

DOI: 10.31857/S086919080012475-9

RUSSIA'S PEACE MEDIATION IN AFRICA: AN ASSESSMENT¹

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Abstract: *In recent years, Russia has become a major power broker in the Middle East, and now is aspiring to repeat the feat in neighbouring regions, particularly in Africa. It was predominantly the use of hard power in Syria that propelled Russia to the current influential position in the region, yet the political, financial and security costs of the use of power politics are poised to grow, which necessitates the prioritization of the diplomatic dimension, with such conflict resolution instrument as peace mediation playing an increasingly prominent role. The success Russia has had with the Astana peace process for Syria naturally encourages it to offer its good offices to other countries in the region and beyond, including Africa, which is particularly suffering from conflict.*

In early 2019, Russia brokered the signing of the Khartoum Peace Agreement between the parties to the conflict in the Central African Republic. In early 2020, Moscow hosted Libya peace talks. The aim of the study is to evaluate the theoretical, practical and geopolitical underpinnings of mediation employed by Russia and assess its potential in Africa. The theme is particularly relevant due to the holding of the First Russia–Africa Summit in 2019, which accentuated security as one of the key areas of Moscow's cooperation with the continent.

Methodologically, the present work relies heavily on contemporary conflict resolution research. The study is based on a wide range of scholarly papers and documents of international organizations.

The present paper argues that peace mediation has become an important policy tool for Russia in Africa, and that it may also provide for strengthening Moscow's position as one of the key providers of security on the continent.

Keywords: Africa, Russia, conflict resolution, directive mediation, biased mediator, Central African Republic, Libya, terrorism.

For citation: Kostelyanets S.V. Russia's Peace Mediation in Africa: an Assessment. *Vostok (Oriens)*. 2020. No. 6. Pp. 96–106. DOI: 10.31857/S086919080012475-9

РОССИЙСКОЕ ПОСРЕДНИЧЕСТВО В КОНФЛИКТАХ В АФРИКЕ

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Резюме: В последние годы Россия заявила о себе как об амбициозном посреднике в конфликтах на Африканском континенте. В 2018–2019 гг. в Судане по инициативе российской стороны прошло несколько раундов переговоров между сторонами вооруженного конфликта

¹ This article is prepared in the framework of the project of the Russian Science Foundation, No. 19-18-00155

в Центральноафриканской Республике (ЦАР), которые в известной мере предопределили подписание в феврале 2019 г. правительством ЦАР и лидерами вооруженной оппозиции мирного соглашения, прекратившего вооруженные столкновения. В свою очередь, в январе 2020 г. на переговорах в Москве Россия совместно с Турцией предприняла попытку примирения противоборствующих сторон гражданской войны в Ливии.

В статье анализируется мирное посредничество Москвы в конфликте в ЦАР и проводятся теоретические и практические параллели с советским опытом посредничества в Африке и недавним российским – в Сирии. В работе рассматриваются основные механизмы и участники разрешения конфликтов в современной Африке, оцениваются перспективы деятельности РФ в этом направлении. Показано, что современная российская модель посредничества в африканских конфликтах отражает исторический опыт, геополитические реалии, а также ограниченность ресурсов страны на текущем этапе ее развития. Утверждается, что Россия использует модель «директивной» медиации, которая предполагает активное влияние посредника на ход и цели переговоров посредством использования различных рычагов воздействия и инструментов поощрения. При этом Москва в африканских конфликтах выступает в качестве пристрастного посредника, что, впрочем, скорее способствует успеху переговоров, нежели их провалу. Основные принципы российской мирной дипломатии – мультилатерализм, прагматизм, гибкость, инклюзивность процессов, приоритетность военно-политической стабильности и др. – также находят благодатную почву в Африке.

Проведение в октябре 2019 г. первого саммита Россия–Африка в значительной степени отразило стремление Москвы утвердиться на геополитически и геоэкономически важном восходящем континенте. В этом контексте посреднические усилия России становятся важным инструментом укрепления политического влияния в Африке и налаживания дипломатического диалога с африканскими лидерами.

Ключевые слова: Африка, Россия, разрешение конфликтов, директивная медиация, пристрастное посредничество, Центральноафриканская Республика, Ливия, терроризм.

Для цитирования: Костелянец С.В. Российское посредничество в конфликтах в Африке. *Восток (Oriens)*. 2020. № 6. С. 96–106. DOI: 10.31857/S086919080012475-9

INTRODUCTION

Humanity has long identified war as one of the biggest calamities on the planet. In his letter written in 1797, Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the United States Declaration of Independence, referred to war as “the greatest scourge of mankind”. In the same vein, the United Nations Organization (UN) was founded in 1945 with the foremost task of “saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. Yet still today, in the era of globalization and integration, armed conflicts, including international and domestic ones, persevere as one of the central factors of instability and uncertainty in the world.

In Africa, “Agenda 2063”, adopted in 2015 by the African Union (AU), set an ambitious task of “silencing all guns” by 2020 [Agenda 2063, 2015]. We are now in 2020, and we can ascertain that the AU has already failed to achieve this objective. Furthermore, in terms of the number of countries involved in military conflicts of varying intensity, the African continent remains the undisputed world leader. It can be argued with much confidence that these conflicting situations, which give rise to extreme insecurity, persist as a major impediment to Africa’s political and economic integration and prosperity.

While it has been acknowledged that armed conflicts are highly resistant to mediation, achieving peace without mediators has historically been very difficult [Zartman, 1995, p. 3–4]. Correspondingly, peace mediation, which finds itself among the three basic methods of conflict resolution alongside direct negotiation and third-party intervention, has been gaining in significance as a tool of international response to crisis situations. Mediation has been defined as the enablement of the appearance of conditions for the resolution of a conflict and adoption of the resultant solution by the parties to the conflict [McGarry, O’Leary, 1993, p. 108]. Peace mediation itself may be divided into three different strategies, ranging from passive to active: communication-facilitation, procedural and directive. The first places focus on smoothing the exchange of information between the conflicting parties; the second sees the mediator establish the overall framework of negotiations; the third allows the mediator to influence the course of negotiations through the use of leverage and various incentives [Bercovitch et al., 2008, p. 347].

Despite the profusion of multilateral bodies responsible for handling conflicts around the world, various limitations of these organizations leave room for peace initiatives by individual countries. Where they lack in institutional capacity and multilateral legitimacy, these countries make up in flexibility and timeliness, as well as in the ability to provide economic or security incentives to conflicting parties. Indeed, mediators always have their own reasons to engage in this activity. For major world powers, which possess political, economic and cultural clout to capitalize on their diplomatic successes, mediation is an integral part of global competition for influence and resources and an attribute of great power status. Mediating states may also be interested in accumulating long-term political and economic influence, preventing flows of refugees and curbing proliferation of extremism, establishing communication channels with other powers, or supporting a particular side of the conflict. Peace facilitators that have demonstrated a preference toward a certain disputant or outcome have been referred to as biased mediators [Young, 1967, p. 81].

In recent years, Russia has become an important mediator in a number of conflicts in Africa. In February 2019, Russia facilitated the signing of the Khartoum Peace Agreement between the parties to the conflict in the Central African Republic (CAR). In January 2020, Moscow hosted Libya peace talks. The aim of the present study is to evaluate the theoretical, practical and geopolitical underpinnings of the Russian approach to peace mediation as an integral and promising component of Moscow’s policy for Africa. The paper will first map out the key mechanisms and actors in the modern conflict resolution arena in Africa; second, it will review the Soviet experience of peace mediation in Africa; third, it will analyze the current Russian model of mediation on the example of Syria and the CAR and draw corresponding conclusions regarding its prospects in the future.

THE MODERN CONFLICT RESOLUTION ARENA IN AFRICA

The AU’s master plan – “Agenda 2063” – envisioned the establishment of “mechanisms for peaceful prevention and resolution of conflicts ... at all levels” [Agenda 2063, 2015]. Indeed, the Agenda focused on the continental level, where the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) has become a dedicated framework of mechanisms that are responsible for conflict prevention, conflict management and peace building. Nevertheless, the capacity of the AU to manage conflicts on its own is still very limited, mostly for financial reasons, although it is gradually strengthening.

On the international level, the AU has been bolstering its facility through the cooperation with the UN. The UN as the key international mediator and peacemaker has for decades been implementing over a dozen of peacekeeping operations concurrently, and over half of them in

Africa. In addition, political missions of the UN have been engaged in assisting nearly every peace process on the continent. However, the ability of the UN to respond to crises in Africa in a timely matter has repeatedly been put into question; the unfolding geopolitical contest between permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) – in particular, the USA, China and Russia – has further jeopardized cooperation on sensitive international security issues.

On the regional level, the AU's conflict resolution effort is supported by its Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been especially active in the field of conflict resolution: the former has been a mediator of civil wars and insurgencies in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, while the latter at various times deployed peacekeepers to Côte-d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone and Togo [Денисова, 2015, с. 38]. Notwithstanding the general trend toward the strengthening of the capacity of RECs to manage conflicts, the progress has been uneven across Africa and plagued by intraregional rivalry and the deficit of practically all necessary resources.

Individual countries have also engaged in mediation in Africa. In 1960–2012, the USA, France and the UK were the most prominent non-African countries in terms of the conflict resolution effort on the continent, having mediated 48, 24 and 24 peace agreements correspondingly [Duursma, 2017, p. 604]. Most recently, in January 2020, Washington hosted talks between Egypt and Ethiopia to defuse growing tensions over the construction of Africa's largest dam on the Nile. In 2018–2019, France hosted a number of meetings between parties to the civil war in Libya, effectively making it the leading international mediator of that conflict. The USA, the UK and Norway jointly established the so-called Troika for Sudan and South Sudan, which concentrates on mediating internal conflicts in the two countries. In North and Northeast Africa, we have been witnessing mobilization of Middle Eastern mediators, particularly of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

SOVIET MEDIATION IN AFRICA: A BRIEF HISTORY AND ANALYSIS

Moscow started to mediate conflicts in Africa in the Soviet era. The number of instances of Soviet/Russian brokering of peace agreements in Africa in 1960–2012 has been put at 10 [Duursma, 2017, p. 604]. The present paper will review three cases of mediation in the Horn of Africa (HoA) and Angola to demonstrate that Russia possesses certain experience in conflict resolution in Africa, which may have served as the historical, theoretical and practical foundation of contemporary Russian conflict mediation on the continent.

The late 1970s in the HoA were marked by a dramatic geopolitical turnaround, when Ethiopia replaced Somalia as the key Soviet partner in the region. This, however, was not Moscow's intent: in fact, the Soviets tried to mediate between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu and prevent the Ogaden War (1977–1978) with the aim of maintaining strategic relations with both sides. Ethiopia underwent a revolution in 1974, which largely removed American influence from the country; Somalia was the first African nation to conclude a friendship treaty with the USSR, and also granted military basing rights to the Soviets. The Soviet proposal was to set aside nationalistic and personal ambitions of Somali President Siad Barre and Ethiopian leader Mengistu Haile Mariam and form a socialist confederate state. Moscow was incentivising the parties with promises of economic support and military assistance. Cuba's Fidel Castro served as Moscow's go-between in the region, facilitating the meetings between the Somali and Ethiopian leaders in March and again in May 1977. The USSR also held negotiations with Barre in Moscow in August 1977, making the last-ditch attempt to avert the breakdown of relations [Soviet Perceptions, 1982, p. 9]. The talks failed; the ensuing conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia drew in massive assistance of the Soviet Bloc to the former, with Cuba and South Yemen sending expeditionary corps (18,000 and 2,000

troops respectively) and the USSR – 1,500 military advisers. Somalia lost the war, but effectively became a close US ally in the region, thus dashing Soviet hopes of hegemony in the HoA.

The repressions by the Mengistu regime aggravated interethnic tensions in the country. In the late 1980s, the armed conflict between the government of Ethiopia and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which was seeking independence of Eritrea, transformed into a large-scale civil war. The USSR had been an ally of Addis Ababa since 1978 and, predictably, supported the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. By 1988, the USSR began to realize that there would be no military solution to the conflict [Адамишин, 2001, с. 104]. Soviet diplomacy proposed negotiations between EPLF and the Mengistu regime. In January 1989, V. Chebrikov of the Soviet Politburo travelled to Addis Ababa and told Mengistu of the necessity to find a "peaceful solution" to the war. Mengistu for the first time agreed that there should be negotiations [String of Military Defeats, 1989]. Soviet diplomats also established contacts with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), an ally of EPLF. The negotiations between the government and EPLF started in September 1989 on the American soil and involved Soviet diplomats. The peace deal was signed in November 1989 in Nairobi. However, TPLF was sidelined from the talks, so the civil war resumed. In 1991, the Ethiopian capital was taken by TPLF; Mengistu fled the country. In 1993, Eritrea became independent following a referendum.

In Angola, Soviet and then Russian diplomats mediated the conflict that had erupted in the 1975 between the Angolan Government and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The USSR coordinated the mediation effort with Portugal and the USA – main foreign sponsors of UNITA. In 1991, the joint conflict resolution effort resulted in the signing of the Bicesse Accords. At that stage Portugal acted as the key mediator and the USSR and the USA as observers. Russia has inherited this status from the USSR and observed the implementation of the 1994 Lusaka Protocol and the final 2002 peace agreement, which holds to this day.

It would be useful to draw some conclusions from the aforementioned cases of the USSR's involvement in mediation in Africa, as well as put them into the contemporaneous geopolitical context. First, these mediation efforts were intrinsically linked to geopolitical calculations, i.e. they were propelled by the logic of the Cold War. In every case, the USSR was a strongly biased mediator; the main priority was not peace, but rather the preservation of the Soviet sphere of influence. This, however, presented a certain advantage, as the USSR generally pursued a pragmatic approach and encouraged its client regimes to moderate their ambitions. Indeed, scholars have noted that "any government is restrained better and more safely by friends and allies than by opponents and enemies" [Schroeder, 2004, p. 130].

Secondly, the inability of the USSR to resolve the abovementioned conflicts in Africa on its own – due to their complex nature, the weakness of allies, logistical difficulties and limited resources – encouraged Moscow to seek political solutions and accommodate other powers. Furthermore, the USSR had to take into account the so-called playback effect, which is "the impact of unilateral action on relations with third parties and potential allies in cooperation at other times and on other issues" [Zartman, Touval, 2010, p. 164]. The effect was gaining in importance as the political and economic might of the USSR was diminishing in the late 1980s. All of the above propelled the USSR toward multilateralism in peace mediation.

Lastly, Moscow's success depended on the extent of political leverage it had over the incumbent government and the amount of incentives, especially military, that it could offer. In Somalia in the late 1970s, Moscow could afford large-scale aid, but lacked tools to neutralize Barre's irredentist policies; by the early 1990s, amid the Soviet strategic decline, which culminated in the breakup of the USSR, Soviet/Russian weight in international affairs had been severely undermined and its resources exhausted, which precluded Moscow from propping the Mengistu regime. The Angolan case was less abortive, but the USSR, which in the 1970s–1980s had been militarily invested in the country, was effectively relegated to the back seat.

THE POST-SOVIET MODEL OF MEDIATION

The disintegration of the USSR engendered a myriad of conflicts, some of which evolved into armed hostilities. Keen to retain influence in ex-USSR countries, Russia became involved in the resolution of nearly every conflict in the post-Soviet space. By the means of a third-party intervention, Russia has effectively frozen conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and East Ukraine; Moscow is also one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Undoubtedly, the contemporary Russian school of conflict resolution has formed on the solid foundation of Soviet and even pre-Soviet practice of mediation [Kostelyanets, 2019]. The principal difference is that having lost messianic ambitions, client states around the world, and the Soviet Empire's vast resources, Russia had to refocus its effort on the "near abroad" and adopt a more pragmatic foreign policy, guided by cost-benefit calculations.

The true test of Russia's modern mediation model has taken place in Syria, where a civil war has been exacerbated by extensive foreign meddling, interethnic and interconfessional tensions, proliferation of terrorism and environmental degradation. Admittedly, the Astana format, which is Russia's mediation framework for the Syrian conflict, has not yet produced a final outcome and by many is seen as a convenient legitimator of Moscow's military campaign in Syria. It has, however, illustrated Moscow's guiding principles and modern-day approaches to conflict resolution and is highly likely to educate any future Russian mediation effort. It must be acknowledged here that each conflict is a unique phenomenon; the Astana format may not be replicated in African context, yet underlying dynamics are bound to persist.

Undeniably, in Astana Russia has been a biased mediator, being a close military ally of the Syrian government. Moscow has been acting as both mediator and arbiter², employing directive mediation. An example of arbitration has been the preparation of a draft of the Syrian Constitution by Russia in early 2017. Between January 2017 and April 2020, 15 meetings were held in the Astana format, which brought together the Syrian government, Syrian opposition groups, the three guarantor countries – Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as a team of UN mediators. The talks led to the establishment of multilateral mechanisms for monitoring the ceasefire and the formation of de-escalation zones in parts of Syria [Астанинский процесс, 2019]. A key feature of the process from the beginning has been its inclusive nature – all stakeholders with the only exception of terrorist organizations have been invited to the negotiation table. The Astana process was also supplemented by the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi in January 2018, whose main focus was finding a lasting political solution by bringing together Syrian civil society and political actors. The main outcome of the Congress was the establishment of a committee to draft a new Syrian constitution.

The fundamental difference between the Russian approach to the Syrian conflict and the Western proposals has been that Moscow has brought ethnic and religious communities to the forefront as subjects of the peace process. This strategy falls in line with the concept of consociation, which entails four key aspects: the establishment of a coalition government that represents main segments of the society; the implementation of the principle of proportionality in the distribution of resources and positions; the implementation of intra-group autonomy; and the recognition of minorities' right of veto [Lijphart, 1977, p. 21].

Where the gap between ethnic groups is wider, as, for example, between the Syrian Kurds and the Syrian Arabs, Russia has advocated autonomisation. The constitution drawn up by Russia provided for the creation of a Kurdish cultural autonomy and establishment of official regional languages in minority-inhabited areas in addition to the official Arabic language [The New Syrian Draft Constitution, 2017]. The Russian approach was to facilitate the implementation of a set

² Arbiter is a "neutral" third party that makes a decision on a political dispute, which the conflicting parties should accept as fair.

of political and institutional reforms to be developed on the basis of consensus between elites representing the main ethnic segments of society.

While the modern Russian approach has inherited the Soviet preference for biased/directive mediation, it has acquired even greater propensity for multilateralism. The approach may also be characterized as all-inclusive and security-centred. The principle of inclusivity is accompanied with attempts to integrate opposition groups into common political platforms. Moscow has also passionately spurned the “colour revolutions” and abrupt regime change, prioritizing continuity of government structures as the means to support livelihoods and contain terrorism. Just as in the Soviet times, Russian involvement in peace mediation is accompanied by a strategic intervention (military advisers, special forces, more recently – private military contractors) and arms deliveries, which are deemed necessary to gain sufficient leverage over the conflicting parties. Geopolitical considerations entail counterbalancing the US in the region, which could explain the scale of Russian involvement in Syria. The multilateral nature of the format reflects both the insufficiency of Russian resources to stabilize the situation in Syria on its own and the interconnectedness of the region. At the same time, Russia constantly reiterated that its efforts were part and parcel of the UN-led Geneva track for Syria. Finally, the penchant for autonomisation and consociation to a degree echoes Russia’s domestic ethno-political structure.

RUSSIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CAR

Between 1991 and 2019, Russia showed little initiative on Africa’s conflict resolution track, reflecting its overall “retreat” from the continent. It also comes as no surprise that Russia’s “return” to Africa, which has been manifested in the intensifying Russian-African political and economic ties and the holding of the first Russia–Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019, is accompanied with greater attention to opportunities to mediate African conflicts. The basic principles of the Astana process were first reflected on the African soil in the Khartoum peace process for the Central African Republic (CAR).

The Second Civil War in the CAR began in 2012, when the agreements between the Government of the CAR (GoC) and the north-eastern rebels that had ended the 2004–2007 civil war fell apart. In 2012, various rebel factions came together to form the new coalition – Seleka (“alliance”). The coalition mostly relied on the support of the CAR’s Muslim minority, which constitutes 9% of the population (Christians – 89%). Initially, faith was just an instrument of the elites to mobilize supporters. Nevertheless, Seleka drew considerable support from Muslims of neighbouring Chad and Sudan. In March 2013, Seleka occupied the capital city Bangui and forced President Francois Bozize to flee the country; the rebel leader Michel Djotodia became the new president. The rebel campaign was accompanied with banditry, mass rapes, destruction of Christian churches and ethnic cleansing. Djotodia disbanded Seleka in September 2013, but most rebels did not lay down their weapons and continued marauding and extorting. On 10 January 2014, Djotodia resigned from his post, unable to control his former comrades-in-arms and under much international pressure. On 23 January 2014, the non-partisan politician Catherine Samba-Panza was chosen to head the state during the transition.

Christians of the country reacted to the cruelty of Seleka by forming their own militias, which in 2013 merged into a loose coalition known as anti-Balaka (“anti-machete”). In early 2014, anti-Balaka took control of Bangui. Anti-Balaka began to terrorize rebel supporters, targeting Muslim communities. The country was effectively split into the anti-Balaka-controlled south and the ex-Seleka-controlled north.

The 2016 presidential election saw Faustin-Archange Touadera win with two thirds of the vote and succeed the interim authorities. The country remained split among 14 armed ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka groups, with the GoC controlling about 30% of the country. In 2017, the AU Mediation Panel of Facilitation began to mediate between Bangui and 14 groups. However, little progress

and economic crisis prompted Touadera in 2017 to seek Moscow's assistance. On 9 October 2017, Touadera met with Foreign Minister Lavrov, and 5 days later called on President Putin to provide military assistance to the Central African Armed Forces (FACA). FACA had been under a UN arms embargo since 2013. In December 2017, Russia obtained an exemption to the UN embargo, and in early 2018 supplied the CAR with arms at no cost, accompanied with 5 military and 170 Russian civilian instructors, whose stated objective was to train FACA. Russia also provided Touadera with personal protection by dispatching a group of private military contractors to the CAR, presumably under the guise of civilian instructors [Филиппов, 2019, с. 134]. Valery Zakharov, a former Russian intelligence official, became the national security advisor to President Touadera.

Moscow used the weapon donation and security cooperation to gain leverage with the GoC; geopolitically, it confronted France, which had been the kingmaker in the African country since its independence in 1960. The military activity was also supplemented by the signing of a number of contracts in the extractive sector. Indeed, Touadera's pivot to Russia was to a great degree educated by Moscow's successes in Syria and its steadfastness in supporting President Assad. It has been noted that by inviting the Russians, Touadera gained influential enemies in the face of Paris and its African allies [Филиппов, 2019, с. 140]. The next step for Moscow to strengthen its positions in the country and assist Touadera was to start mediating the civil war.

As previously mentioned, Seleka depended very much on the assistance from Chad and Sudan. The largest splinter factions of Seleka – the Popular Front for the Rebirth of the CAR (FPRC) and the Union for Peace in the CAR (UPC) – drew most of their income from taxing trade with the two neighbouring countries. Sudan was also the largest source of weapons for the rebels. Thus, the choice of Sudan's Khartoum as the venue for talks was not a coincidence. Besides, Russia enjoyed warm relations with Sudan's President al-Bashir. Consequently, Moscow took advantage of the Sudanese corridor to establish contacts with Muslim rebels in the CAR [Денисова, Костелянец, 2019, с. 25]. By May 2018, Russia had held talks with the FPRC, UPC and other groups [Explainer, 2018]. Moscow also sought the support of the top three religious leaders of the CAR [As Sudan hosts CAR peace talks, 2018].

Since November 2017, the AU Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR provided the framework for the negotiations between the GoC and the 14 armed groups. The Russo-Sudanese initiative was seen by some as a threat to the AU-led process [Final report, 2018]. However, despite a number of setbacks, in August 2018 Russia fostered a peace agreement between the FPRC, UPC, the Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC) and the most powerful anti-Balaka faction. The talks resulted in the signing of the Khartoum Declaration of Understanding of the Central African Armed Groups. The Declaration provided for the establishment of the Central African Assembly – an inclusive political platform for consultations. Besides, the groups agreed on the prioritization of the decentralization of the CAR, which also entailed the preservation of armed groups as territorial self-defence units. To incentivize them economically, the signatory groups were promised new business opportunities under the GoC authority. Reportedly, the groups were also paid \$50,000 each for their participation [Final report, 2018].

The outcome was lauded by the GoC, which issued an official letter of thanks to President Putin. Importantly, the documents stressed that the Khartoum process was set within the framework of the AU Initiative. Evidently, Russia sought to supplement rather than supplant the common efforts of the international community. In September 2018, Russia was granted observer status to the AU Initiative, which reflected its growing weight in the CAR's politics [Final report, 2018].

The talks resumed in Khartoum on 24 January 2019 and this time around involved all 14 rebel groups. The UN bridged the gap between the two parallel peace processes – the AU-led track and the Khartoum track – by supporting the move of negotiations to Sudan. The choice of venue pandered to Russia, which “emphasized that this important Agreement was made possible by, among other

things, the talks between the armed groups held in Khartoum in August 2018” [8467th Meeting, 2019], while the West was satisfied with the leading role of the AU. The talks ended on 5 February 2019 with the preparation of a peace agreement, which was signed in Bangui the next day. Touadera agreed to include most of the signatories of the agreement in the government and involve ethnic communities supporting them in the political process, clearly in line with the principles of consociation.

In the aftermath of the agreement, Russia strengthened its role as the facilitator of peace in the CAR. Alongside the UN, Russia has been supporting monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of the agreement. Moscow has also engaged in facilitating inter-faith dialogue and other humanitarian activities. However, Russia’s has focused primarily on empowering FACA. The formal military cooperation agreement between Russia and the CAR was signed in August 2018. In line with the signed agreement, Russia delivered further weapons and ammunition, thus fully satisfying the needs of FACA in terms of small arms [Final report, 2019].

Indeed, the true exam of the Russian strategy for the CAR will be the next elections in the country, which are scheduled for late 2020. However, Russian diplomacy has taken due credit for helping reach the peace agreement, which has not gone unnoticed in Africa. The AU officially expressed its gratitude for Russia’s help in bringing the parties of the CAR peace talks to the negotiating table [AU Commissioner, 2019].

PROSPECTS FOR RUSSIA TO MEDIATE CONFLICTS IN AFRICA

Perhaps, Moscow’s mediation in the CAR could have been seen as an exceptional endeavour rather than part of some strategy, were it not for Russian engagement in mediation in Libya. While Russia has diplomatically supported the UN-led Libyan peace process since its start, it has established own channels of communication with a variety of Libyan factions, seemingly preparing ground for its own peace track. This has been buttressed by the establishment of the Contact Group for intra-Libyan settlement, whose main courses of action have been to facilitate dialogue between Marshal Khalifa Haftar and Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and to engage the relatively autonomous and militarily powerful Misrata militia. In 2016–2017, leaders of various Libyan forces began to frequent Moscow, signalling their interest in adding another mediator to the peace process. In 2017, Russia for the first time invited Haftar and al-Sarraj to hold talks in Moscow. Finally, in January 2020, Moscow hosted a round of direct peace talks between the two.

Indeed, the Moscow talks did not produce a breakthrough, becoming just another episode in the series of Libyan negotiations. However, Moscow’s attempt to join forces with another biased mediator – Turkey, which is Sarraj’s critical ally – and supplement the UN-led track was a creative move. While publicly Russia speaks of its neutrality on the Libyan question, Moscow has been deepening military ties with Haftar. By 2019, a significant number of Russian private contractors had arrived in Libya to support Haftar’s military operations, which caused criticism of official Tripoli. The capacity of Moscow to conduct directive mediation in Libya is, however, seriously limited by the interests of other stakeholders, including Haftar’s key sponsors – the UAE, France and Egypt. Nevertheless, Russia’s open channel of communications with Turkey gives Moscow a certain competitive advantage and may herald its greater future role in the Libyan peace process.

In recent years, Moscow has also been developing military-technical and security cooperation with a number of African countries that are fighting insurgents – among them Mali, the DRC, South Sudan, Mozambique, etc. Russian private military contractors have reportedly been engaged in fighting Islamists in Mozambique’s north. In the Sahel, the leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso have publicly called on Russia to assist them in combating extremists. In general, it may seem that demand for Russia’s security assistance in Africa exceeds its ability to deliver. Security cooperation is highly likely to pave the way for greater engagement in conflict resolution in these

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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