected tangible dividends comes to mind. Russia, as with all Great Powers, isn't just doing all of this out of the "kindness of its leadership's heart", but in order to procure physical benefits such as profitable extraction contracts in these two mineral-rich countries, with both impoverished societies sitting on a wealth of resources such as the Central African Republic's diamond and uranium reserves and the Congo's copper and cobalt ones. That's not the only reason why Russia is doing this, however, since there's a more pressing one to explain Moscow's willingness to engage in African adventures, and that's to provide strategic value to China in an effort to equalize the [two states' partnership](#) with one another.

Russia, like all of Beijing's partners, has a lingering fear – whether legitimate or not – that it could become politically subservient to the People's Republic in the future because the sheer scale and magnitude of China's economic power is multiple levels higher than Moscow's own. As such, Russia feels compelled to pioneer creative solutions to prove its worth to China and retain equilibrium in this Great Power relationship, which explains its [diplomatic balancing act in Asia](#), [fast-moving rapprochement with Pakistan](#), and exercise of "military diplomacy" in Africa. This latter element is especially important because China needs African stability in order to ensure the success of its Silk Road vision in solidifying the [Multipolar World Order](#), yet the continent has become a [battleground](#) in the [New Cold War](#) and frighteningly runs the future risk of one day sucking Beijing into an Afghan-like quagmire as a result.

Spreading The Syrian Model

It's at this point where Russia's "military diplomacy" in Africa takes on its true value. Moscow gained tremendous military and diplomatic experience from Syria in learning how to leverage these two factors to streamline a ["political solution"](#) to what was previously thought to be one of the world's most intractable conflicts. Now that some mild success has been made on this front, Russia has turned its attention to [Afghanistan](#) and [Libya](#) in preparation for possibly getting diplomatically involved in [Yemen](#) sometime further down the line as well. All four of these conflicts were caused by the US, so it can be said that Russia is using Syria as its springboard for "cleaning up" the mess that its American rival made elsewhere in Afro-Eurasia. Up until now, however, it hadn't signaled any interest in

sub-Saharan conflicts, but that's evidently changing due to its newfound interest in Sudan, the Central African Republic, and maybe even eventually the Congo, all per the aforementioned strategic imperative vis-à-vis China.

Russia's African Return



Most readers probably missed the recent news, but Russia is seriously deliberating Sudan's offer to provide it with a [naval base](#) on the country's Red Sea coast, which could allow Moscow to maintain a strategic presence at the [northern mainland-maritime interface](#) of one of China's African Silk Roads, the [Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road](#). This still doesn't explain the value that Russia believes that it could provide to China via its prospective "military diplomacy" in the Central African Republic, as this landlocked state doesn't sit astride the previously mentioned route, but it could have, though, and that's the point. In the [introductory chapters](#) of the author's book-length analytical series on African geopolitics, it was mentioned that one of China's greatest goals is to link Africa's most populous state of Nigeria with its second-largest one of Ethiopia via an overland route, which could in the future be fulfilled via the Sahelian-Saharan Silk Road but at one time could have more profitably gone through resource-rich South Sudan and the Central African Republic instead as opposed to the barren desert.

The "Failed State Belt"

The US' [psy-op campaign](#) of "[Kony 2012](#)" in the early months of the same year was nothing more than a cover for deploying its special forces into the tri-border region between those two states and the Congo in order to foment instability for preemptively disrupting China's plans. By the end of the year, the Seleka rebels from the eastern Muslim-majority part of the mostly Christian Central African Republic were in open revolt against the authorities and thus began their march on the western capital of Bangui, which had not too long beforehand signed [somehigh-level deals with China](#). They succeeded in capturing the capital and overthrowing the government in early 2013, which was the first step in forming the "Failed State Belt" that the author described in his earlier mentioned book-length series. Soon thereafter, [South Sudan](#) erupted in civil war at the end of 2013, and the second component of the said "belt" was in play.



While it can't be known for certain, the case can be made for arguing that the US' regional Kony 2012 special operations forces was just a front for sparking these two conflicts in order to sabotage any of China's future Ethiopia-Nigeria Silk Road plans for transiting through these countries.

In all actuality, it would have been naïve if China ever seriously thought that it could incorporate the Central African Republic and South Sudan into its connectivity vision without having their inherently unstable situation exploited by the US for Hybrid War ends, but then again, Beijing does believe that its Silk Road strategy represents a new model of International Relations capable of overcoming the burdens of the past. It would therefore be a strong sign of Russia's strategic value to China as an equal partner if Moscow could contribute to the restoration of stability in one of the "Failed State Belt" countries and help revive Beijing's Silk Road dreams there.

The Russian-Chinese Tag Team

Furthermore, China might even consider dispatching peacekeepers to the Central African Republic if the military can restore order throughout most of the country and calm the situation down, just like the People's Republic already has done in neighboring South Sudan, with both operations directed out of Beijing's first-ever overseas base in nearby Djibouti. This isn't a groundless forecast either, since the French were forced to [unceremoniously withdraw](#) their peacekeeping forces in utter disgrace after a string of [child](#) and even [animal](#) sex scandals discredited their presence there (though they did retain a few hundred regular troops). China, however, doesn't want to send its soldiers into a hot warzone, no matter how badly it would still like to [acquire some active combat experience](#) (which is one of the reasons why it's the [largest contributor](#) of UN peacekeeping forces out of the five Security Council members), so it would be reluctant to undertake this mission with full gusto unless the situation stabilizes, ergo the purpose of Russia's "military diplomacy" in this context.

Should this turn out to be the case, then it would signify the development of a new conflict resolution model for Africa, whereby Russia's "military diplomacy" helps stabilize the situation in war-torn states, and then China follows through by deploying peacekeepers to maintain the progress that Moscow's munitions helped government forces attain. The next logical step would be for these two multipolar Great Powers to actively involve themselves in UN-backed peace talks and political negotiations, as they would each have a tangible stake in these countries' success by that point because of their arms relationship and peacekeeper deployment respectively, both of which could eventually yield economic "rewards" for them with time if they can pull off a peacemaking victory. Even though the "Failed State Belt" of the Central African Republic and South Sudan might seem relatively insignificant of a "prize" for Russia and China to focus on, the fact remains that the continuing unrest in these two countries complicates the ongoing Congo Crisis and could lead to the creation of a [transnational terrorist nest](#) if left unaddressed.

That, though, is exactly what the US planned in advance when it deployed its special forces to these three countries in 2012 in order to "find Kony", anticipating that the civil wars in the Central African Republic and South Sudan that its troops would later help set off could forever subvert China's Silk Road plans and eventually cause pandemonium in the Congo. The author's June 2016 analysis for The Duran titled "[China vs. The US: The Struggle For Central Africa And The Congo](#)" explains the reasoning for this more in depth, but the simplified motivation is that the US also wants to cut off China's cobalt connection in the country's southeastern mineral-rich region of Katanga, which could conceivably relive its immediate post-colonial history in once again aspiring for independence as a potential outcome of this century's Congo Crisis (the third since 1960). China doesn't want a hostile

pro-Western government to come to power there that might nationalize its mining assets and/or re-appropriate them into Western hands, since Beijing is counting on its cobalt reserves there to fuel its emergence as a global superpower in the electric vehicle industry.

Concluding Thoughts

Prognosticating that Russia and China will learn valuable lessons from their joint coordination in the Central African Republic, it's reasonable then to reckon that they'll take their African partnership to the Congo afterwards, particularly its mineral-rich and former breakaway region of Katanga in order to safeguard Beijing's assets there, though their diplomatic-peacekeeping efforts would naturally affect other corners of the country as well. Moscow might even exercise its "military diplomacy" so that its national companies can acquire a stake in Katanga in exchange for Russia's support of Kinshasa and the Congo's territorial integrity following a successful conclusion of the current crisis, though provided that it dramatically devolves to the point of teetering near or actually becoming a civil war to "justify" such a handsome "reward".

In concluding the analysis, Russia's sub-Saharan Africa policy previously relied on its traditional Cold War partnerships with [Angola](#), [Ethiopia](#), and South Africa – and even those have been very limited in their scope and concentrated only on a few industries – but its "pivot/return" to the region is now seeing it overcome its post-Soviet aversion to getting involved in the continent's civil conflicts as Russia races to establish a presence for itself in Africa's geostrategic heartland. There are certainly pecuniary interests at stake, as well as less tangible ones dealing with Great Power prestige, but the main impetus for all of this is for Russia to enhance its strategic value to China and therefore creatively ensure that their relations remain on an equal footing for the foreseeable future.

Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare.

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Articles by: [Andrew Korybko](#)

About the author:

Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent

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