



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The Growing Presence of Russia in Africa: Analyzing Russia-Ghana Relations during the Wagner Group Era

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

U.S.	The United States of America
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
PMCs	Private Military Companies
CAR	Central African Republic
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
OAU	Organization of African Unity
UN	United Nations
AU	African Union
CPP	Convention People's Party
NLC	National Liberation Council
WG	Wagner Group
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
EU	European Union
RUSAL	International Public Joint Stock Company of Russia
WITS	World Integrated Trade Solution
PJCC	Permanent Joint Commission for Cooperation
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
FOI	Swedish Defence Research Agency

ABSTRACT

Russia's re-engagement with Africa has received scholarly attention in recent years, though much of it has concentrated on the activities of its Wagner Group (WG) within authoritarian contexts. In Francophone West Africa, attention has focused on Russia's militarized engagements, while comparatively little focus has been given to its activities within democratic, Anglophone contexts. This study addresses that oversight by exploring the nature of Russia's foreign policy engagement with Ghana during the WG era (2017-2023) to offer a more nuanced understanding of its engagement across diverse political environments. It also investigates Ghana's response to Russia's increasing presence in West Africa within the framework of its foreign policy tradition of positive neutrality.

Employing a qualitative single-case study design grounded in a neocolonialism framework, this research analyzes Russia-Ghana relations across five key thematic areas and applies discourse analysis to synthesize Ghana's rhetoric in response to Russia's regional presence.

It concludes that Ghana's pro-Western orientation constrained Russia's ability to replicate its coercive Francophone playbook. Instead, Russia's relied on soft power instruments. Crucially, Ghana maintained its non-aligned tradition of positive neutrality, consistently resisting Russian overtures in West Africa.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Africa has witnessed a resurgence of great power competition, signaling a crucial turning point in the continent's long-standing history of imperial and postcolonial engagements. Ayers (2013, 227) describes this renewed engagement as a “new scramble for Africa,” one increasingly defined by both Western and non-Western powers such as China, Russia, Brazil, India, Malaysia, and Turkey. Despite the multiplicity of actors, Russia's return to Africa has generated growing interest in both scholarly and public discourse.

Following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia retreated from most of its global commitments, including Africa.¹ Over the last decade, however, Russia has reasserted itself through a deliberate strategy of rekindling Soviet-era alliances to undermine the U.S.-led liberal order (Osei-Opare 2023, 258). A key feature of its strategy in Africa has been the deployment of private military companies (PMCs), notably the WG.² The WG has operated for years as a covert extension of Russian statecraft, allowing Moscow to “project power abroad cheaply and deniably,” typically in fragile and authoritarian contexts (Suvari 2021, 33).

West Africa has emerged as a critical region in Russia's renewed engagement in Africa, with its presence markedly visible in Francophone countries grappling with recurring episodes of political instability and military coups. In states such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, Russia has filled security vacuums left by traditional Western security partners.³ Through opaque “arms-for-

¹ Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, *Grand Illusions: The Impact of Misperceptions About Russia on U.S. Policy*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, 10.

² Nick Reynolds, Oleksandr V Danylyuk, and Jack Watling, “The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24,” Royal United Services Institute, February 20, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>, 15.

³ Kemal Mohamedou, *The Wagner Group, Russia's Foreign Policy and Sub-Saharan Africa* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2024), 15.

resource” arrangements, it has secured privileged access to natural resources and strategic assets (Amentenbrink 2024, 28).

Yet, while scholarly and policy attention has focused heavily on Russia’s presence in Francophone West Africa, where its militarized engagements have been most pronounced, its engagement across Anglophone West Africa has witnessed little scholarly visibility.⁴ This research addresses this critical gap by focusing on Ghana, a country widely regarded as the bastion of democracy in West Africa, to offer new insights into how Russia adapts its foreign policy when operating outside authoritarian contexts. Against this backdrop, this study critically investigates the research question: What was the nature of Russia-Ghana engagement during the WG era? To what extent did Ghana’s response to Russia’s expanding presence in West Africa, particularly its overt, militarized engagement in some Francophone West African countries, reinforce or challenge its longstanding foreign policy tradition of positive neutrality? This study advances two core hypotheses: First, it argues that, unlike Russia’s hard power foreign policy approach in Francophone West Africa, its engagement with Ghana during the WG era was marked by a more subtle, soft power statecraft. Secondly, this paper hypothesizes that Ghana’s response to Russia’s expanding footprint in West Africa during the WG era aligned with its foreign policy tradition of positive neutrality.

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving scholarship on Russia-Africa relations by redirecting analytical focus toward underexplored dimensions. The choice of

⁴ For the purposes of this study, the classification of West African states into Anglophone and Francophone follows the linguistic and colonial delineations commonly recognized by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). *Anglophone West Africa* refers to countries where English is the official language, including Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Liberia. *Francophone West Africa* comprises countries with French as the official language, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo.

Ghana provides a compelling lens through which to assess whether Russia adopts a distinct foreign policy strategy in navigating its engagement with stable democracies, especially in a region where its influence has substantially been predicated on backing authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, this study offers valuable insights into Ghana's non-aligned foreign policy tradition. Importantly, Ghana offers valuable insight into how smaller states engage assertive global powers like Russia while safeguarding sovereignty and African agency.

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows: Chapter Two reviews existing literature on Russia's renewed presence in Africa. Chapter Three situates the study within a neocolonialism framework to analyze Russia's contemporary influence strategies. Chapter Four discusses the research methodology. Chapter Five offers historical context by examining Soviet-Ghana relations under Nkrumah. Chapter Six presents a thematic analysis of the nature of Russia's engagements with Ghana during the WG era, organized across five key domains. Chapter Seven analyzes Ghana's rhetoric to assess whether its response to Russia's expanding influence in West Africa during the WG era reflected a consistent application of positive neutrality or otherwise. The final Chapter concludes the study and offers key recommendations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The post-Cold War era has seen renewed competition among great powers in Africa as China and Russia persistently alter the longstanding dominance of Western powers in the region (Bukhari, Khan, and Haq 2024, 682). Russia's presence on the continent closely aligns with its overarching foreign policy objectives aimed at destabilizing the Western liberal international order, reasserting its status as a preeminent global power, and diminishing the geopolitical influence and normative

credibility of the U.S., the European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (McClintock, Hornung, and Costello 2021, 6).

Matusevich (2019, 26-27) and Osei-Opare (2019, 88) trace the historical roots of contemporary Russia-Africa relations to the Soviet era, highlighting how Cold War solidarities with African liberation movements were deeply embedded in anti-colonial ideological commitments. Yet, as Matusevich (2019, 27) notes, while earlier scholarship often stressed ideological motivations, more recent studies underscore that these interactions were also shaped by pragmatic geopolitical and economic considerations, often veiled by Marxist-Leninist rhetoric at the time. This is echoed by Osei-Opare (2019, 89), who contends that Soviet engagements in countries such as Ghana were guided not only by ideological solidarity but also by pragmatic economic diplomacy aimed at expanding influence in the Global South. Matusevich (2019, 28) further observes how nostalgia for Soviet-era ties has been reinvigorated by Russia as a legitimizing tool to facilitate its re-engagement with African states under the guise of historical camaraderie.

Recent scholarly debates suggest that contemporary Russian foreign policy in Africa departs significantly from earlier ideological orientations. Scholars like Kanet and Moulioukova (2022, 431) emphasize that Russia's post-2000 engagement with Africa has become markedly transactional and interest-driven, focused heavily on access to strategic resources, the expansion of export markets, arms deals, and the consolidation of political influence. Marten (2019, 155) observes that Russia's efforts on the continent tend to concentrate on enriching President Putin's cronies and other members of the elite class. This trend reflects a broader pattern of elite-centered diplomacy, wherein Russia cultivates strategic relationships with local elites in Africa, who are instrumentalized to advance Russian interests (Matusevich 2021, 139). Such relationships

facilitate patronage-based arrangements that secure access to lucrative business opportunities for Russian businessmen, particularly those with close ties to the Kremlin (Matusevich 2021, 139).

Moreover, as Marten (2019, 155-156) notes, Russia's engagements in Africa are typically opaque and strategically concentrated in states with fragile or dysfunctional institutions, where political and security alliances with entrenched autocrats offer a conducive environment for advancing its interests, often at the expense of democratic consolidation. This opportunistic strategy has been structurally implemented through the deployment of PMCs, particularly the WG, which, as Pokalova (2023, 2) argues, reflects a "symptom of a larger trend in Russia's foreign policy" in Africa. She characterizes the group as a "quasi-state agent," arguing that it operates within a strategic grey zone, which enables it to execute activities on behalf of the Russian government while offering the state plausible deniability (Pokalova 2023, 3).

More narrowly, Mensah and Aning (2022, 58) observe that Russia's strategic focus on conflict-prone and fragile states facilitated its entry into West African geopolitics. They argue that Russia's foray into West Africa is particularly pronounced in the Francophone subregion, where the rise of jihadist insurgencies and waning trust in Western-led interventions have compelled governing military juntas to seek alternative security partnerships with Russia and its WG. However, they caution that such alliances are typically forged at the expense of democratic governance, the integrity of peacebuilding efforts, and the long-term stability of the region. In addition, Russia's use of disinformation agents and strategic communication campaigns has become a central pillar of its influence-building strategy in West Africa and the Sahel. According to Mensah and Aning (2022, 56), it leverages both traditional and social media platforms to amplify narratives that promote its role as a credible partner in Africa while simultaneously discrediting rival global actors, particularly Western powers.

Yet, as scholars have noted, Russia's engagement in Africa is not solely reliant on coercive instruments. Kaneta and Moulioukova (2022, 431) draw attention to Russia's soft power foreign policy approach, often overshadowed by its more assertive hard power influence on the continent. They highlight the inaugural Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi in 2019 as a watershed moment in Moscow's soft power diplomacy, bringing together dozens of African leaders to signal a renewed commitment to trade, economics, investment, education and training, among others. Ambrosetti (2022, 5) similarly foregrounds the strategic role of Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian agency responsible for international cultural cooperation, which has actively promoted educational exchanges, cultural programs, and humanitarian aid as tools of influence across much of Africa. He argues that Russia's soft power approach is grounded in a normative framework built on the principles of multilateralism, multipolarity, anti-imperialism, non-interference, conservatism, and localism, values that are fairly embraced across the Global South (Ambrosetti 2022, 9). However, Stronski (2019, 3) offers a more critical appraisal, contending that Russia's soft power appeal remains underwhelming and lacks the global cultural reach of Western counterparts, arguing that its "cultural and artistic traditions" have limited reach beyond its immediate "periphery". He further critiques Russia's reliance on hard power, particularly its "military-security activities," which he characterizes as overly dependent on PMCs, noting that it also "pales in comparison" to the material capabilities of the U.S. on the continent (Stronski 2019, 19).

Despite this growing body of literature, most studies disproportionately focus on Russia's widespread activities in Francophone West Africa, with comparatively limited scholarly concentration on its foreign policy towards Anglophone West Africa. Existing studies often generalize findings from Francophone contexts to represent Russia's strategy across the entire West African region. This scholarly approach essentially presents West Africa as a monolithic

entity, typically failing to account for Russia's distinct foreign policy objectives in Anglophone countries such as Ghana. However, this scholarly oversight should not be misrepresented as a lack of Russian interest or the absence of diplomatic activity in other parts of West Africa. Instead, it represents a critical gap that this study seeks to bridge. By focusing on Ghana, this study offers a more comprehensive analysis of Russia's foreign policy behavior in other parts of West Africa, beyond the Francophone bloc.

A compelling contribution to the literature on Russia-Ghana relations is offered by Osei-Opare (2019, 85), who re-examines Ghana's early engagement with the USSR through the lenses of race and neocolonialism, rather than traditional Cold War paradigms. He argues that Ghana exercised considerable agency in shaping the economic and diplomatic terms of its relationship with the USSR, prioritizing sovereignty and anti-colonial ideals over ideological alignment. Recent studies, such as Kulkova and Sanusi (2016, 296), offer a valuable overview of the evolution of Russia-Ghana relations, tracing the trajectory from their Soviet-era foundations in the 1950s through to contemporary engagements spanning the period from 2000 to 2016. They highlight the enduring nature of bilateral relations between the two countries, emphasizing their shared commitments to international principles such as multilateralism, disarmament, and combating global threats.

While acknowledging the important contributions made by these prior studies, this study departs by focusing on a more recent and assertive phase of Russian foreign policy in West Africa. Specifically, it examines the WG era, a period marked by heightened Russian military engagement in parts of Francophone West Africa. This research seeks to contribute to the literature by interrogating the nature of Russia's strategic overtures in Anglophone West Africa, using Ghana as a case study. It investigates whether Moscow's approach in Ghana during the era of the WG mirrored the militarized interventions characteristic of its engagements in Francophone states or

whether it relied on alternative, more subtle instruments of influence. Additionally, the study examines how Ghana's response to Russia's expanding regional presence can be understood within the framework of its long-standing tradition of positive neutrality, offering deeper insight into the ways in which democratic states exercise agency in managing external pressures and preserving strategic autonomy within a multipolar environment.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Within the expansive catalogue of international relations theories, no single theory fully explains the complex and evolving nature of Russia's contemporary engagement with Africa. Recognizing this theoretical limitation, this study adopts the theoretical lens of neocolonialism to critically interrogate the continuity and increasing assertiveness of Russia's foreign policy behavior in Africa. Specifically, it explores the extent to which Russia's contemporary engagements echo the extractive and asymmetrical patterns of nineteenth- and mid-twentieth century colonial rule. Though originally formulated to critique Western imperialism, the neocolonialism framework offers a compelling lens for analyzing how revisionist powers such as Russia replicate historical hierarchies of domination, often under the guise of South-South cooperation and multipolar diplomacy.

First coined by Kwame Nkrumah in his seminal work *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965, 4), neocolonialism describes a post-independence phenomenon in which a postcolonial state "has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty" in theory, yet "in reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside." While acknowledging that direct military occupation may occur in "extreme cases," he emphasizes that

“more often, however, neocolonialist control is exercised through economic or monetary means” (Nkrumah 1964, 4).

Contemporary scholars have built upon Nkrumah’s foundational framework to interrogate the rise of new global actors, including Russia and China, whose engagements in Africa increasingly resemble the exploitative, extractive, and hierarchical logic of colonialism (Moyo, Yeros, and Jha 2012). They argue that Africa’s distinctive historical trajectory, marked by its pre-colonial integration into the global economy as a reservoir for slave labor, its protracted colonial subjugation, and its enduring settler colonial legacies, has uniquely positioned the continent in an unusually never-ending cycle of “primitive accumulation,” more intense and continuous than on any other continent (Moyo, Yeros, and Jha 2012, 184).

This enduring cycle, they contend, sustains a global racial hierarchy that continues to shape external engagements with the continent. Crucially, this imperial hierarchy perpetuates forms of cultural paternalism that did not simply vanish with the formal end of colonial rule. Instead, it persists today through what Moyo, Yeros, and Jha (2012, 184) term the “discovery syndrome” and the “abolitionist syndrome.” These syndromes capture the paternalistic impulse of external powers to cast themselves as Africa’s “models” and “saviors,” projecting ready-made development prescriptions and security solutions from the outside in ways that can inadvertently reinforce dependency rather than foster genuine sovereignty or self-reliance (Moyo, Yeros, and Jha 2012, 184).

A compelling illustration of how new global powers such as Russia have stepped into neocolonial roles, albeit through contemporary mechanisms, is provided by Doboš and Purton (2023) in their study of the WG’s operations in CAR. They argue that Russia’s use of the WG exemplifies a form of “proxy neo-colonialism,” applying three core markers that mirror classical colonial patterns: the

tangible benefits extracted by the external patron, the effects on the broader population, and the ways in which such an intervention either aids or undermines the institutional capacity of the state (Doboš and Purton 2023, 14).

Their findings show that this relationship sustains a deeply unequal structure in which Russian interests benefit disproportionately, the local population gains little to nothing, and the country's sovereignty remains somewhat compromised. First, in exchange for safeguarding the CAR's ruling elite against domestic threats, Wagner is granted privileged access to strategic mining and logging concessions such as gold, diamonds and timber, generating direct economic and diplomatic returns for Russia and its network of influential elites, while simultaneously consolidating the personal power of the CAR's ruling class (Doboš and Purton 2023, 16; Siegle 2021, 82; Reynolds, Danylyuk, and Watling, 35). A similar pattern of extractive gain was evident in Mali, where the WG reportedly earned approximately \$10 million per month from its contract with the Malian government to support counterterrorism and insurgency operations (Allison et al. (2025, 25-27; Mohamedou 2014, 19-20). Unlike in the CAR, Wagner faced difficulty gaining direct access to Mali's gold mines; instead, the Malian government reportedly increased taxes, raised government stakes in mining companies, and conducted audits to generate the necessary revenue needed to pay for Wagner's services. The government also compensated the Russians by signing a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Russia to build a gold refinery in Mali (Allison et al. 2025, 27-28).

Beyond its extractive economic engagements, Russia strategically leverages its security and patronage networks to marshal the loyalty of fragile African states, enabling it to shape voting patterns at multilateral platforms such as the United Nations (UN). This diplomatic alignment effectively allows it to secure reliable support or neutral stances on contentious issues that advance

its geopolitical interests (Siegle 2021, 84). For instance, both the CAR and Mali, each heavily dependent on Russian security assistance, abstained from key UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (United Nations 2022). This demonstrates how proxy interventions can secure geopolitical loyalty alongside resource extraction, typical of the old colonial practice of leveraging dependent client elites such as chiefs to protect imperial interests.

Secondly, these operations bring negligible benefits to the wider population. In the CAR, the WG's operations focus narrowly on safeguarding extractive sites and fortifying the capital city to guarantee regime survival, with little effort to stabilize the broader territory. The result has been a sharply deteriorating security environment, with reports of grave human rights abuses, indiscriminate violence against local communities, severe population loss, and documented killings of journalists to obscure its activities (Doboš and Purton 2023, 16-17). Similarly, the group's involvement in Mali heightened existing conflicts and produced widespread instability among local populations and communities (Mohamedou 2014, 22). Documented reports of civilian massacres, including the infamous Moura incident in March 2022, as well as summary executions, sexual violence, and torture, reinforced a pervasive climate of fear and repression for ordinary citizens (United Nations 2023). This reality powerfully echoes Nkrumah's (1965, 8) observation that neocolonial rulers derive their authority not from the people but from external patrons, leaving them little interest in taking any step that would challenge exploitative patterns or meaningfully develop their people.

Finally, the Russian presence, especially through WG's operations, systematically undermines rather than strengthens the institutional capacity of African states. By concentrating security support narrowly on elite protection, Wagner entrenches a patron-client relationship that keeps governance structures fragile and subservient to external interests, mirroring the neocolonial logic

of sustaining extractive influence by undermining sovereign state-building. Through this selective security provision, incumbent elites are insulated, while broader state institutions remain weak, underdeveloped, and dependent (Doboš and Purton 2023, 16). In addition, Giustozzi, Pereira and Lewis (2025, 31) contend that the presence of Russian forces limits the effectiveness of peacebuilding operations led by the UN and other regional bodies. In Mali, for instance, Wagner-linked operatives reportedly deployed coordinated disinformation campaigns to consolidate their influence as stabilizing actors while depicting French-led Operation Barkhane and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) as conspirators colluding with terrorists to destabilize the country. This move disrupted regional peacekeeping and counterinsurgency efforts across the broader Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region.

Crucially, Amtenbrink (2024, 29) argues that to keep allied regimes firmly entrenched, Russian operatives are deeply embedded within the corridors of power, granting them direct access to shape political decision-making. By positioning advisors and Wagner operatives close to the highest levels of government, Russia ensures that key decisions align with its interests, deepening the regime's dependence on its security and political patronage. This embedded presence, reinforced through pro-Russia disinformation campaigns and control of local media narratives, sustains an environment of influence that keeps host governments politically tethered and institutionally weak (Doboš and Purton 2023, 17). For example, in the CAR, the WG actively bolstered President Touadéra's 2020 re-election by financing his campaign, sponsoring pro-regime narratives, and allegedly intimidating political opponents, actions that secured an unsurprising first-round victory for the government (Mohamedou 2014, 25).

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how Russia’s contemporary engagement in Africa, particularly through its WG operations, echoes the exploitative patterns of past imperial systems but under new guises of “partnership” and “security assistance.” As Nkrumah (1965, 4) so presciently noted, “Where neo-colonialism exists the power exercising control is often the State which formerly ruled the territory in question, but this is not necessarily so.” This insight remains profoundly relevant today: Russia’s proxy interventions show that new external powers, even those without a direct colonial past in Africa, can perpetuate similar structures of domination and dependency. Understanding these continuities through the neocolonialism framework is thus vital for recognizing how old imperial logics are reasserted by new actors today.

It is against this backdrop that this study situates Ghana’s experience within the wider conversation: by interrogating whether and how Russia’s engagement in Anglophone West Africa during the WG era reflects, deviates from, or resists this enduring pattern of proxy neo-colonialism.

IV. METHODOLOGY

a. **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative, single-case study design to examine the nature and scope of Russia’s engagement with Ghana during the WG era (2017-2023) and to assess Ghana’s foreign policy response within the framework of its long-standing tradition of positive neutrality.

The research was structured around two interrelated lines of inquiry:

- i. Russia’s strategic engagement with Ghana across five key domains: economic and trade relations, security and military cooperation, diplomatic engagement, educational and cultural diplomacy, as well as multilateral engagement and UN voting patterns

- ii. Ghana's responses to Russia's regional activities, with particular attention to the activities of the WG in neighboring states.

b. Case Selection and Justification

Ghana was selected as the focal case study due to its strong democratic credentials, stable political institutions, and overtly pro-Western foreign policy orientation under the administration of President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo (2017-2024). This period coincided with Russia's most assertive phase of re-engagement with Africa through the WG. This timeline is particularly significant as it overlapped with Akufo-Addo's tenure as a two-time Chairman of the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government (2020-2022), during which the region experienced a successive wave of military coups across Francophone West Africa, developments that ultimately paved the way for closer alignments between transitional regimes and Russia.

c. Data Sources

The first part of the study relied heavily on both primary and secondary sources across five key thematic domains. Data on economic and trade relations were sourced from UN Comtrade, the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), and Trading Economics.

Security and military cooperation proved to be one of the most challenging areas for data collection for this study. As a result, the study relied on publicly available data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), supplemented by informal consultations with individuals affiliated with Ghana's Ministry of Defence and National Security (presented anonymously given the absence of clearance from the Institutional Review Board).

For diplomatic engagement, official statements and press releases from Ghanaian and Russian channels were analyzed. Data on educational and cultural diplomacy were obtained from the

official website of the Russian Embassy in Ghana and media sources. Ghana's voting patterns on Russia-related UN resolutions were examined using the UN Digital Library and statements from Ghana's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York.

The second phase leveraged primary sources, including official statements and interviews by President Akufo-Addo and Ghana's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York. These were used to examine how Ghana articulated its foreign policy response to Russia's expanding footprint in West Africa.

Overall, the information provided in this research was supplemented by secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books.

d. Analytical Method

To synthesize the nature and scope of contemporary Russia-Ghana engagement, this study employed document analysis to systematically review both printed and electronic data. In addition, it employed discourse analysis to examine Ghana's official statements during the WG era as a means of understanding how the country rhetorically positioned itself in response to Russia's expanding regional influence. The analysis focused on how diplomatic language, rhetorical framing, and strategic signaling were deployed to highlight Ghana's foreign policy tradition.

e. Scope

This study traced the historical evolution of Russia-Ghana relations, beginning with Ghana's early Cold War alignment with the USSR under President Kwame Nkrumah (1957 to 1966). Attention was given to the 2017-2023 period, marking the height of WG's influence in Africa. This allowed the study to draw connections between past ideological alliances and present-day strategic relations between the two countries.

While Russia's renewed engagement with Africa under President Vladimir Putin in the early 2000s laid the groundwork for its expanding presence on the continent, this study deliberately focused on two critical periods: the post-independence Nkrumah era and the contemporary period marked by the activities of the WG.

f. Delimitations

This study faced several limitations, most notably the challenge of accessing reliable data, particularly in the area of security and military cooperation. The opaque nature of Russia's international engagements, particularly in the African context, compounded by institutional secrecy and limited official disclosures, posed constraints on the empirical depth of the research.

Furthermore, the study's focus on Ghana limited the generalizability of its findings across the broader Anglophone West Africa, given the region's diverse contexts.

Finally, this research was temporally bounded by developments up to the end of 2023, corresponding with the period during which the WG actively operated in Africa, prior to the formal integration of its African operations into the Russian Ministry of Defense's Africa Corps. While emerging public discourse suggests that Ghana's current administration exhibits a greater receptiveness to Russian interests, this study did not incorporate events or policy shifts beyond 2023. As such, any subsequent geopolitical developments, particularly those occurring under the current government, fell outside the scope of this analysis.

V. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RUSSIA-GHANA RELATIONS

a. **Brief Overview of Soviet-Africa Relations**

Throughout the Cold War, the USSR projected itself as a staunch opponent of imperialism and a natural ally of newly independent African states. The USSR viewed African liberation movements as extensions of its global ideological struggle against Western imperialism, seeking to position itself as a trusted partner of the Global South.⁵ To enhance its ideological appeal as a moral vanguard of global decolonization, the Soviets offered vocal support for the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and consistently aligned with African states in multilateral forums such as the UN. This included backing resolutions on the liberation of Southern Africa, anti-Apartheid initiatives, and condemnations of Western imperialism and neocolonialism, efforts that ultimately earned the USSR the designation of sub-Saharan Africa's de facto "ally in protest."⁶

The USSR developed particularly strong ties with Marxist-aligned regimes such as Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia, where Soviet advisers, arms, and infrastructure support were deployed at scale.⁷ Across the African continent, these ties were pursued through a combination of military assistance, technical cooperation, and cultural diplomacy, most visibly through educational exchange programs that brought thousands of African students to Soviet universities.⁸

However, under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the USSR's engagement with Africa sharply declined as perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), a set of sweeping reforms launched by Gorbachev himself, ushered in a wave of fierce public criticism of Soviet foreign policy.⁹ As economic hardship deepened across the USSR, public discourse and media narratives began to

⁵ Maxim Matusevich, "Revisiting the Soviet Moment in Sub-Saharan Africa," *History Compass* 7, no. 5 (September 2009): 1259–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2009.00626.x>, 1259.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1263

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1264

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1261-1262

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1265

scapegoat its costly commitments in the Global South, framing it as a drain on domestic resources and a contributor to the nation's internal decline. Moreover, the Soviets pursuit of rapprochement with the West prompted a strategic reassessment of their foreign policy, leading to an irreversible retreat from prior ideological engagements in the Global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, in favor of a more pragmatic "national reconciliation."¹⁰ As state support waned, African students in the USSR faced shrinking scholarships, worsening living conditions, and rising racism and xenophobia, reflecting a broader erosion of Soviet-African solidarity in the final years of the Cold War.

Despite these shortcomings, the USSR left a lasting imprint on the continent, especially in its material support for liberation movements and the ideological education of a generation of postcolonial elites. As Osei-Opare (2019, 86) observes, as early as the 1920s, the USSR stood out as the sole major white-majority power actively championing anti-colonialism, racial equality, and the right of Black peoples to self-determination, a move that distinguished it from the prevailing imperial orthodoxy of the time.

This brief context of Soviet-African engagement is vital for understanding how the USSR pursued and maintained relations with key states like Ghana, especially during the Nkrumah era.

b. Soviet-Ghana Relations During the Nkrumah Era (1957-1966)

"From now on, there is a new African in the world, and that new African is ready to fight his own battle and show that after all, the Black man is capable of managing his own affairs. We

¹⁰ Ibid., 1266

are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, young as we are, that we are prepared to lay our own foundation.”¹¹

These powerful words formed part of the iconic speech delivered by Kwame Nkrumah on the night of Ghana’s independence on March 6, 1957. This statement captured not only the triumph of political emancipation but also the weighty ambition that underpinned Ghana’s postcolonial vision. For Nkrumah, independence was never an end in itself; rather, it was the foundational platform upon which true sovereignty, economic freedom, and continental liberation were to be built. The speech reflected his awareness of the geopolitical terrain Ghana was entering and his determination to assert the agency of African states in a world still structured around imperialism. It also signaled his intention to pursue a bold foreign policy that would allow Ghana to craft its own developmental path, untethered from Western dependency. This conviction would go on to define Ghana’s early Cold War posture, especially in its engagements with the USSR.

The relationship between Ghana and the Soviet Union during the presidency of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah (1957-1966) was one of the most important episodes of the Cold War era in Africa. It marked a rare instance where a newly independent African state, led by a Pan-Africanist visionary, navigated Cold War geopolitics on its own terms, balancing ideological affinity, strategic calculation, and national development goals.

i. Ideological Affinity and Strategic Hesitancy: Ghana’s Early Caution

At independence in March 1957, Ghana was the first sub-Saharan African country to break free from colonial rule. Under Kwame Nkrumah, the country emerged as a symbol of Black emancipation and the custodian of Pan-African unity. Contrary to conventional accounts that cast

¹¹ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955-1968*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2022, 65.

African nations as passive actors in Cold War geopolitics, Osei-Opare (2019, 87) argues that Ghana, led by Nkrumah, a staunch admirer of Marxist ideology, navigated the complex geopolitical terrain of the era with strategic caution and assertiveness. While the West and East competed for influence across newly decolonized states, post-independence Ghana adopted a foreign policy that Soviet observers likened to India's model of "active neutralism," an approach marked by global engagement without formal alignment to either side of the Cold War divide.¹²

By 1958, Ghana's commitment to "active neutralism" had evolved into a clearly articulated foreign policy doctrine known as "positive neutrality." In a landmark speech before the U.S. Congress on July 24, 1958, President Nkrumah drew upon Marcus Garvey's Pan-African slogan "Africa for the Africans" and compared Ghana's stance to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. He emphasized that, like America's 19th-century desire to remain uninvolved in European conflicts, Ghana sought to keep Africa free from the entanglements of Cold War rivalries. Nkrumah insisted that non-alignment was not a strategy of opportunistic maneuvering between East and West, but a principled position aimed at safeguarding African sovereignty and promoting continental unity. As he famously warned: "When the bull elephants fight, the grass is trampled down," underscoring the danger of great power competition to weaker states. Thus, positive neutrality emerged not as passive non-involvement but as a deliberate diplomatic posture, one that sits at the heart of Ghana's foreign policy to this day.¹³

Among the newly independent West African states, Ghana emerged as a critical focus of Soviet foreign policy efforts in the late 1950s. Alongside Sékou Touré of Guinea and Modibo Keita of

¹² Ibid., 71

¹³ Frank Gerits, "'When the Bull Elephants Fight': Kwame Nkrumah, Non-Alignment, and Pan-Africanism as an Interventionist Ideology in the Global Cold War (1957–66)," *The International History Review* 37, no. 5 (2015): 954, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2015.1064465>.

Mali, Kwame Nkrumah was identified by the Soviet leadership as a promising partner in the Third World. Although Ghana initially preferred Western engagement, Moscow remained persistent in its diplomatic overtures, recognizing Nkrumah's ideological leanings toward socialism and his anti-colonial posture.¹⁴ Despite the Soviet Union's early appeal as a white-majority power openly opposing colonialism and racism, two pivotal incidents in the 1930s prompted deep skepticism among many Black intellectuals and political elites, sentiments that would later inform Ghana's cautious diplomatic posture toward the USSR. First, the USSR's lukewarm response to Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia undermined the image of the Soviet Union as a reliable ally against imperial aggression. Rather than taking a firm anti-fascist stance, the USSR not only delayed support but also sold fuel to the Italian forces. Secondly, the persecution of prominent Black communists, most notably George Padmore, a close advisor to Kwame Nkrumah, exposed the racial and ideological contradictions of Soviet solidarity. Padmore, who was expelled from the Soviet Communist Party in 1934 and narrowly escaped Stalin's purges, became a vocal critic of Soviet paternalism, emphasizing the USSR's prioritization of class struggle over racial justice. His influential writings, particularly *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*, resonated deeply with Kwame Nkrumah and shaped Ghana's early post-independence foreign policy.¹⁵

These historical grievances and ideological tensions culminated in Ghana's conspicuous diplomatic coldness toward the Soviet Union during its independence celebrations in March 1957. Although Soviet representatives were invited, their exclusion from key ceremonial functions served as a deliberate signal of Ghana's ambivalent posture toward the USSR.¹⁶ Despite Ghana's

¹⁴ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet, 90-91*

¹⁵ Nana Osei-Opare, "Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft, Race, and Citizenship, Ghana-Soviet Relations, 1957–1966," *Journal of West African History* 5, no. 2 (2019): 90, <https://doi.org/10.14321/jwestafrihist.5.2.0085>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86

diplomatic niceties, the Nkrumah government remained hesitant to deepen formal ties with the Soviets, repeatedly citing financial limitations and staffing shortages as reasons for delaying the establishment of an embassy in Moscow.¹⁷ Around the same time, Nkrumah declined a Soviet invitation for Ghanaian officials to visit the USSR for agricultural cooperation, citing the country's limited capacity to dispatch delegations abroad, an indication of his administration's deliberate and measured approach to forging any diplomatic ties with the USSR.¹⁸ This contradicted Soviet expectations and led officials like Ambassador Yakov Alexandrovich Malik to characterize Ghana's foreign policy as "hostile" to Soviet interests in 1957.¹⁹

ii. Gradual Deepening of Relations

As previously mentioned, a significant factor behind Ghana's early diplomatic wariness toward the USSR was the counsel of George Padmore, a Trinidadian intellectual and a staunch critic of Soviet paternalism, who became Nkrumah's closest Advisor on African affairs. Having initially embraced Soviet communism after studying in the U.S. in the early 1920s, Padmore joined the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow in 1921, reflecting his deep admiration for the USSR's anti-colonial rhetoric and its vision of socialist planning as a pathway to racial and economic justice. However, his time in Moscow left him profoundly disillusioned. The brutality of Stalinism, coupled with the Soviet Union's inconsistent and often ambivalent stance on colonial liberation, prompted Padmore to sever ties.²⁰ As a trusted advisor, Padmore played a pivotal role in shaping Ghana's foreign policy between 1957 and 1959, driven by his commitment to shielding Ghana from "swapping one set of white imperial rulers for another."²¹ As further evidenced by

¹⁷ Ibid., 96

¹⁸ Ibid., 94

¹⁹ Ibid., 95

²⁰ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet*, 23-24

²¹ Nana Osei-Opare, "Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft, 94

Osei-Opare (2019, 96), “only Nkrumah had a greater hand than Padmore in shaping Ghana’s foreign policy during the first two years.” Padmore’s death on September 23, 1959, however, signaled a turning point in Ghana’s foreign policy towards the USSR. His demise removed what the USSR viewed as the last major barrier to advancing its diplomatic agenda in Ghana.²²

Prior to Padmore’s death, tensions between Nkrumah and the British had already begun to deepen. This was evident in his strained engagement with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and the eventual resignation of his chief economic advisor, Arthur Lewis, in 1958, amid sharp disagreements over Ghana’s development trajectory. For instance, while Lewis favored gradual, technocratic progress anchored in foreign investment and continuity with colonial-era economic structures, Nkrumah believed that establishing embassies, building air forces, and projecting Ghana’s voice on the international stage were indispensable tools to assert the country’s leadership on the continent. His urgency was further fueled by the perceived competition from Nigeria and Ethiopia, both of which were also positioning themselves as standard-bearers of African unity.²³ These tensions, combined with Padmore’s created a political opening for stronger Soviet-Ghana relations.

The Congo Crisis of the early 1960s also marked a watershed moment for newly independent African states such as Ghana, which, though previously committed to a policy of non-alignment, found themselves compelled to align more closely with the USSR.²⁴ Following Congo’s independence in June 1960, internal instability erupted as the national army mutinied and the mineral-rich province of Katanga, backed by Belgian forces and Western interests, declared secession. Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba’s appeal to the UN for support was met with a tepid

²² Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet*, 99-100

²³ *Ibid.*, 98-99

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 154

response, including setting up a peacekeeping operation that quickly became mired in controversies, particularly over its limited mandate, reluctance to use force against the Katangese secessionists, exclusion of African troops from key roles, and perceived alignment with Western interests. Frustrated by the UN's neutrality and suspicious of Western collusion in Congo's destabilization, Lumumba turned to the USSR for military assistance. Although the Soviets lacked the military capacity for meaningful intervention, they clashed with both the UN and Western powers on multiple occasions.²⁵ Most notably, at the 15th UN General Assembly in September 1960, Khrushchev dramatically called for Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld's resignation over the UN's perceived complicity in Western efforts to undermine Congolese sovereignty.²⁶ In retaliation, the US and its allies supported a series of political maneuvers that culminated in a coup by Joseph Mobutu and Lumumba's subsequent arrest and brutal assassination in January 1961.²⁷

These events, particularly the perceived complicity of the West in undermining Congo's nascent democracy and the assassination of Lumumba, sent shockwaves across the continent. For Nkrumah, the crisis confirmed his deepest fears about neocolonial subversion, the vulnerability of African sovereignty, and the limits of non-alignment. This prompted Ghana to recalibrate its earlier diplomatic caution and intensify its alignment with the USSR, viewing it as a more dependable partner in the struggle against Western imperialism. For instance, between 1960 and 1961, Nkrumah and Khrushchev exchanged several correspondences over the future of Congo, complemented by a series of high-level meetings between Ghanaian and Soviet ministers to align their positions and formulate joint responses.²⁸ Additionally, the USSR provided Ghana with

²⁵ Ibid., 151

²⁶ Frank Gerits, "'When the Bull Elephants Fight': Kwame Nkrumah, 958

²⁷ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet*, 152

²⁸ Nana Osei-Opare, "Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft, 97-98

intelligence revealing that British officers embedded within the Ghanaian military, including General Alexander, the British officer in charge of Ghana's Armed Services, were secretly reporting to London and Ottawa and actively undermining Nkrumah's initiatives, including plans to send military cadets to the USSR, as well as how to sabotage it. Interpreting these acts as neocolonial sabotage, Nkrumah expelled over 200 British officers and proceeded to dispatch dozens of cadets to the Soviet Union.²⁹ As Osei-Opare (2019, 98) notes, when confronted over Ghana's deepening ties with the Soviet Union, Nkrumah defended his position unequivocally, asserting: "We make no apology for the steps ... taken to strengthen our trade and economic relations with the Soviet Union," framing the move as essential to securing Ghana's sovereignty.

By August 1960, leading Ghanaian officials began to refer to the USSR as Ghana's "real friends." During his 1961 visit to Moscow, Nkrumah echoed this sentiment, observing that: "nowhere have I felt to myself and to Africans such friendly and sincere and unbiased attitude as in the USSR." Contrasting this with his experiences in the West, he added: "In the USA and England, I always felt slightly palpable, but noticeable of neglect and arrogance to Africans. Here, in the USSR, my companions and I feel as in our own family, among sincere friends."³⁰

iii. Ghana and the USSR in Strategic Partnership

At the height of Ghana-Soviet relations in the early 1960s, bilateral cooperation expanded significantly across strategic sectors. In April-May 1960, a Ghanaian parliamentary delegation paid its first official visit to the Soviet Union, marking an important step in formal diplomatic engagement.³¹ Shortly afterwards, on August 4, the USSR agreed to extend a credit facility to Ghana amounting to 160 million rubles, repayable over twelve years at an interest rate of 2.5%.

²⁹ Ibid., 98

³⁰ Ibid., 98

³¹ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet*, 103

The funds were earmarked for key development projects in Ghana's industrial and agricultural sectors.³²

As part of its broader support for Ghana's postcolonial economic transformation, the Soviet Union approved and co-financed the Tema fishing harbor project, one of Nkrumah's flagship initiatives aimed at diversifying Ghana's economy beyond cocoa. Soviet advisers drafted a comprehensive construction plan that encompassed port facilities, refrigeration infrastructure, fish processing factories, vessel maintenance workshops, and residential quarters for workers.³³

In addition to the Akosombo Dam, Nkrumah sought to expand Ghana's hydroelectric capacity by reviving a colonial-era proposal to construct a dam at the Bui gorge on the Black Volta. In late 1961, the Ghanaian government requested Soviet assistance to assess the feasibility and cost of the project. Soviet engineers and energy specialists conducted site studies and began preliminary work on a 200,000-kilowatt power station and a 250-kilometer transmission line designed to transport electricity to northern Ghana. The project was envisioned for completion between 1964 and 1965.³⁴

In February 1961, the two countries signed a landmark agreement on peaceful nuclear cooperation, through which the USSR supported Ghana in establishing a research nuclear reactor and an isotope laboratory at the University of Ghana, Legon. The Soviets also dispatched hundreds of specialists, ranging from geologists and engineers to doctors and educators, who worked in Ghana throughout

³² *Ibid.*, 104

³³ *Ibid.*, 125

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 122

the 1960s. Military exchanges were complemented by extensive technical assistance, with the USSR providing 23 separate loans worth \$53 million in the 1960s alone.³⁵

In the domain of education and human capital development, the Soviet Union played a transformative role by training over 2,000 Ghanaian students in various disciplines and hosting another 1,000 in Soviet schools across more than forty cities. The establishment of the Soviet-Ghana Friendship Society in 1961 and the Soviet commercial and industrial exhibition, which took place in Accra in 1962, further underscored the cultural and ideological warmth of the era.³⁶

By March 1960, in response to the growing number of Ghanaian citizens and students residing in the Soviet Union, Ghana finally established an embassy in Moscow to safeguard their welfare. Throughout 1962, this embassy became a critical institution for Ghanaians in the USSR, providing a platform for addressing grievances, seeking redress against discrimination, and engaging with local Soviet institutions in cities where Ghanaian nationals were based.³⁷

iv. Collapse of the Alliance and Aftermath

The fall of Nikita Khrushchev from power in October 1964 represented a critical turning point in Soviet engagement with Ghana and the broader Third World. The new Soviet leadership that replaced Khrushchev did not share his ideological commitment to the Global South. Under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev and Aleksei Kosygin, the USSR adopted a more cautious and economically pragmatic foreign policy. In his first major address as party secretary in November 1964, Brezhnev notably omitted any mention of economic aid to the Third World, reflecting a retrenchment from bold Third World engagements. During this period, the Soviets signed

³⁵ O. S. Kulkova and H. A. Sanusi, "Russia-Ghana Relations in the Past and the Present: A Time-Proven Partnership," *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 16, no. 2 (June 2016): 298.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 298

³⁷ Nana Osei-Opare, "Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft, 100

markedly fewer economic and technical cooperation agreements with African states, and notably, none with Ghana. While trade between the two countries persisted, it was now driven strictly by market considerations. Moscow bought more Ghanaian cocoa when global prices were low and scaled back purchases when prices rose, underscoring the shift from ideological solidarity to transactional pragmatism in Soviet foreign policy.³⁸

The February 24, 1966, military coup that deposed President Kwame Nkrumah dealt a final blow to the Soviet-Ghana relations. While the USSR had already begun scaling back its Third World engagements, Nkrumah's fall eliminated one of Moscow's most committed African partners. The new regime, led by the National Liberation Council (NLC), swiftly dissolved Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP) and severed diplomatic ties with socialist states, therefore signaling an abrupt pivot toward the West.³⁹ By April 1967, the new military regime had defaulted on repaying Ghana's debts to the USSR, which had accumulated to £G20 million, effectively bringing all joint development projects to a halt. The NLC expelled 483 Soviet citizens, comprising technical experts, advisors, and workers, and declined to recognize academic qualifications earned by Ghanaian students in the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ Although the Soviets condemned the coup and facilitated Nkrumah's return from China aboard a Soviet aircraft, they refrained from further action, even abandoning covert intelligence plans of a counter-coup to reinstate Nkrumah.⁴¹ This tepid response, so unlike the USSR's defiant posture during the Congo Crisis, reflected a broader strategic recalibration under Brezhnev, in which Africa ceased to be a revolutionary priority and relationships such as that with Ghana were quietly deprioritized.

³⁸ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet*, 207-208

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 208-209

⁴⁰ Nana Osei-Opare, "Uneasy Comrades: Postcolonial Statecraft," 103

⁴¹ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet*, 209

c. Historical Justification: Why Nkrumah and the WG Era?

Anchoring this study in the historical context of Soviet-Ghana relations during the Nkrumah era enables a nuanced exploration of the evolving nature of Ghana’s foreign policy and its interactions with global powers. The early post-independence period was instrumental in shaping Ghana’s diplomatic identity, particularly its commitment to “positive neutrality” and non-alignment amid superpower rivalries. This legacy is instructive for analyzing Ghana’s present-day response to Russia’s strategic overtures, particularly in the era of the WG, allowing for a deeper interrogation of the continuities and shifts in its foreign policy ethos amid evolving geopolitical dynamics.

VI. RUSSIA-GHANA RELATIONS DURING THE WG ERA (2017-2023)

a. Economic and Trade Relations

Economic and trade ties between Ghana and the Russian Federation remained a relatively underexplored aspect of their bilateral relations, particularly in comparison to Ghana’s more robust ties with traditional partners such as China, and the EU.

The below illustrate trade flows between Ghana and Russia from 2016 to 2023, as reported by the UN Comtrade and WITS. It shows Ghana’s exports to and imports from Russia, as well as the resulting trade balance. The sharp surge in imports in 2023, exceeding US \$1 billion, significantly widened the trade deficit.

Figure 1



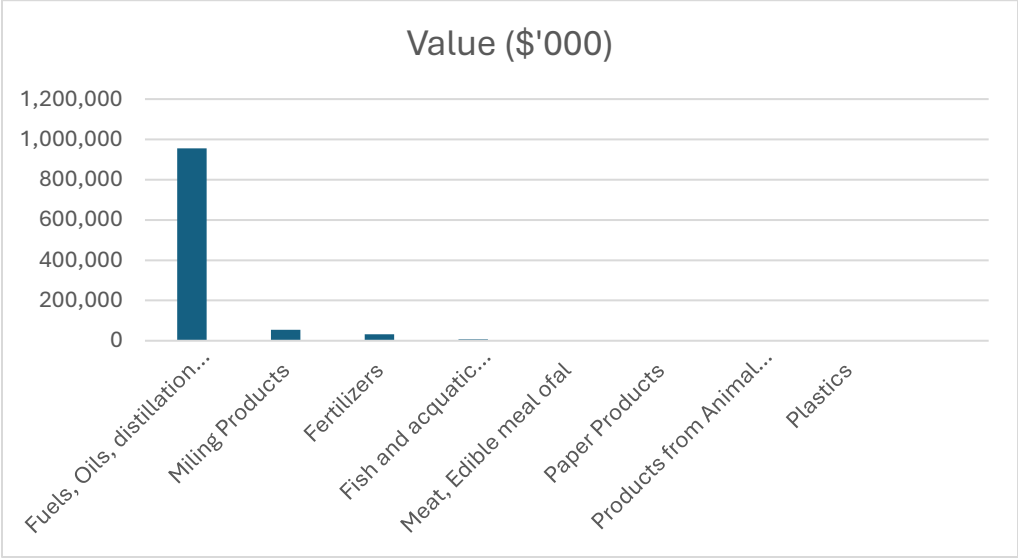
Table 1 below provides the corresponding trade values in exact figures. The year 2020 has been marked as 'N/A' due to the absence of reported bilateral trade data, likely caused by disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Year	Exports (\$'000)	Imports (\$'000)	Trade Balance (\$'000)
2016	122.58	69,249.53	-69,126.95
2017	4,734.10	135,108.24	-130,374.14
2018	9,037.88	177,857.53	-168,819.65
2019	7563.53	142,318.78	-134,755.25
2020	N/A	N/A	N/A
2021	9,424.85	280,916.78	-271,491.93
2022	129,512.59	141,724.66	-12,212.07
2023	10,979.46	1,051,877.13	-1,040,897.67

Ghana's Key Imports from Russia

Figure 2 shows Ghana's primary imports from Russia as of 2023 with trade heavily skewed in favor of energy-related products, totaling over US \$955 million, while its largest export, oil seeds,

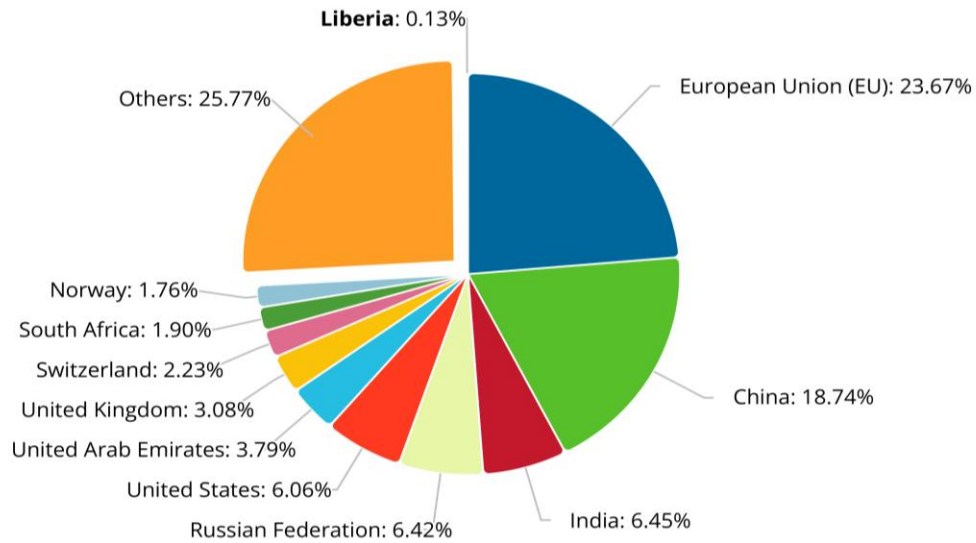
grain, seed and oleaginous fruits, amounted to just US \$9.63 million. This underscores the heavy energy reliance in the bilateral trade relationship.



Source: Trading Economics

Ghana’s Import Sources in 2023: Comparative Overview

Figure 3 below illustrates Ghana’s major import partners in 2023. The EU led all sources, accounting for 23.67% of Ghana’s total imports, followed by China (18.74%) and India (6.45%). Russia ranked as Ghana’s fourth largest import source, supplying 6.42% of total imports, slightly ahead of the U.S. at 6.06%. While Russia has emerged as a steady supplier, Ghana’s trade remains more diversified toward traditional global partners. In 2023, the combined import share from the West stood at 29.73%, significantly outweighing Russia’s 6.42%.



Source: UN Comtrade

b. Security and Military Cooperation

Between 2017 and 2023, as Russia deepened its military footprint across Africa, most notably through the WG’s assertive operations in Francophone West Africa, Ghana presented a notable exception to this trend. Despite the region-wide proliferation of Russian arms deals, security agreements, and PMC activity, Ghana appeared to have maintained a largely non-aligned posture with minimal overt military engagement with Russia. However, it is important to note that information on security cooperation, particularly involving Russia, is often difficult to verify, as such agreements are frequently shrouded in opacity and not readily disclosed, especially within African contexts.

While this section draws primarily on open-source data, it is supplemented by informal background insights from individuals with prior affiliations to Ghana’s Ministry of Defence and National Security between 2017 to 2024. According to their insights, Ghana had minimal to no formal security or military cooperation with the Russian Federation during the period under

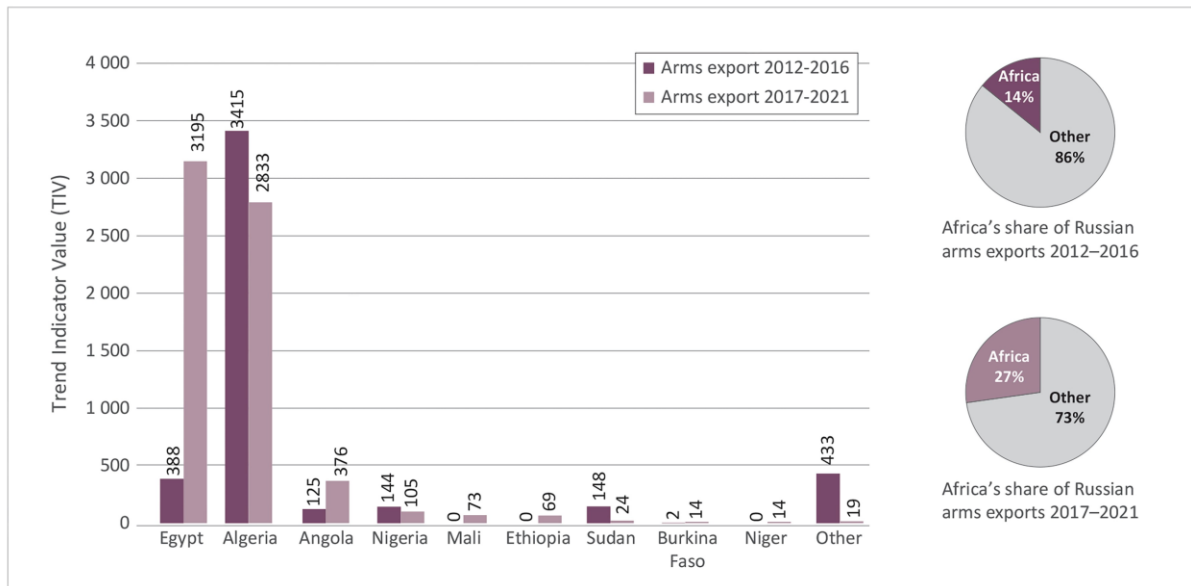
review. Although this information cannot be independently verified through official records, it provides important contextual knowledge that aligns with the absence of documented agreements or joint initiatives in open-source datasets.

Formal Military Cooperation and Arms Deal

According to these informal insights, the May 9, 2018, Defense Cooperation Agreement between the U.S. and Ghana stands out as the most formalized, detailed, and binding security pact Ghana entered into with any major power during the period under review. While no publicly disclosed military-technical agreements were concluded with the Russian Federation between 2017-2023, it is to be noted that Russia made proposals in 2018 for cooperation in the area of information security. However, these proposals were not adopted, nor did they progress into any formal agreement. The most recent publicly known military cooperation agreement between Russia and Ghana was signed in June 2016, a military-technical cooperation agreement that focused on weapons supply and joint training.⁴²

⁴² “Russian Security Cooperation Agreements Signed July 2014-May 2020,” Institute for the Study of War, 2020, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/List%20of%20Russian%20Security%20Cooperation%20Agreements%20Post-2014.pdf?utm_source, 6.

Figure 4



Source: FOI

Data above covering the period 2017-2021 lists Ghana among thirteen African countries categorized as “Other” recipients of Russian arms exports. This group includes states such as Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, South Africa, Cameroon, and Rwanda, among others, and collectively accounts for a small fraction of Russia’s total arms exports to the continent. Ghana’s inclusion in this category indicates that while there was some level of Russian arms transfer, the volume was marginal and significantly lower compared to major recipients in the Sahel such as Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger.⁴³

⁴³ Karolina Lindén, “Russia’s Relations with Africa Small, Military-Oriented and with Destabilising Effects,” FOI Studies in African Security, January 2023, https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208090?utm_source, 5.

SIPRI Fact Sheet 2025

Arms transfers data from SIPRI covering the period 2020-2024 confirms that Russia was not a major arms supplier to Ghana, underscoring its limited footprint in Ghana's defense landscape. While Russia accounted for 11% of total West African arms imports, its arms exports were heavily concentrated in just four countries, with Mali alone accounting for 54% of Russia's arms exports. Ghana was not listed among Russia's top recipients, indicating either a complete absence or negligible volume of Russian arms transfers during this period.

Wagner/PMC Presence

Despite regional concerns over the WG's operations in neighboring states such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, there is no publicly available evidence showing any activities by the Group within Ghanaian territory. This assessment is supported by multiple lines of inquiry: comprehensive reviews of Ghana's parliamentary Hansards revealed no mention of Wagner or any Russian PMC presence; informal background consultations with security-affiliated individuals likewise confirmed the absence of such activity; and no public statements were issued by the Ghana Armed Forces (GAF), the Ministry of Defence, or Ministry of National Security during the period under consideration.

Furthermore, Ghana's media landscape, typically responsive to high-profile foreign security developments, did not circulate reports or even credible rumors regarding Wagner's activity. Investigative and security-focused institutions such as the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) Africa, Center for Democratic Development Ghana (CDD) Ghana, and the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) have likewise not attributed any PMC involvement to Ghana. Additionally, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) conflict

data for the review period shows no indication of foreign non-state military actors operating within Ghana's borders. Collectively, the absence of evidence reinforces the conclusion that Ghana maintained a firewall, whether intentionally or otherwise, against the kind of Russian security incursions observed elsewhere in West Africa.

c. Diplomatic Engagement

Diplomatic engagement is often a barometer of strategic alignment and mutual interest in bilateral relations. In the case of Ghana and the Russian Federation, a 2023 national security assessment identified Ghana as one of five African countries with maximum diplomatic distance from the Russian Federation, alongside Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Malawi.⁴⁴ It is worthy of note that the 2017-2023 period was marked by a conspicuous absence of direct bilateral visits or engagements at the head-of-state level between President Vladimir Putin and President Akufo-Addo.

Russia-Africa Summit (2019 and 2023)

President Akufo-Addo attended the first-ever Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum, held in Sochi from October 23 to 24, 2019, joining 45 other African heads of state and government in what was widely seen as a milestone in Russia's re-engagement with the continent.⁴⁵ However, although present at this inaugural gathering, there is no record of a bilateral meeting between President Akufo-Addo and President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the summit, a notable

⁴⁴ Government of Ghana, Ministry of National Security, *Report on the Second Russia-Africa Economic Forum and Summit* (Accra, 2023), 6.

⁴⁵ "Outcomes of the First Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum. Roscongress to Continue Working on the African Track until the next Forum," Russia-Africa, accessed July 14, 2025, <https://summitafrica.ru/en/archive/2019/summit-outcomes/>.

omission, given that President Putin held one-on-one meetings with at least sixteen African leaders during the event, including those of Nigeria, Guinea, South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda, and Egypt.

At the second Russia-Africa Summit held in St. Petersburg in July 27 to 28, 2023, President Akufo-Addo was notably absent. Instead, Ghana's delegation was led by the Minister of National security.⁴⁶

d. Educational and Cultural Diplomacy

Over the years, Russia has increasingly turned to educational and cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool to deepen bilateral ties with Ghana. One of the most visible platforms through which Russia advances its educational and cultural diplomacy in Ghana is the Center for Open Education in Russian, a project supported by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, which has been in existence since 2003. The center is designed to serve as a conduit for Russian language instruction, cultural exchange, and the promotion of Russian science and art.⁴⁷ While the School of Languages at the University of Ghana, the country's premier academic institution, already offers Russian as one of its modern language options, the launch of the Center for Open Education in Russian on the university's campus on November 3, 2023, marked a significant expansion of Russia's soft power outreach in Ghana's academic space.⁴⁸

On the occasion of the 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Ghana and the Russian Federation, Russian Ambassador Sergei Berdnikov announced that, in 2022, the Russian Federation expanded its educational cooperation with Ghana by increasing the government scholarship quota for Ghanaian students from 70 to 110 annually. He also added that, as of 2023,

⁴⁶ Government of Ghana, *Report on the Second Russia-Africa Economic Forum*, 2.

⁴⁷ "Information about the Center," Center for Open Education, accessed July 22, 2025, https://newyspu.ru/en/gh_coo/.

⁴⁸ "New Opportunities for Learning Russian in Ghana," Africa Press, November 8, 2023, <https://www.africa-press.net/ghana/all-news/new-opportunities-for-learning-russian-in-ghana>.

over 900 Ghanaian students were enrolled in Russian higher education institutions, with more than 300 benefiting from tuition-free programs.⁴⁹

Following several fruitful negotiations and diplomatic groundwork laid in 2023 between Ghana's Josping Group of Companies and Russian educational institutions, a landmark MoU was signed with the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) in February 2024. The MoU provides for 600 Ghanaian students to pursue higher education in Russia; 120 annually from 2024 to 2029, in various disciplines.⁵⁰ In a complementary move, Mr. Joseph Siaw Agyepong, the Executive Chairman of the Josping Group of Companies announced plans with the support of RUDN University to introduce Russian language courses in Ghanaian institutions.⁵¹

As part of its broader cultural diplomacy efforts, Russia engages Ghana through youth-focused initiatives. On October 10, 2023, Russian Ambassador to Ghana, H.E. Sergei Berdnikov, met with the Ghanaian Youth Preparatory Committee, in advance of the 2024 World Youth Festival scheduled to take place in Russia. The meeting emphasized the importance of youth cooperation as a pillar of bilateral engagement. Discussions included logistical coordination and Russia's expressed interest in ensuring high Ghanaian youth representation at the festival.⁵²

⁴⁹ ⁵² "Russian Ambassador Sergei Berdnikov's Speech at the Russia Day Reception, June 12, 2023," Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Ghana, June 12, 2023, https://ghana.mid.ru/en/press_center/news/russian_ambassador_sergeri_berdnikov_s_speech_at_the_russia_day_reception_june_12_2023/.

⁵⁰ "600 Students to Benefit from Scholarships as Josping Group Signs MoU with RUDN University," Citinewsroom, February 2, 2024, <https://citinewsroom.com/2024/02/600-students-to-benefit-from-scholarships-as-josping-group-signs-mou-with-rudn-university/>.

⁵¹ "Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Josping Group Sign MoU on Scholarships in Agriculture," Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Ghana, February 4, 2024, https://ghana.mid.ru/en/press_center/news/peoples_friendship_university_of_russia_josping_group_sign_mou_on_scholarships_in_agriculture/.

⁵² "Russian Ambassador to Ghana Sergei Berdnikov Meets with Chairman of the Ghanaian Youth Preparatory Committee for the World Youth Festival 2024 John Aggrey," Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Ghana, October 10, 2023,

e. Multilateral Engagement and UN Voting Patterns

This section presents Ghana’s formal voting positions on key Russia-related resolutions at the UNGA during the WG era, with emphasis on the period following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Table 2: Ghana’s Voting Record on Crimea-Specific UNGA Resolutions (2017-2022)

Resolution	Date Adopted	Summary	Vote	Notes
A/RES/72/190	December 19, 2017	Condemned Russia’s occupation of Crimea; cited human rights violations and abuses against the residents of Crimea.	Abstained	Consistent with neutral posture on Crimea-specific resolutions.
A/RES/73/263	December 22, 2018	Reiterated condemnation of Russia’s actions in Crimea; emphasized legal obligations under international humanitarian law.	Abstained	Maintained non-alignment on Crimea-specific issues.
A/RES/74/168	December 18, 2019	Highlighted militarization of the peninsula and targeted repression of Crimean Tatars, contributing to forced displacement.	Abstained	Aligned with prior abstention pattern on Crimea.
A/RES/75/192	December 16, 2020	Addressed various human rights violations in Sevastopol and Crimea, including forced conscription of residents into the Russian armed forces, arbitrary detentions, etc.	Abstained	Aligned with prior neutral stance on Crimea-specific issues.
A/RES/76/179	December 16, 2021	Reaffirmed Ukraine’s sovereignty over Crimea; Expressed concerns about the militarization of young people and the blocking of access to Ukrainian education in Crimea.	Abstained	Continued abstention on Crimea.
A/RES/77/229	December 15, 2022	Condemned Russia’s continuous occupation of parts of the territory of	Abstained	Maintained its traditional neutral stance.

https://ghana.mid.ru/en/press_center/news/russian_ambassador_to_ghana_sergeri_berdnikov_meets_with_chairman_of_the_ghanaian_youth_preparatory_c/.

		Ukraine; Reaffirmed the non-recognition of the illegal annexation; Condemned violations of international humanitarian law.		
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Source: United Nations Digital Library (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/>)

Table 3: Ghana’s Voting Pattern on Russia-related Issues at UNGA (2022-2023)

Resolution	Date Adopted	Summary	Vote	Notes
ES-11/1	March 2, 2022	Deplored Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; demanded full withdrawal of Russian forces and reversal of recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk. Also confirmed Belarus’ involvement in unlawful force.	In Favour	Joined 141 states, backing Ukraine’s sovereignty.
ES-11/2	March 24, 2022	Reiterated full implementation of resolution ES-11/1; condemned attacks on civilian population and civilian infrastructure.	In Favour	Showed consistency with prior vote, reinforcing Ghana’s support for international law.
ES-11/3	April 7, 2022	Decided to suspend the rights of membership in the Human Rights Council of the Russian Federation.	Abstained	Joined 58 abstentions, reflecting caution about punitive precedents while condemning violations.
ES-11/4	October 12, 2022	Declared sham referendums & annexations of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine illegal; demanded unconditional withdrawal of Russia’s military forces from the territory of Ukraine.	In Favour	Joined 143 states, an even stronger condemnation than ES-11/1.
ES-11/5	November 14, 2022	Called for the Russian Federation to be held accountable for its actions in	In Favour	Backed financial accountability for invasion impacts.

		Ukraine and to provide reparations for the damage caused.		
ES-11/6	February 23, 2023	Reaffirmed UN Charter principles for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine.	In Favour	Reinforced commitment to peaceful resolution and territorial integrity

Source: United Nations Digital Library (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/>)

Observation on Voting Trends (2017-2023)

As Tables 2 and 3 illustrate, Ghana maintained a consistent abstention on Crimea-specific resolutions between 2017 and 2022, aligning with its traditional non-aligned foreign policy posture. However, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Ghana’s voting behavior shifted markedly. In all but one of the emergency special session resolutions addressing the broader conflict, Ghana voted in favor, demonstrating a clear commitment to the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and humanitarian protection under the UN Charter.

f. Hypothesis Evaluation

The first part of this study hypothesized that Russia’s foreign policy approach in Ghana during the WG era diverged significantly from its overt militarized strategy in Francophone West Africa. It argued that in response to Ghana’s democratic and pro-Western foreign policy orientation, Russia would recalibrate its engagement towards a more subtle, soft power strategy. The empirical evidence gathered across all five thematic domains above strongly supports this hypothesis.

From the above, the nature of Russia’s engagement with Ghana was overwhelmingly non-militarized, with no evidence of WG presence or activities in Ghana, a stark contrast to its assertive and widely documented operations in Francophone neighboring countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The study found no evidence of any active military-technical agreement concluded

with the Russian Federation during the period. Instead, the existence of a comprehensive 2018 U.S.-Ghana Defense Cooperation Agreement demonstrated Ghana's unambiguous preference for traditional Western security partnerships. In addition, arms transfer data from SIPRI and FOI confirmed Russia's negligible footprint in Ghana's defense architecture, unlike Mali that accounted for more than half of Russia's arms exports to West Africa.

Contrary to Russia's proxy neo-colonial orientation observed in countries like Mali and CAR, characterized heavily by the WG, security-for-resources, and elite security patronage, its approach in Ghana was markedly defined by symbolic diplomacy, educational and cultural exchanges, and economic overtures. This observation addresses an existing academic oversight that portrays West Africa as a monolithic geopolitical landscape dominated by fragile, authoritarian regimes. It demonstrates that Russia does not conduct a one-size-fits-all foreign policy strategy in West Africa but instead recalibrates its tool of engagement based on the political contexts of individual states. This differentiated foreign policy approach reaffirms the importance of disaggregating West African states in analyses of Russia-Africa relations. It also refutes any simplistic assumption that Russia lacks interest in Anglophone West Africa; rather, the study finds that while Russia is present in Ghana, its persuasive reach and strategic influence remained limited under this period.

Ghana's democratic resilience, pro-Western leanings, and the absence of regime volatility or a fragile security environment, under the leadership of President Akufo-Addo constrained Russia's capacity to replicate coercive strategies it employed in Francophone West Africa during the WG era. These factors undoubtedly restricted Russia's strategic use of coercive tools such as PMCs, arms deals, or covert operations, tools it had hitherto successfully deployed in more fragile and authoritarian contexts.

A key insight emerging from the study is the role of multilateral diplomacy as an instrument of influence. One of Russia's strategic interests in West Africa is to leverage its security-for-resources relationships to secure support on key resolutions at multilateral forums. Data from the UN Digital Library reveals how a country like Mali, heavily dependent on Russia for security and regime survival, consistently abstained from or voted against key UN resolutions condemning Russia's aggression in Ukraine. In contrast, key findings from this study show that Ghana asserted its agency by decisively upholding Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, through the backing of nearly all post-invasion emergency resolutions, including those condemning the invasion, calling for troop withdrawal, and demanding reparations. This evidently emphasizes that Russia's playbook of leveraging coercive support for multilateral loyalty proved ineffective in Ghana's case during the WG era.

VII. POSITIVE NEUTRALITY IN THE WG ERA: CONTINUITY OR DEPARTURE?

Understanding the rhetorical posture adopted by Ghana in response to Russia's expanding influence in West Africa, particularly through the WG, is critical for understanding its foreign policy tradition of positive neutrality. Ghana's post-independence foreign policy was rooted in a tripartite vision articulated by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah: "The three basic aims of Ghana's foreign policy are African independence, African unity, and the maintenance of world peace through a policy of positive neutrality and non-alignment" (Nkrumah 1963, 199). For Nkrumah, these goals were inseparable; he believed that Africa could contribute meaningfully to global peace only through continental liberation and unity. He argued that "a united policy of non-alignment could have a most powerful effect for world peace," showing that moral leadership from unaligned states could safeguard against the Cold War's destructive bipolarity (Nkrumah 1963, 200).

Yet Nkrumah's non-alignment did not mean disengagement. In one of his strongest criticisms of passive diplomacy, he warned: "I do not believe it is possible for a state, in the world today, to secure its safety by withdrawing from international affairs and refusing to take a stand on issues which affect peace and war" (Nkrumah 1963, 200). He termed this "negative neutralism," a dangerous posture of silence in the face of global instability. Instead, Nkrumah envisioned positive neutrality as a proactive, morally anchored stance that allowed Ghana to engage the international system without succumbing to great power influence.

This section examines how Ghana's rhetoric functioned as instruments of diplomatic signaling. The following analysis interrogates whether such rhetoric represented a principled continuity of positive neutrality or otherwise amid intensifying external threats during the WG era.

a. President of Ghana's Statement at the 77th Session of the UNGA

President Akufo-Addo's September 21, 2022, address to the 77th UNGA offers critical insight into Ghana's multilateral positioning during the WG era. He condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the principle that it had dire repercussions for African economies. By stressing that "every bullet, every bomb, every shell that hits a target in Ukraine, hits our pockets and our economies in Africa," the President constructed the conflict as a global crisis with domestic consequences. This framing helps explain why Ghana consistently supported Ukraine in UNGA resolutions since 2022, even though it previously maintained a neutral stance on Crimea-specific votes. The President also talked about the "unhappy reappearance of military rule" in the ECOWAS region, highlighting Ghana's growing concern over the likely spillover of instability from the Sahel and the enabling role of the WG. Though Wagner was not explicitly named, the mention of "invading forces" and the accompanying complaint that "all of us in the region are being forced to spend huge amounts of money on security," showed Ghana did not support mercenary-backed regimes.

In this speech, the President balanced his condemnation of Russia's aggression with a call for reforms to the "international financial structure," which he argued has been "skewed significantly against developing and emerging economies like Ghana," reinforcing Ghana's posture as a non-aligned yet principled actor on the global stage.⁵³

b. UNSC Meeting: Maintenance of Peace and Security in Ukraine

In a significant demonstration of its evolving foreign policy posture during the WG era, Ghana delivered a strong statement at the UNSC on June 28, 2022, reinforcing its "unwavering support for the sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine." The country further called for an "immediate cessation of military engagements in areas populated by civilians" in compliance with international humanitarian law. Emphasizing the urgency of peaceful resolution, Ghana pleaded for "genuine and unconditional dialogue," warning that the "collateral economic impact" of the war, especially on developing countries already burdened by COVID-19 and other global shocks, could soon "go beyond the reach of easy resolution." Notably, Ghana commended the diplomatic outreach of the UN Secretary-General, signaling a continued belief in multilateralism and UN-led mediation.⁵⁴

Even though Ghana refrained from directly condemning Russia, its consistent support for Ukraine's sovereignty, and emphasis on international law and humanitarian protection implicitly challenged Russia's aggressive actions. This posture underscored Ghana's strategic use of soft

⁵³ "President of Ghana Full Statement at the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly," Ghana Permanent Mission to the United Nations, February 6, 2025, <https://www.ghanamissionun.org/77thsession/>.

⁵⁴ "United Nations Security Council Meeting on Maintenance of Peace and Security of Ukraine," Ghana Permanent Mission to the United Nations, June 29, 2022, <https://www.ghanamissionun.org/maintenance-peace-and-security-of-ukraine/>.

balancing, subtly resisting great power overreach while avoiding overt confrontation. Ultimately, Ghana's engagement at the UN affirmed its agency as a principled Global South actor.

c. AU Reflection Forum on Unconstitutional Changes of Government

In a keynote address delivered on March 15, 2022, in Accra, President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, then Chair of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, issued pointed comments about the role of foreign actors in destabilizing African democracies. Without specifically naming Russia or the WG, he stated strongly that “foreign involvement in fomenting unconstitutional changes, often in favor of repressive governments, foreign economic interests and other would-be geo-political benefits, are contributory factors,” adding that “some foreign entities regard coups in African countries as a means of enhancing their regional ambitions.”⁵⁵ These remarks were in line with concerns raised by international observers regarding the WG's activities in Mali and Burkina Faso, specifically their involvement in disinformation campaigns and support for authoritarian governments.

President Akufo-Addo's framing thus emphasized Ghana's subtle diplomatic resistance to mercenary-backed destabilization and Russia's expanding influence in the region, reinforcing the country's broader commitment to democratic norms and regional stability.

d. EU-AU Summit

During the February 2022 EU-AU Summit held in Brussels, President Akufo-Addo, also in his capacity as then-Chair of the ECOWAS Authority, articulated Ghana's firm stance on the growing presence of foreign mercenaries in West Africa. Although the interviewer explicitly mentioned

⁵⁵ “Address by the President of the Republic of Ghana and Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, at the Reflection Forum on Unconstitutional Changes of Government, Organized by the AU Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security,” African Union, March 15, 2022, <https://au.int/pt/speeches/20220315/address-president-republic-ghana-and-chairman-ecowas-authority-heads-state-and>, 3.

Wagner and Russia, the President deliberately refrained from doing same; instead, he raised broader concerns about foreign mercenaries, a diplomatic maneuver that nonetheless conveyed clear regional concern about their presence. “We have a long-standing protocol... against foreign mercenaries intervening in the lives of our various states,” he stated, adding that “if there’s a mercenary force involved in the life of Mali, it’s a matter that concerns us.”⁵⁶

Beyond this, the President expressed profound unease during the interview over the wave of unconstitutional military takeovers that he viewed as destabilizing West Africa, many of which had received overt or tacit backing from Russia. While he avoided direct reference to Russia, his firm rejection of prolonged military rule in neighboring countries signaled Ghana’s opposition to the growing influence of actors like the WG, whose presence has often served to entrench coup regimes. Akufo-Addo firmly rejected any romanticization of military coups, saying, “We do not want this contagion to spread... we are not interested in returning West Africa to the days of military rule.”⁵⁷ These statements not only reflected Ghana’s staunch adherence to constitutionalism, but also a subtle pushback against Russian-enabled autocracy within West Africa. They also reinforced Ghana’s normative commitment to ECOWAS protocols and democratic stability, while tacitly rebuking Russia’s growing footprint in the Sahel.

e. U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit

President Akufo-Addo’s comments during a bilateral engagement with former U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022, stand out as the most decisive expression of Ghana’s stance regarding Russia’s growing footprint in West Africa.

⁵⁶ “EU-AU Summit: Ghana’s Akufo-Addo Calls for 12-Month Transition in Mali,” FRANCE 24, February 18, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tUXZbLiDag&t=26s>.

⁵⁷ Ibid

In a marked departure from his otherwise prior cautious diplomatic tone, the President explicitly mentioned Russia and the WG as destabilizing actors in the region: “Today, Russian mercenaries are on our northern border. Burkina Faso has now entered into an arrangement to go along with Mali in employing the Wagner forces there. I believe a mine in southern Burkina has been allocated to them as a form of payment for their services.”⁵⁸ This direct naming of Wagner and the explicit mention of trading natural resources for military support, reflected Ghana’s deep discontent with Russia’s “security-for-resources” model employed in fragile African states, a model Ghana implicitly criticizes as exploitative and extractive.

President Akufo-Addo’s reference to Wagner’s presence near Ghana’s northern border, describing it as “particularly distressing for us in Ghana,” constituted the strongest articulation of national security anxiety. By emphasizing how close the threat was, he effectively constructed Wagner’s presence not just as a regional concern but also a direct danger to Ghana’s territorial integrity and stability.⁵⁹ By this, Akufo-Addo abandoned his earlier restraint and positioned Ghana squarely among African states unwilling to tolerate foreign military actors within their region. This moment marked a shift in tone, one from principled caution to urgent alert, highlighting the evolving perception of Wagner not only as a destabilizing actor in fragile states but as a threat to stable democracies in the region as well.

During the meeting, the President strongly defended democracy, stressing that both Ghana and ECOWAS opposed unconstitutional rule in West Africa, which he argued are being instigated by domestic coup actors and their external enablers. He stated that “ECOWAS has been very consistent in refusing to deal with these governments because of the undemocratic nature of their

⁵⁸ “Secretary Blinken Meets with Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo,” U.S. Department of State, December 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y--tkY1sXwM>.

⁵⁹ Ibid

accession to power,” referencing the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. His assertion that “it’s very important that ECOWAS and the West African area remain a democratic space” marks a normative commitment to constitutional governance as the regional standard. By further warning that “there are enemies of democracy who are working hard in West Africa today,” the President carefully positioned Russia side-by-side with domestic coup regimes, portraying them as mutually reinforcing forces undermining democratic stability in West Africa.⁶⁰

f. Hypothesis Evaluation

Drawing from above, this study argues that Ghana’s response to Russia’s expanding influence in West Africa during the WG era reflected a principled continuity in its foreign policy tradition, rather than a departure. When Nkrumah, one of the founding figures of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), grew disillusioned with the West’s tepid support for African liberation movements, he turned to the Soviet Union for cooperation. While this strategic alignment was rhetorically justified as pragmatic pan-Africanism, it nonetheless exposed the practical limitations of non-alignment and raised enduring questions about the sustainability of positive neutrality amid intensifying Cold War polarization.

In contemporary Ghana, President Nana Akufo-Addo faced a comparable dilemma. The presence of the WG in Francophone West Africa and its intrusion near Ghana’s northern frontier, forced a recalibration of the country’s diplomatic posture. While Ghana has historically maintained cordial relations with both Western and non-Western powers, the rise of Russian influence via opaque security-for-resources arrangements generated national security concerns. At the 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, Akufo-Addo departed from Ghana’s typically measured foreign policy rhetoric by explicitly naming Russia and Wagner as destabilizing actors and appealed to the U.S. as a

⁶⁰ Ibid

“reliable partner.” This moment also invited similar scrutiny on the global stage, just like in Nkrumah’s case when he turned to the Soviet Union. Yet the question remains: does Ghana’s posture during the WG era constitute a fundamental departure from Ghana’s historical doctrine of non-alignment?

From a realist perspective, Ghana’s rhetorical shift at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit does not reflect a normative breach of its non-aligned tradition, but instead a rational recalibration of its foreign policy grounded in national interest and survival. As Waltz (1979, 91) notes, “states seek to ensure their survival,” an imperative which often guides their foreign policy decisions. As he further argues, “to say that a country acts according to its national interest means that, having examined its security requirements, it tries to meet them... lest the survival of the state be in jeopardy.” (Waltz 1979, 134). President Akufo-Addo’s explicit opposition to Wagner and Russia, and his appeal to the U.S. as a “reliable partner,” signaled a strategic alignment motivated less by ideological orientation and more about the imperative to deter threats and secure Ghana’s territorial integrity.

In an anarchic international system, where power, not principle, dictates outcomes, Ghana’s rhetorical shift reflected the logic of self-help. As Waltz (1979, 111) observes, “in any self-help system, units worry about their survival, and the worry conditions their behavior.” The encroachment of Russian-backed mercenary forces along its northern border, coupled with the instability spilling from coup-prone neighbors, posed an existential risk that required decisive signaling. The President’s assertiveness in this context, especially his direct appeal for U.S. partnership in pushing back against the WG, was not a betrayal of Ghana’s non-aligned tradition, but a pragmatic expression of Ghana’s pursuit of security, sovereignty, and strategic adaptation in response to regional threats.

In realist terms, then, the shift is not a rupture. It is continuity: a strategic move to guard against external threats without sacrificing independence, demonstrating that even rhetorically, small states must sometimes tilt to survive.

Even from a normative standpoint, Ghana's posture during the WG era remained within the contours of positive neutrality. Nkrumah's conception of positive neutrality was neither intended as moral relativism nor a justification for silence. As he asserted, neutrality did not mean withdrawing from the global stage or "refusing to take a stand on issues which affect peace and war" (Nkrumah 1963, 200). Rather, it demanded active moral leadership, one that had the capacity to denounce injustice and defend sovereignty irrespective of the global bloc responsible. At the UN, Ghana consistently reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence, clearly opposing Russia's violation of international law. This principled stance demonstrated Ghana's continued willingness to speak out when international norms are violated, even when it involves a major power like Russia.

More importantly, Ghana's principled opposition to Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty found unambiguous resonance in its regional rhetoric against foreign interference in West Africa. President Akufo-Addo's resistance to Wagner-backed coup regimes, evident in his condemnation of prolonged transitions in Mali and Burkina Faso, and his explicit warning against mercenary intrusion in the Sahel, reiterated Nkrumah's call to safeguard African self-determination and agency. In the face of destabilizing foreign involvement, Ghana's rhetoric consistently upheld ECOWAS protocols and democratic norms, reflecting Nkrumah's conviction that African unity and independence were important conditions necessary for meaningful global engagement.

A historical perspective also reinforces continuity. Both Nkrumah and Akufo-Addo recalibrated their international alignments not only in response to perceived threats to Africa's independence

and regional stability, but also to safeguard Ghana's own sovereignty. For Nkrumah, deepening ties with the Soviet Union was a strategic move to shield post-colonial Ghana from Western interference and to bolster continental liberation. Similarly, Akufo-Addo invoked U.S. partnership in the face of Wagner's encroachment as a strategic response to escalating external threats, particularly the spread of mercenary-enabled authoritarianism in the region. In both cases, foreign policy choices were driven by the imperative to defend national sovereignty while advancing Africa's collective agency on the global stage. This continuity affirmed that positive neutrality, as originally envisioned, remains relevant.

Therefore, Ghana's posture towards the growing presence of Russia in West Africa during the WG era highlighted a pragmatic evolution of positive neutrality, one that was firmly grounded in the core principles of non-alignment, yet responsive to the exigencies of an increasingly multipolar world.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore whether Russia adopted a distinct foreign policy strategy in Ghana during the WG era, compared to its overt militarized strategy it employs in Francophone West Africa. Additionally, the study sought to understand how Ghana responded to Russia's overwhelming footprint in West Africa, during the same period. It argued that Russia adopted a distinct, non-militarized strategy in Ghana during the WG era, shaped by Ghana's democratic resilience and pro-Western orientation. The study argued again that Ghana's rhetoric and diplomatic posturing would reflect a consistent adherence to its long-standing tradition of positive

neutrality. As a democratic bulwark within West Africa, Ghana offered a compelling case for examining Russia's engagement in the region beyond its typical authoritarian contexts.

Through a combination of historical analysis, which provided rich context for understanding contemporary Russia-Ghana relations, thematic analysis of their engagements across five strategic areas, as well as a discourse analysis of Ghana's rhetoric in response to Russia's regional presence, the study concluded as follows: (i) Russia's engagement in Ghana during the WG era was overwhelmingly non-militarized, diverging sharply from its coercive, security-centered strategies in Francophone West Africa; (ii) Ghana's rhetorical positioning throughout the WG era reflected a consistent application of its tradition of positive neutrality.

The findings from this study affirm that Russia's foreign policy behavior in West Africa is far from monolithic. Rather, it is adaptive and conditioned by the political environment of individual states. This thesis, therefore, contributes to the growing literature on Russia-Africa relations by underscoring the agency of democratic states in shaping their external alignments, even amid intensifying great power competition.

b. Recommendations

i. For Academic Community

Further research on Russia-Africa relations, primarily in West Africa, should consider looking into democratically stable Francophone states such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire to explore the nuances of Russian engagement beyond fragile regimes within the Francophone bloc. Again, comparative case studies involving Ghana and other stable Anglophone democracies such as Nigeria, West Africa's largest arms importer (2020-2024) according to the 2025 SIPRI Fact Sheet, could yield deeper insights into Russia's evolving foreign policy strategies in the subregion.

ii. For Regional Bodies such as ECOWAS

To effectively deter external actors like Russia from exploiting institutional weaknesses in fragile and authoritarian states, ECOWAS and AU must end the selective application of its normative frameworks: sanctioning coup leaders yet turning a blind eye to civilian leaders who subvert constitutional norms just to entrench themselves in power. This inconsistency creates fertile grounds for foreign interference. The study therefore recommends that existing AU and ECOWAS protocols be expanded to include all forms of constitutional manipulation, with sanctions applied uniformly.

Regional bodies must also enhance coordinated responses to threats such as terrorists and Islamist jihadists, in order to reduce the likelihood of individual states seeking destabilizing external security partnerships that fall outside the region's democratic framework.

iii. For Ghanaian Policymakers

Ghana's foreign policy must be insulated from excessive politicization. Ghanaian policymakers must take steps to formalize its foreign policy principles, grounded in positive neutrality, into a non-partisan national document ratified by Parliament. This would ensure policy continuity across administrations while preserving flexibility for future challenges.

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