

RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE IN AFRICA: A WORRYING TREND FOR THE WEST

Over the past few months, the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-backed group of mercenaries led by Putin loyalist Yevgeny Prigozhin, has emerged as a key component of the Russian forces arrayed against the Ukrainians. Wagner is an irregular force, initially designed to provide the Kremlin with plausible deniability for its actions, but it should also be seen as a key part of Russia's foreign and military policy. While Wagner has emerged from the shadows, it is by no means a new force. More importantly, its activities in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sahel region, dating back to 2017 – where it is providing Russia with access to valuable minerals despite international sanctions, while destabilising vulnerable regions, committing human rights abuses, interfering in elections and spreading disinformation – represent a new front in Russia's hybrid warfare.

As I explore below, Wagner has become a key driver of Russia's expanding sphere of influence in Africa, reminiscent of the Soviet Union's Cold War playbook in the 1960s-1970s. Wagner is perfecting Russian-directed hybrid warfare¹ that combines military, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism tactics, unencumbered by human rights considerations, with commercial and strategic objectives. The overall effort is underpinned by increasingly sophisticated disinformation operations, often amplified by local influencers cultivated by Russia. Wagner is a low-cost alternative from the Kremlin's perspective as it can self-fund through the mineral deals it cuts in the countries in which it operates.

Why is all of this important? While Africa faces significant challenges, it should be seen as a continent of opportunity, and not merely for the reasons that China and Russia have been quick to exploit. We (and by "we" I refer to the West²) have a significant stake in shifting our focus from risk to opportunity, and in supporting institutions, civil society and dynamic entrepreneurship. We must, at the same time, ensure that "opportunity" is not seen as opportunity to exert anti-democratic influence, to dominate or to extract mineral resources.

¹ Writing in 2020, Mason Clark, in a [paper](#) published by the Institute for the Study of War, posited that Russia is engaged in a hybrid war against the United States. He argues that the Russian military defines "hybrid war" as "a strategic-level effort to shape the governance and geostrategic orientation of a target state in which all actions, up to and including the use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts, are subordinate to an information campaign." The concept is expansive, in that it covers "the entire 'competition space,' including subversive, economic, information, and diplomatic means, as well as the use of military forces extending above the upper threshold of the 'grey zone' concept that more accurately captures the Chinese approach to war." This is not, he argued, a temporary phenomenon, but rather the future of Russian military development.

² I admit that the "West" is an amorphous concept, whose meaning typically is a function of who is using the term and for what purpose. It has long ceased to be tied to geography (the land where the sun sets). West and East exist in a sense only in relationship to one another. One school of thought traces the concept to the Greeks and Romans. The ancient Greek city states "to the west" distinguished themselves from the Persians, "to the east," in terms of freedom versus despotism. The Romans saw themselves to be of the occident ("sunset" or "west") in contrast to the orient ("rise" or the "east"). The setting/rising sun figures in other explanations as well, but ironically location then shifts with the horizon. Perspective matters – are we speaking of values, culture or geopolitical alignment? In any event, Europe figures prominently as the 20th century kicks off. West/East take on geopolitical attributes in WWI and clearer delineations during the Cold War. But, I digress.

Background

Wagner is believed to have been formed in 2014 to support deniable attacks against Ukraine that ultimately culminated in the annexation of Crimea. [Reporting](#) suggests that the Wagner Battalion was formed by Dmitri Utkin, an ex-Russian GRU officer. Its financier was, and continues to be, Prigozhin, an ex-convict, who has long been known as Putin's chef, for his Putin-backed catering business. Until recently, Prigozhin had denied the existence of the group, as had the Kremlin.³ That changed as Wagner took on a far more significant, and visible role, in Ukraine and began openly recruiting mercenaries from Russian prisons.⁴

Wagner represents a variation on the theme of soldiers of fortune. A 2020 article in the McGill International Review by [Felipe Aas](#) (on the role of mercenaries as an instrument of foreign policy) highlights the evolution of the soldier of fortune to today's mercenaries, rebranded as private military contractors that are functionally mercenaries but are unlikely to be involved in front line combat. As governments outsource involvement in armed conflict to private military companies (PMCs), groups like Wagner have emerged.⁵ Unlike their mid-to late-1900s forebears operating in post-colonial conflicts, Russian PMCs are direct extensions of the Kremlin's foreign and military policy and, in the words of the US Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group, are "used as a force multiplier to achieve objectives for both

³ As chronicled by [Miles Johnson](#), Prigozhin has used prominent law firms in the United States and the United Kingdom to silence his critics. The essence of the claims was that alleged connections between Prigozhin and Wagner mercenaries were false. Lawyers acting for Prigozhin in London were able to get a license from the UK Treasury to undertake a libel action on behalf of a sanctioned individual, Prigozhin. Rare is the case that abuse of the rule of law (defamation) is so clearly demonstrated. As part of his recruitment pitch to inmates in Russian prisons, Prigozhin admitted he represented Wagner and later admitted to founding Wagner. In November, he opened the Wagner headquarters in St Petersburg, complete with logo on the front. Clearly an abuse of the British court system, but that is the subject of another briefing note.

⁴ Some believe there may be more to the story, and that Prigozhin is merely a useful front to provide deniability for the Kremlin. Others note that the rise of Prigozhin is a natural by-product of the erosion of law in Russia, where the state tolerates, if not encourages, unaccountable violence so long as it serves its foreign policy and military interests. As criminal violence is institutionalized, Putin and his cronies may rue the day that Prigozhin was allowed to amass power unchecked. [Samantha de Bended](#) of Chatham House, writing in the Guardian (February 2023), quotes unnamed sources speaking off the record who maintain that Prigozhin is allowed to bluster his way to the front and feud with the Russian military as a warning to those who favor regime change in Russia – the alternative could be far more dangerous.

⁵ It is believed that military contracting activity in Russia dates back to the 1990s, when private security companies were retained to provide security for Russian business interests in Africa. Putin is believed to have put an end to this, but the new and improved (and far more effective) version is now ascendant.

Ironically, the use of mercenaries in Russia is outlawed in Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code. (See generally, [Warsaw Institute](#) report (August 2019) and [Federica Saini Fasanotti](#) from Brookings (February 2022).) The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) [reports](#) that Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has a PMC, Patriot, as does oligarch Gennady Timchenko (Redut), and of course Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov also has his own army. As CEPA notes, these groups no longer merely reflect the state of Russian politics; they shape it.

government and Russia-aligned private interests while minimizing political and military costs.”⁶

Reporting on PMCs between 2014 and 2021 emphasized the lack of clear links between the Kremlin and its latter-day mercenaries. In the case of Wagner, last fall that clear link was established and is now very much out in the open (at least as anything in Russia can be said to be out in the open).⁷

Hybrid Warfare Comes to Africa

After getting its start in Ukraine, Wagner forces were sent to Syria, but thereafter were also deployed across parts of Africa, including the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Mali, Mozambique and Sudan. It is [estimated](#) that Wagner now has around 5,000 men stationed in Africa. This contrasts, according to an article on Military.com, with 6,000 US troops and support personnel on the continent, more than half of which are based in Djibouti (which incidentally also hosts China’s first permanent overseas military presence).

According to the [first article](#) (by Miles Johnson) in a four-part series in the Financial Times on Russian activities in Africa, Prigozhin has been rewarded with a series of natural resource concessions in Africa and, according to US government sources, has expanded his portfolio to include gold, diamonds, oil and lumber across Syria, Sudan and the CAR. Cameroon [reportedly](#) has also been targeted, and [Benoit Faucon and Joe Parkinson](#), writing in the Wall Street Journal (February 2023), report that Wagner is also training rebels from Chad and targeting Ivory Coast. Burkina Faso, which recently asked French forces to depart, is also [believed](#) to be another Wagner destination.

Sudan

Sudanese strongman Omar al-Bashir sought protection in 2017 from the Kremlin against “US interference,” offering up Sudan as “Russian’s key to Africa” (see [Kremlin read-out](#)). Mining concessions followed, as did advice on how to counter civilian protesters (see [Declan Walsh](#) writing in the New York Times (May 2022)). In 2020, Prigozhin and Wagner were [sanctioned](#) by the US Treasury for their activities in Sudan.

Central African Republic

Wagner has been present in CAR since 2017 – its first foray into francophone Africa, at the expense of the French. This deployment was foreshadowed by the first Russia-Africa summit hosted by Putin, in Sochi. Today, according to the [Crisis Group](#), the situation in CAR “shows signs of troubling deterioration,” with fighting between armed groups (the Coalition

⁶ See note 1 to “*Putin’s Proxies: Examining Russia’s Use of Private Military Companies*,” testimony by Catrina Doxsee, Associate Director and Associate Fellow, Transnational Threats Project, CSIS (September 2022).

⁷ A 2022 [article](#) in The Conversation notes that Chinese private security companies are proliferating in Africa as well, largely as a result of needs generated by the Belt and Road Initiative for security for Chinese infrastructure projects and personnel, and China’s quest on the continent for mineral resources.

of Patriots for Change) and national security forces supported by Wagner and the Rwandan army, with civilians caught in the crossfire.

The CAR government sold gold and diamond mining rights to hire Russian trainers and buy weapons (see [Eric Schmitt](#) writing in the New York Times (March 2019) and [David Pilling and Andres Schipani](#) writing in the Financial Times (February 2023)). The murder of three Russian journalists on an assignment sponsored by the Investigation Control Center (funded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky) to investigate the use of mercenaries by the Kremlin in Africa, namely Wagner, drew attention to the Wagner presence (see [Andrew Higgins and Ivan Nechepurenko](#) writing in the New York Times (August 2018)). A 2021 [report](#) by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights cited systematic human rights violations by Wagner in CAR, including detention, torture, disappearances and summary execution, as well as rape and sexual violence.

Wagner (together, according to the [Crisis Group](#), with elements of the Rwandan army) has propped up the CAR president and provides his presidential security detail. The initial overture – providing weapons when a deal proposed by the French fell through and then deploying against rebel forces – has been repeated elsewhere, including in Mali, when the sale of an Airbus transport plane was reportedly vetoed by the State Department. Fast forward to 2022, and Russian diplomats reportedly urged CAR’s court to abolish the constitutional restriction limiting presidential terms to two. In October, the court’s president was removed to make way for a referendum to abolish term limits, and allow President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to remain in power. (See [Roger Cohen](#) writing in the New York Times (December 2022).)

Mali

In 2018, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger [sought](#) Russian assistance to address the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel region caused by Jihadist extremists. Wagner entered Mali in 2021 following the second of two military coups and was welcomed as an alternative to the French.⁸ Wagner has been tasked with combatting insurgents affiliated with Islamic State and al-Qaeda, following Mali’s expulsion of French forces, and may represent Russia’s most high-profile involvement in Africa to date. (See [Marie Jourdain and Petr Tůma](#) writing for the Atlantic Council (June 2022).)

An April 2022 [report](#) by Human Rights Watch alleges that 300 civilians were massacred in the Malian town of Moura the month before during a one-week counter-insurgency operation by Malian armed forces supported by foreign mercenaries. It is unclear that Wagner has been any more successful than the French in combating the insurgency by Jihadist extremists, but the suffering of the civilian population certainly has increased. (See [BBC report](#) (February 2023) and [ACLEDA Analysis](#) (August 2022).)

It is believed that allegations of human rights abuses led to the banning of French broadcasts from Mali and, following testimony at the UN Security Council on January 27 and a [call](#) by UN-appointed rights experts ([Working Group on the use of mercenaries](#)) for an investigation of atrocities committed by government forces and Wagner, Mali expelled the head of the UN

⁸ In August 2020, Mali’s government was overthrown in a coup led in part by army colonel Assimi Goita. He was sworn in as president following the second coup in nine months. France withdrew its forces in August 2022.

peacekeeping mission's human rights division for "destabilizing and subversive actions against the government" (see [VoA post](#)).

While the Russians are focused on Ukraine and keen to overcome isolation in the West, Foreign Minister Lavrov found time to visit Bamako, Mali this past week (the first visit to Africa by a Russian foreign minister). This may be tied to the upcoming second Russia-Africa summit, [planned](#) for July in St Petersburg.

Libya

In 2020, press reports (see [BBC report](#) and [AP News report](#)) cited a leaked UN report that estimated that 800-1,200 Wagner operatives were active in Libya since deploying there in 2018. Wagner is associated with military commander Khalifa Haftar, who is based in eastern Libya and had been fighting the UN-backed (and internationally recognized) government in his bid in April 2019 to seize Tripoli. While less active following the October 2020 ceasefire, Wagner forces are believed to have entrenched themselves around key military installations and, more worryingly, key oil facilities. Press reports suggest that CIA Director Bill Burns visited Libya in mid-January to pressure Haftar to expel Wagner from the country (which, incidentally, has the largest oil reserves in Africa).

Under the Radar Screen

When it comes to growing foreign influence in Africa, while much attention in recent years has been on China, Russian hybrid warfare appears, until recently, to have flown under the radar screen.

The hybrid warfare model provides Russia with multiple means to advance its interests in Africa. Make no mistake, Wagner's counter-insurgency efforts in the Sahel are hugely destabilizing.⁹ At the recent UN Security Council meeting in January, Western ambassadors characterized Wagner as part of the problem, not the solution, likely to only fuel instability in the region. (See [Al Jazeera News report](#) (January 2023).)

The tools at the Kremlin's disposal are by no means limited to military and counter-insurgency efforts. An equally effective tool to offset the influence of the West has been disinformation operations deployed by Russia across the African continent. These tools can be employed in tandem. For example, Wagner has been deployed alongside active disinformation campaigns designed to promote, according to the [Digital Forensics Lab](#), Russia as a viable partner and "alternative to the West" and to create local support for Wagner. (See [State Department](#) (May 2022 report).)

The deployment of malign information operations by Wagner should come as no surprise, in that one of Prigozhin's early claims to fame was his financing of the Internet Research Agency, the troll farm believed to have led the online Russian interference in the 2016 US elections.

⁹ According to the [Global Terrorism Index](#) (2022) published by the Institute for Economics & Peace, in 2021 Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) accounted for 48% of global terrorism deaths, four in ten countries with the largest increases in terrorism-related deaths are in SSA (Burkina Faso, the DRC, Mali and Niger) and the Sahel is home to the world's fastest growing and most deadly terrorist groups. The security situation in the Sahel is rapidly deteriorating, with eight attempted coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea and Chad in the past 18 months.

The Consequences

In March 2022, when the resolution demanding Russia cease its operations in Ukraine was presented in the UN General Assembly, of the 193 member states, 141 voted in favor, five voted against, 35 abstained and 12 did not cast votes at all. Of the 54 member states in Africa, one voted against (Eritrea), 16 (including CAR, South Africa, Senegal, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Mali) abstained and eight did not vote (altogether, almost half). As reported by [Paul Melly](#) of Chatham House (June 2022), when President Zelensky spoke to the African Union last June, only four African heads of state tuned in. While there is a general consensus that neutrality on the invasion was driven by various (and, admittedly, complex) factors, Russian influence on the continent, driven largely by Wagner and arms deliveries, presumably has paid off.

[Ebenezer Obadare](#), in a post for the Council on Foreign Relations (March 2022), sets out four factors to explain reticence of African countries in criticizing Russia. First, Putin holds dark appeal for reluctant democrats and autocrats (including the Malian and Sudanese juntas), whose friendship is not conditioned on clean human rights records; intensified Russian courtship, led by Wagner providing military and intelligence support (in contrast to China's diplomatic and economic outreach, largely through infrastructure investments); mixed attitudes towards colonial borders; and an ascendant anti-Western sentiment and resentment flowing from perceived double standards.

The continued focus of Russia on Africa, not to mention the longer-standing focus by China on the continent, should underscore the geopolitical importance of engagement in Africa and should serve as a reminder that we need to be taking a more active role on the continent as a counterweight.

Perhaps in part because the invasion of Ukraine has crystallized Putin's malign intentions and derivatively has highlighted the role of Wagner, we are paying greater attention to hybrid warfare activities.

- Last March, the House passed the [Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act](#), which did not pass in the Senate (and admittedly elicited negative reactions in certain quarters, particularly from South African President Ramaphosa, which saw the bill as punishment for the UNGA vote or as forcing countries to take sides, and/or potentially tarring all Russian actions as malign and, of course, singling out Africa).
- Last December, the Commerce Department imposed [additional restrictions](#) under export control regulations on Wagner's ability to acquire equipment with embedded US technology.
- Last month, citing, among other things, widespread human rights abuses and extortion of mineral rights in Africa as well as serious criminal activity, including mass executions, rape, child abductions and physical abuse in CAR and Mali, the US Treasury [announced](#) the expansion of sanctions and named Wagner as a "transnational criminal organization."

Also in January, CIA Director Bill Burns is [reported](#) to have raised concerns about Wagner's growing influence in Africa in discussions with officials in Egypt as well as Libya. At a speech at Georgetown University, he [characterized](#) Wagner's expanding influence in Africa as a "deeply unhealthy development [that the United States is]

working very hard to counter, because [it] is threatening to Africans across the continent right now.”

- At the UN Security Council briefing in February on the security situation in CAR, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield [called out](#) the need to address the threats posed by Wagner to human rights.

These responses come in the context of the August 2022 [US Strategy Towards Sub-Saharan Africa](#) issued by the White House and the December 2022 US-Africa Leaders Summit (the first since 2014).

As the [State Department](#) noted last May, despite US, EU and UK sanctions and public exposure of entities linked to Prigozhin that spread disinformation, “these actors continue operating in Africa, exploiting turbulent situations through disinformation to sway public support for the Russian government to expand its influence.” It is reasonable to assume that regardless of what happens in Ukraine in the coming months, Russia’s hybrid warfare that we have witnessed in Africa the past few years is likely to continue.

[Mason Clark’s](#) 2020 recommendations remain equally apt today. The United States needs to see Russian actions within the context of a hybrid warfare framework, needs to counter the threat globally and needs to confront these wars as synthetic threats rather than discrete deployments. Russia, he argues, should be stymied in its efforts to normalize its malign behavior and world view. Specific actions cited three years ago included challenging Russian disinformation campaigns, depriving Wagner and other proxy forces of their deniability and shifting force projection to address the global nature of the threat. While Ukraine has focused attention in the West on Putin’s malign view of the world, much remains to be done to address the hybrid threat in vulnerable regions of the world.

Concluding Thoughts – Why We Need to Care

While multiple, and at times seemingly intractable, challenges abound, Africa should be seen as a continent of opportunity, and not merely for the reasons (principally access to mineral resources that will power clean technologies as the world moves to net-zero) that China and Russia have been quick to exploit. Fred Swaniker, founder of the [African Leadership Group](#), sees the opportunity in terms of innovation and entrepreneurship: by 2035, Africa will have the largest and youngest workforce in the world (larger than China or India). By 2100, Africa will be home to 40% of the world’s population. Swaniker sees that world of innovation and entrepreneurship unleashed through new approaches to education and a laser-like focus on leadership, combined with the benefits of technology available through a proper internet connection. Imagine the benefits as we transition to a more diffuse labor market based on remote working.

The continent really has no choice – rapid urbanization, consistent lack of adequate healthcare, education and infrastructure, and climate change, call for drastic solutions. The future is in the hands of Africa’s youth population (Sub-Saharan Africa’s population is expected to double by 2050; approximately 60% of the population is under 25), which is why skills training in entrepreneurship as a path to business creation, particularly in the digital economy, holds such promise. Creating sustainable skills training and employment can generate economic and social opportunities for young people, their families and their communities, which in turn can transform the broader society.

All to say that we have a significant stake in shifting our focus from risk to opportunity, and in supporting institutions, civil society and dynamic entrepreneurship in Africa. We must, at the same time, ensure that “opportunity” is not seen as opportunity to exert anti-democratic influence, domination or resource extraction. As part of this, providing an acceptable alternative to malign influences, for example through soft power, countering marginalization in global forums and just showing up, needs to be high up on the list of priorities. The challenge, though, is that any alternative must be able to address legitimate, and pressing, questions around security and stability, in the Sahel in particular, but elsewhere as well. Wagner is not deploying in a vacuum, and while its activities may ultimately exacerbate insecurity and instability, it is able to offer to meet demands for counter-insurgency solutions, weapons and training.

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