

Analytical Report



**Glimpse into the Arms Bazaar:
Its Confluence with the Sway
of Actors in Africa**

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Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the African continent has witnessed escalating attention from global powers. These international actors are keen to strengthen their foothold in this strategically vital region, which is not only abundant in energy resources but also houses mineral wealth essential for various industries. In addition to its resource-rich landscape, Africa is emerging as a promising consumer market, especially appealing to manufacturing nations. This is particularly true for countries that specialize in arms exports. Moreover, the continent holds a key position in maritime navigation, adding another layer to its strategic importance.

In light of the increasing international focus on Africa's strategic and economic potential, it's unsurprising that major powers are investing in the continent's various security and political challenges as part of their broader competition for influence. This investment manifests itself distinctly in areas where militarization is intensifying.

For instance, the northern region of Africa is a theater for an ongoing, tense rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, particularly over the contested territory of Western Sahara. Similarly, the West African Sahel countries¹, situated south of the Sahara, are experiencing escalating security threats. This decline is attributed to the growing presence of extremist organizations and a rise in the frequency of civil conflicts within the region².

This analytical report delves into the arms race in Africa, examining the key countries that are major weapons exporters. It provides an overview of the contexts and agendas fueling the feverish competition in armament, while also highlighting the approaches and strategies adopted by various nations concerning arms proliferation.

¹ Mustafa Jalli, "Algerian-Moroccan" armament: a new context for old trends, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, October 7, 2021, [Link](#)

² Because of Russian weapons, a silent arms race in West Africa, Middle East, September 17, 2022, [Link](#)



FIRST: THE MAIN ARMS EXPORTERS TO AFRICA

Weapon-producing nations are actively exporting arms to African countries in a competitive process that goes beyond merely achieving profits and financial returns or testing new weapons. Their objectives also extend to expanding political and security influence in the region.

Russia, France, the United States, and China consecutively top the list of countries exporting weapons to Africa³.

While the traditional arms market in Africa was once dominated exclusively by established powers with historical ties to the region, there has been a noticeable shift recently with the entrance of new players. These emerging actors, such as Turkey and South Korea, are carving out their own space in the arms market and are likely to see their influence grow over time⁴.

Nonetheless, Africa remains a primary destination for French arms, a relationship deeply rooted in historical colonial ties and the military training received by officers from numerous former colonies at French military academies. For instance, in 2021, Egypt topped the list of countries importing French weapons, following an order for 30 Rafale fighter jets valued at 4.5 billion euros⁵.

Over the past two decades, Russia has deepened its ties with African countries at large, becoming the continent's largest arms supplier. This has significantly bolstered Russia's influence within Africa. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI⁶), Russia today is the leading source of arms to Africa, accounting for 49% of the continent's total arms imports.

³ The Weapon Map in Africa: Between Neocolonial Policies and Great Power Competition, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, September 12, 2021, [Link](#)

⁴ The Turkish military presence in Africa... motives and challenges, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, January 4, 2022, [Link](#)

Also, the Egyptian army concludes a deal worth \$1.66 billion with a South Korean arms company, AFP, February 2, 2022.. [Link](#)

⁵ Egypt tops the list of French arms importers in 2021, FRANCE24, September 27, 2022, [Link](#)

⁶ Russia: Arms exports to Africa are a long-term strategy, DW, May 31, 2020, [Link](#)



As for China, it supplies weapons to 17 African countries, most notably Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger. Additionally, Chinese security firms are active in several African nations, including Libya, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo⁷.

Regarding Turkey's role as a newcomer in the region, African countries have been rapidly acquiring Turkish drones to combat armed groups, given their proven effectiveness in various conflicts around the world. In 2022, Turkey sold Bayraktar B2 drones to Niger, Togo, and Burkina Faso. Some of these nations are leveraging the advantages provided by these cost-effective drones to bolster their air power and employ them in confrontations with insurgents in the Sahel region, south of the Sahara Desert, and near Chad.⁸

⁷ Analysis of Chinese and Russian military and security exports to Africa, RAND, [Link](#)

⁸ Burkina Faso buys 5 drones . Defens-Arabc, [Link](#)



SECOND: THE DRIVING FORCES FUELING THE ARMS RACE IN THE REGION

Indeed, conflicts and wars are among the primary drivers fueling the arms race, and crises such as the one in the Sahel region play a pivotal role in driving the region's arms acquisitions. The fight against terrorism requires substantial military resources, leading countries like Angola, Nigeria, and Mali, actively engaged in countering terrorist organizations, to top the list of arms importers in the Sahel region south of the Sahara Desert. These nations recognize the need for enhanced military capabilities to combat the threat posed by extremist groups and maintain security within their borders.

In addition to the previously mentioned drivers, military coups and the use of arms by international actors as a means to achieve political influence are also contributing factors to the arms race. A case in point is Mali, where following the military's assumption of power in August 2020, the country has turned to Russia as its primary arms supplier. However, Mali continues to receive weapons from Brazil, China, France, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, despite France and the United States refraining from arms sales to Mali since the coup in 2020. This highlights the complex dynamics of arms procurement and how various nations seek to exert their influence in the region⁹.

In a similar scenario, Burkina Faso renewed its diplomatic ties with North Korea after its relationship with France deteriorated following the military coup in 2022¹⁰. The country's foreign minister explained this decision by stating that Burkina Faso was seeking security assistance and military equipment from North Korea, alongside its arms purchases from Russia.¹¹

⁹ Russia increases its influence in Mali, DW/Stockholm Peace Research Institute, March 13, 2023, [Link](#)

¹⁰ Burkina Faso coup: protests against France and fire at its embassy, and the ousted president calls on the coup plotters to avoid a fratricidal war, Al Jazeera Net, October 2, 2022, [Link](#)

¹¹ Burkina Faso restores relations with North Korea, Madar, April 2, [Link](#)



THIRD: THEORIES AND DETERMINANTS THAT GOVERN THE FLOW OF ARMS INTO AFRICA

The issue of arms trafficking to Africa is controlled by a variety of interrelated factors. However, these are increasingly aligning in favour of new, rising powers aiming for influence in the continent. The most crucial of these determinants can be condensed into the following key points:

MULTIPOLARITY PRINCIPLE

Russia, China, and certain other countries are calling for the establishment of a new global security framework based on the principle of multipolarity. The goal is to ensure balanced security and to disrupt the hegemony of specific nations in global affairs. This perspective is most prominently expressed in Russian official discourse and was crystallized in the concluding statement of the 14th BRICS summit. There, member states signaled their commitment to enhance 'military-political' cooperation as a means to address security challenges¹². Joint naval drills involving Russia, South Africa, and China serve as a significant step in bolstering this direction¹³. According to this theory, fostering a clearly-defined, multipolar system will enlarge the roster of fully active participants in international politics, thereby simplifying and rationalizing inter-state relations. This would make the global system more navigable and beneficial for all involved.

¹² BRICS calls for rebalancing the global order, skynewsarabia, June 2, 2023, [Link](#)

¹³ It will last 10 days. South Africa announces joint naval exercises with China and Russia, Al Jazeera Net, January 20, 2023, [Link](#)



WEAPON SANCTIONS LEVERAGE

Russia and China benefit from their opposition to arms embargo resolutions at the United Nations Security Council concerning certain African nations. This allows them to increase their exports at a time when Western countries are adopting such embargoes. Compared to other major players, Russia's arms deals with African countries do not come with political or human rights conditions. In some instances, Russia fills the void left by European and American suppliers.¹⁴

HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL FILES

While Western nations tend to be more proactive in intervening in internal governance, focusing on democracy and human rights issues, both Russia and China consistently maintain a stance of non-interference in domestic matters. The U.S. and European countries are frequently accused of leveraging human rights concerns to advance their own political objectives, a strategy that has led numerous nations to distance themselves and seek alternative alliances.

¹⁴ Russia strengthens relations with Africa despite Western sanctions (report), Anadolu Agency, June 7, 2022, [Link](#)



CONCLUSION



The African continent can be considered a vibrant new market for competing arms-exporting powers. The volatile security conditions in the region serve as a catalyst for this competition. In addition to this, other geostrategic factors and considerations come into play, with economic prospects, investment opportunities, and political and cultural influence serving as the main drivers. An increase in the negative effects of widespread arms distribution in the region is often anticipated. This includes the rise of external control factors in the region, fueled by heightened polarization, competition, and reliance on a logic of influence-sharing. This is especially the case as emerging powers seek to capitalize on the policy failures of Western powers in the region.

It's evident that expenditures on armaments and related activities, such as recruitment, training, and development, will deplete the budgets of countries that are already financially strained. These nations, presumably, should have more pressing developmental priorities. The result is likely to further complicate economic and social conditions in countries that are already at the forefront of global poverty and fragility.



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