

The Wagner Group's





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The Wagner Group's Expanding Global Footprint

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INTRODUCTION

The Wagner Group is both the tip of the Russian spear in Ukraine and the state's backroom dealer in Africa. A mercenary outfit originally designed as an expeditionary foreign policy tool offering Russia the guise of plausible deniability, Wagner ascended as a leading force in the Kremlin's campaign to wage war in Ukraine as evidenced by its scorched earth assault in Bakhmut. Meanwhile, its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, cuts deals with African junta leaders promising counterterror assistance for access to resources while he feuds with the Russian military brass over Ukraine. But Wagner is not the first Russian private military company (PMC), and it will not be the last. Throughout the tenure of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the use of semi-state security forces like PMCs has accelerated.

Russia's current use of PMCs reads like a classic case of "coup¹-proofing" and simultaneously enables Moscow to use proxy forces as part of its broader irregular warfare strategy to enhance Russia's reach abroad and achieve its geopolitical goals. Wagner trades its services—counterterror assistance and personal protection—for lucrative resource extraction deals², undermining Western political-military relationships³ with African states at the same time.

The West must consider the context in which Wagner has become a viable policy choice for governments.

Concurrently, the West must consider the context in which Wagner has become a viable policy choice for governments. Insecurity wrought by the growth of Islamist insurgencies in the Sahel region of Africa has crippled already fragile security forces. Coupled with a surge in civil-military crises over the past several years, Europe's patchwork4 counterterrorism efforts and the United States' "behind the wire"5 approach are insufficient in the eyes of the military regimes that seized power in Mali and Burkina Faso. Though such Western efforts were well-intentioned, they led to unintended consequences, which allowed a group like Wagner to fill a growing security gap. Addressing sustained insecurity in the Sahel will take more than lip service. With France having exhausted its relations with Bamako and Ouagadougou, Washington must think creatively about how best to counter terrorist threats that are gaining traction in the wake of Wagner's arrival.





LOSSES IN EUROPE, GAINS IN AFRICA

Recently, much has been written about the Wagner Group. These articles may lead to some confusion because the Wagner Group is constantly evolving, eschewing classifications, evading sanctions, and frustrating Western generals and politicians alike. The group's battlefield behavior in Ukraine and recruitment tactics have changed, and rumblings of new frontiers in Burkina Faso, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) could provide alternate paths for economic and political gain. Indeed, if the Russian General Staff shuts Wagner Group out of the Ukraine conflict, it could return to a place of relative success when it resumes missions in Africa.

In the past few months, Wagner has assumed center stage with its involvement in the months-long battle around Bakhmut. The battle, a 21st-century⁶ Verdun, has seen Wagner locked in a war of attrition with Ukrainian armed forces for a city with little strategic value⁷. Like Verdun, Bakhmut has become a symbol, as both sides see victory there as key to the war effort. The Wagner Group has mimicked World War I-style tactics, using human waves⁸ to storm positions while taking massive casualties among the group's newly recruited prisoner cadres9. Although estimates vary, UK sources put Wagner's prisoner recruit casualties at approximately 50 percent¹⁰, while US sources gauge that Wagner suffered north of 30,000 casualties¹¹.

Many wonder what might be next for these prisoners¹². Some may turn to organized crime after the war. Others may continue with Wagner in other operations. Either way, Wagner's new recruits could have cascading effects¹³ on African instability. Indeed, the next shoe to fall may be Burkina Faso, host to persistent jihadist threats, spillover violence, and instability from Mali. Burkina Faso's government, like Mali's junta, came to power via a coup and has flirted with Wagner cooperation in recent months. In January, Ouagadougou demanded¹⁴ France end its counterinsurgency operations there, saying it would take on the mission of defending itself. France¹⁵ subsequently honored that request. Given the country's inability to defeat iihadist insurgents, a new security partner appears¹⁶ essential.

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Outlines of a Wagner campaign are already appearing among Burkinabe: a Russian-backed disinformation¹⁷ campaign aimed against the West, gold¹⁸ concessions suspiciously requisitioned by the government, and mining rights awarded to Russian-owned Nordgold.¹⁹ Ghana's



Funeral of Wagner group fighter Dmitry Menshikov, who died during a special military operation in Ukraine, at the military section of the Beloostrovskoe cemetery. 24.12.2022 Russia, St. Petersburg. Photo credit: Alexander Koriakov/Kommersant/Sipa USA(Sipa via AP Images)

President Nana Akufo-Addo²⁰ went even further, stating at the US-Africa Leaders Summit that Wagner is already deployed in Burkina Faso. If Ouagadougou were to invite Wagner in as a security partner, it could further divide the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), pitting the coup regimes in Ouagadougou, Bamako, and Conakry against Accra, Abidjan, and others. Such alliances may already be coalescing, as Burkina's prime minister openly discussed the possibility of a union²¹ with Mali during his recent visit to the country.

Meanwhile, in the Central Africa Republic (CAR), Wagner continues to expand, diversifying and attempting to sanctions-

proof its revenue streams. The group has heavily invested in diamond and gold mining, expanding the Ndassima²² gold mine from an artisanal scale to an eightzone industrial project capable of producing roughly \$1 billion in gold. Wagner broadened its portfolio in CAR beyond mining precious metals, moving into the forestry²³, alcohol²⁴, and possibly coffee²⁵ industries. Meanwhile, the organization exports raw materials through the Cameroonian port of Douala²⁶. The group aims to ensure its place in CAR's economic and political future as it continues fighting rebel forces alongside the government, taking significant casualties²⁷, and killing civilians²⁸ along the way.

Wagner appears ready to expand its

footprint further across Central and West Africa. Recent US intelligence reports²⁹ suggest the Wagner Group, which previously embedded with the rebel group Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT) in Libya before they killed former Chadian President Idriss Déby, may be trying to destabilize Chad's current government. Wagner coordinated a plot to assassinate Mahamat Idriss Déby, the former president's son and the current head of Chad's junta, to work with FACT to take power thereafter. Other reports suggest Wagner is supporting a potential rebellion in northern Chad. Meanwhile, in the DRC, reports abound about Eastern European mercenaries³⁰ based in Goma and employed by the government to fight M23 insurgents. Opensource³¹ reporting suggests these are other mercenaries, not Wagner Group. Yet, a March 1 pro-Russia and anti-France protest in Kinshasa³², ahead of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to DRC, troublingly mirrors similar, presumably Russiansponsored activities in Mali³³, Burkina Faso³⁴, and the Central African Republic³⁵. These situations demand careful monitoring given DRC's status as a tinderbox³⁶ for the Great Lakes region and Chad's stability as a key factor in West Africa.

In Ukraine, Wagner's fortunes seem to have taken a turn for the worse, although this may benefit the group in the long run. Unsurprisingly, Wagner's heavy losses discouraged further recruitment among prisoners, leading Wagner to completely halt³⁷ prisoner recruitment. Meanwhile, Prigozhin, a loud critic of the Russian military's strategy in Ukraine, has accused

top military officials of treason³⁸ for their failure to supply Wagner with ammunition and air transport. Taken together, these developments suggest that Prigozhin and Wagner are losing³⁹ their campaign to compete directly with the Russian defense establishment. Yet, paradoxically, this 'demotion' in Ukraine may save the Wagner Group. Given the high attrition⁴⁰ rates near Bakhmut, it is unclear how long the group would endure if it maintains its current front-line assault role in the conflict. Instead, a recommitment to Africa would allow Wagner to resume its core mission acting as an expeditionary force in unstable environments, while pursuing valuable resource extraction contracts and building Russian military-to-military relations with African countries.

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MERCENARY EVOLUTION

While the Wagner Group has emerged as Russia's premier PMC, Moscow's use of semi-state⁴¹ security forces is far from novel. From Cossacks in the early 20th century to Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov's "Kadyrovites," Russia has relied on various paramilitary-style forces both within and outside its territorial boundaries for decades. Under Putin, this trend has expanded⁴². The traditional notion of the state as the primary guarantor of security has gradually eroded during his tenure—morphing into a complex landscape of traditional and irregular armed forces.

Mercenary-esque outfits have been a key feature of the Kremlin's foreign policy toolkit for much of the past decade. While Wagner first appeared on the battlefield in eastern Ukraine circa 2014 and has ascended to the pinnacle of the Russian PMC hierarchy, other groups such as Anti-Terror Orel, the Moran Security Group⁴³, and Wagner's immediate predecessor, the Slavonic Corps, were already operating⁴⁴ in places like Nigeria and Syria well before Wagner fired its first shot. Many of Russia's modern PMCs have close, if not direct, links to the Russian Ministry of Defense and Russia's foreign military intelligence agency, the GRU.

But Wagner is not your ordinary PMC. In fact, the degree to which Wagner is truly a "private" and independent entity is questionable. Instead, the defining feature⁴⁵

of Wagner is that it blends private corporate interests with Russian state interests. Wagner itself is best viewed as the military component of an extensive network⁴⁶ of business entities owned, operated, or financed by Prigozhin. The group does not operate without the Kremlin's approval like a genuinely independent private military contractor might. While the organization may wield some autonomy at the tactical and operational levels, Moscow maintains a tight grip to ensure Wagner is in alignment with the government's broader foreign policy. This grip may have loosened over the summer of 2022 as Wagner's footprint in Ukraine expanded, but the Kremlin has made a recent, concerted effort to shorten Wagner's leash and streamline its activities.

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Moscow's relations with Wagner have been volatile for several years. Before calling Wagner to Ukraine, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) relied⁴⁷ on another PMC named Redut, in part due to Prigozhin's ongoing disputes with Putin-backed



politicians. Redut failed miserably during the early days of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, catapulting Wagner to the forefront of the war effort. But Prigozhin's recent infighting with the Russian General Staff has led to a flurry of speculation about Wagner's future and that of the Russian PMC industry more generally. This includes growing concern about the proliferation of Russian PMCs and Wagner copycats that will emerge to either challenge or supplant Prigozhin's firm via promises of a less adversarial relationship with the Kremlin.

However, to equate Wagner's demotion in Ukraine with the rise of various PMC challengers would be inaccurate. Russia's PMC market was already booming before Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine in February 2022 and recent reports suggest Russia's state-owned oil giant, Gazprom, is fielding⁴⁸ its private army. Gazprom's cultivation of its own PMC, should it fully materialize, could spell trouble for Wagner. However, it could also simply be an effort to construct an inhouse security infrastructure, ensuring the oil giant need not rely on outsiders to protect its corporate interests.

The news of Gazprom's PMC pursuit is just the latest addition in a growing chorus of potential Wagner replicas. Kadyrov, who is leading his semi-autonomous forces in Ukraine, recently took to social media to advertise⁴⁹ his interest in fielding his own PMC after his "service to the state is completed." Despite his praise of Prigozhin's forces, Kadyrov noted his ambition is to "compete" with Wagner, citing the necessity of having PMCs to bolster the

state. Kadyrov and others may ultimately see building PMCs as an alternative avenue for endearing themselves to the state—to say nothing of the financial payoffs to gain. Others have gone so far as to suggest⁵¹ that the fractionalization of PMCs, which may expand during and after the war, could backfire as these organizations begin to generate meaningful power. This is ironic given Russia's PMC industry was originally designed (in part) to give the Kremlin plausible deniability.

Even if the ongoing tensions between Prigozhin and the Russian General Staff ultimately lead to Wagner's demise, it will not signal the collapse of the Russian PMC industry.

Meanwhile, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu is reportedly also in the PMC game. Shoigu retains⁵² close connections to a PMC known as Patriot which has been deployed⁵³ in the town of Vuhledar in the Donetsk province. Whether this force is in direct competition with Wagner or simply another proxy to bolster the war effort in Ukraine is debated, but Patriot's presence is indicative of Moscow's increasing demand for such forces. Given that Patriot has competed⁵⁴ with Wagner in the past in other theaters,



Founder of Wagner private mercenary group Yevgeny Prigozhin leaves a cemetery before the funeral of Russian military blogger Maxim Fomin widely known by the name of Vladlen Tatarsky, who was recently killed in a bomb attack in a St Petersburg cafe, in Moscow, Russia, April 8, 2023. REUTERS/Yulia Morozova

and noting its close connection to the MoD, it would not be shocking to find these entities competing for resources as the war drags on and even after the war ends. Taken together, the PMC landscape in Russia is on a concerning trajectory and has been for years. Even if the ongoing tensions between Prigozhin and the Russian General Staff ultimately lead to Wagner's demise, it will not signal the collapse of the Russian PMC industry. The model itself—using mercenaries in the battle to maintain plausible deniability while advancing Russian foreign policy interests at minimal costs—is here to stay. Eventually, one of

the existing Russian PMCs, or perhaps new ones currently in development, will supplant Wagner, just as the end of the US PMC Blackwater was not the end of American private security firms. Like Blackwater, which became Xe Services and later Academi, PMCs can simply rebrand and reorganize under new names. Moscow will undoubtedly work to retain direct control and oversight in this space. However, emboldened actors like Prigozhin may have inspired the next generation of Russian PMCs. And with the influx of war veterans produced by the current conflict, there will be no shortage⁵⁵ of personnel to stack the PMC rank-and-file.



LIMITED RESPONSES

The potential growth and proliferation of Russian PMCs should concern Western decision-makers. The Biden administration, to say nothing of the broader US government, cannot agree on a strategy to most effectively counter the Wagner Group⁵⁶. In late January, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated⁵⁷ the Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization (TCO). The TCO designation makes it harder for Wagner to operate but also has its limitations. Beyond its symbolism, which is significant, OFAC's designation of Wagner as a TCO is intended to warn states of the consequences of doing business with the mercenary outfit. But the states where Wagner maintains connections—Libya, Sudan, Syria, Mali, and CAR, to name a few—are unlikely to be persuaded⁵⁸ by policies crafted in Washington.

These governments already know what they are getting into when they invite Wagner to their countries—a security-for-resources agreement with no strings attached⁵⁹, including no lectures over human rights abuses. In a speech delivered at the end of February, French President Emmanuel Macron⁶⁰ called the Wagner Group "life insurance of failing regimes in Africa." Even China has not been deterred from dealing with Wagner. The US recently levied sanctions against Changsha Tianyi

Space Science and Technology Research Institute for supplying Wagner fighters with satellite imagery. Known as "Spacety China," it was one of sixteen entities recently sanctioned⁶¹ by the Treasury Department.

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Bipartisan pressure has been building in Congress for the Biden administration to label Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism (SST)⁶² and, through the reintroduction⁶³ of the Holding Russian Mercenaries Accountable (HARM) Act⁶⁴, to designate Wagner as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). An SST designation would place dual-export restrictions on the types of materials flowing to the Russian war machine.

An official FTO designation under the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act would go beyond existing sanctions against Wagner to bring into effect the US material support to terrorism statutes, which limits financial and business ties, hitting African leaders and Wagner with



harsh economic penalties⁶⁵ for cooperation. In April 2020, the US designated⁶⁶ the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), a farright group with white supremacist ties, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity. RIM members are fighting in Ukraine and maintain ties to Wagner and Task Force Rusich. In early March, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said he would "not object" ⁶⁷to labeling Wagner as an FTO, referring to Prigozhin as a "war criminal."

Wagner's operations in Africa present a destabilizing force against Western interests on the continent

Labels aside, backroom diplomacy was attempted. US officials reportedly⁶⁸ made an offer to leadership in CAR suggesting that, if President Faustin-Archange Touadéra would be willing to break from Russia and the Wagner Group, Washington could offer concessions more beneficial for Banqui in the long term. Reports suggest that diplomats from the US, Europe, and Africa met to discuss the challenge posed by Wagner and circulated a "strategic roadmap" ⁶⁹to evict Wagner from CAR, though details are scarce. Any US or European offer of security assistance would come with human rights provisions and thus perhaps be less appealing to CAR's leadership. Moreover, Wagner's growing influence in Mali

represents the difficulty Western countries have making progress in sub-Saharan Africa.

Wagner's operations in Africa present a destabilizing force against Western interests on the continent while also damaging the rule of law, humanitarian protections, and state capacity to maintain a monopoly of force within borders. Wagner's continued operations on the continent will almost certainly escalate jihadist backlash⁷⁰ in countries where the group operates, leading to spillover violence and a surge of recruits for al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates active in the region. Western leaders must determine a multitiered, prudent strategy in countering Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs while balancing this response alongside the persistent issues of governance and security failure in the Sahel. Devoid of a comprehensive Western strategy to deal with the group, the mercenaries will continue filling power vacuums from Syria to the Sahel, perpetrating human rights abuses and destabilizing already fragile states and regions.





WAGNER ROADMAP: A MULTISECTOR APPROACH TO FIGHT THE GROUP

While the US, the European Union, ECOWAS, and a variety of other states and international organizations have tried to respond to Wagner, these attempts have been reactive, struggling to limit the group's expansion or its numerous human rights abuses.

This paper provides ten potential responses, avenues, or ways of thinking about Wagner Group and other Russian-backed PMCs that can be turned into a roadmap to effectively combat the group.

The sanctions discussion needs to be expanded, as such designations should aim to shame Wagner's state partners. Potential Wagner partners should be informed of the outcomes of associating with the group—long-term instability and greater distrust in governance. Immediate examples include Burkina Faso, Liberia, DRC, and Sierra Leone.

Further, the Wagner Group has become very shrewd in sanctions-proofing its activities, as can be seen through its economic pipeline from Douala to Bangui. Third-party states should be warned against allowing Wagner Group arms, industrial equipment, or other elements from transiting across their borders. Wagner's TCO designation may have helped deter some states in this regard, but more work is needed.

Sanctions lists should expand to include actors in third-party countries, such as Broker Expert LLC⁷¹, a Russian-owned company widely reported to be shipping heavy machinery to support Wagner Group forestry activities in CAR, and First Industrial Company⁷², a business owned by Wagner operator Dimitri Sytyi which concocts cheap "Russian" alcohol in Cameroon and sells it in CAR. Governments must stay vigilant, updating sanctions lists routinely to account for shell corporations, new business ventures, and other avenues that the Wagner Group and other Russian entities use to evade sanctions.

Perhaps one of the more important lessons for countering Wagner and other Russian PMCs is the importance of multilateralism.

Perhaps one of the more important lessons for countering Wagner and other Russian PMCs is the importance of multilateralism. Given Wagner's ability to entice clients into partnerships via coalescence of false promises and disinformation, efforts to counter the group's activity demand a strong coalition.

Regional institutions can play an important role in this regard. For instance, ECOWAS originally sanctioned and ⁷³suspended Mali in January 2022 for its failure to adhere to its promised election timeline and has since eased⁷⁴ some of those sanctions after the Malian junta's commitment to a 24-month⁷⁵ transition to democracy. Yet, it is questionable whether the junta will honor the proposed timeline given its track record⁷⁶ in the past. If the government's partnership with Wagner is any indication, a partnership that has led to severe human rights abuses and direct targeting of civilians⁷⁷, then ECOWAS should consider redeploying a robust sanctions package against Mali. It would also be wise to remind Bamako that its confrontational relationship with its neighbors and toward the West is a risky gamble⁷⁸ as Russia is in no position to provide Mali with the tools it needs to cultivate a durable regime or generate any lasting security. Such actions could play an important role in convincing Mali's neighbor, Burkina Faso, that Wagner is the wrong partner of choice.

NATO must also continue to consider proactive tools to counter Russian and other PMCs. Moscow's use of gray-zone tactics via the employment of mercenary outfits like Wagner has frustrated the alliance, and finding effective responses to nontraditional tactics has always been difficult. Given that such hybrid warfare tactics are increasingly the norm, NATO must consider non-kinetic tools that can pack a punch in slowing Wagner's, and future Russian PMCs', metastasization.

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Though appearing mundane, NATO should work to amplify efforts to push the adoption of the 2008 Montreux Document⁷⁹—an international agreement designed to reaffirm the legal obligations of states where PMCs originate and for those who hire them. The Montreux Document currently has the support⁸⁰ of 58 states, including nearly all NATO members. NATO, the EU, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have also invoked their support for the document. While the likelihood of convincing a state like Russia to commit to an agreement that seriously hampers their ability to use PMCs to operate in legal limbo and avail them of accountability, NATO and its members have an opportunity to push for its global acceptance⁸¹ which would seriously restrict the list of potential Wagner clients. In other words, the more states committed to enhancing rules-based norms about PMCs, the more difficult it will be for Wagner and other Russian PMCs to find business and operate with impunity.

The Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs require consideration within a larger great power discussion, particularly as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has firmly aligned Europe and the US against Russia. Indeed,

the war in Ukraine is a cautionary tale but also a welcome precedent. Countries across the globe and particularly in Africa need help building defense and civil society responses to pro-authoritarian, particularly Russian, actors. On the kinetic side, the war in Ukraine demonstrates that the West has the means to provide massive military assistance, including arms, equipment, and training to partners in need. At the same time, these tools must not be used haphazardly, leaving a Cold War-like residue of authoritarianism. The West needs to continue corruption-proofing and authoritarian-proofing its "soft" tools in helping to build strong civil societies alongside militaries capable of maintaining a just rule of law.

> Western responses should be a stark reminder of the sobering reality—Wagner is a farce and bad for African security and stability.

In the information and media space,
Russian-backed sources of disinformation
have been on the offensive, with cartoons
and other media messaging tools used to
sow discord against the West and glamorize
the Wagner Group's interventions in Africa.
Western responses must not stoop to this
level. Such cartoons are deeply infantilizing⁸²
to target populations, demonstrating how
disconnected Russia's misinformation

warriors are from Africans. Western responses should be a stark reminder of the sobering reality—Wagner is a farce and bad for African security and stability. Its high rate of civilian killings in the places it operates, its failure in Mozambique⁸³ and subsequent exit, and its contribution to weak governance across Africa are all areas that should be directly and iteratively communicated to would-be Wagner clients. Such responses, in turn, can act as a deterrent against future Russian PMC operations.

On the US side, senior leaders should demonstrate a greater diplomatic commitment to African allies and put pressure on other African leaders considering, or currently contracting, the Wagner Group and other Russian PMC operations. CIA Director William Burns'84 visit to Libya and Egypt and Secretary of State Antony Blinken's⁸⁵ visit to Egypt, both in January 2023, provided a good start, particularly given the countries' proximity to Wagner operations in Sudan and Mali. Vice President Kamala Harris's visit to Ghana and Secretary Blinken's visit to Niger are important steps forward. However, sub-Saharan Africa requires more visits, given the region's high and increasing rate⁸⁶ of jihadism on the continent and threats posed by Wagner Group. Cabinet or secretarylevel officials need to double down on the US strategic commitment to Africa with individual visits in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Like Burns' and Blinken's visits, these meetings must highlight the dangers of doing business with Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs.

Beyond warning states about Wagner, these diplomats should also extend an olive branch on security sector reform and assistance alongside NATO and the US. A proactive approach will prevent US leaders from having to offer security guarantees ex post facto after Wagner Group has already destabilized states and influenced governments, as recently occurred in CAR⁸⁷.

International bodies such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and the East African Community (EAC) should reevaluate their approaches to peacekeeping and instability.

"African solutions to African problems"—the idea of an autonomous Africa—presented by the late Ghanaian economist George Ayyitey when describing the Somalia crisis, is a much-debated and key element in the ever-changing debate on international security in Africa. While many argue for noninterventionism88 as a defining doctrine of post-colonial Africa, the continent's history⁸⁹ would suggest otherwise. Perhaps the continent should reevaluate this discussion at a time when former colonial military support is waning⁹⁰, at the behest of many African leaders. International bodies such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and the East African Community (EAC) should reevaluate their approaches to peacekeeping and

instability. Given the rise of jihadism and insurgency across the continent, now is the time for African leaders to take the lead in guaranteeing regional and continental security. Peacekeeping efforts have already begun among EAC members in the battle-ridden North Kivu province of DRC where Kenyan peacekeepers arrived in December 2022. Perhaps similar African peacekeeping strategies can be applied elsewhere on the continent—with the caveat that multilateral African approval ought to apply before individual peacekeeping interventions to prevent states from masking aggression as peacekeeping.

Exploiting the friction between Wagner's financier and the MoD should also be considered a worthwhile policy option. As noted, Wagner and PMCs like it are only semi-autonomous. They cannot function without the approval or support of the Kremlin and the military. Therefore, opportunities to exploit deteriorating relations between Prigozhin and the Russian General Staff can have tremendous payoffs. US Treasury's layered sanctions91 approach aimed at constricting Wagner's financial capabilities is one way to frustrate the group in this regard, making it a far less appealing tool both now and in the future. Moreover, amplifying the narrative of problems between Prigozhin and the Russian military may have a deterrent effect as potential clients worry about Wagner's ability to service a contract. However, such an approach has limitations. For starters, Prigozhin certainly does not need any help in straining relations with the Russian MoD, and at least for now, this does not appear to have soured his contracts elsewhere. More importantly, however, his mercenary outfit is not the only one that the international community will have to deal with now, or in the future. Therefore, exploiting current friction is only a short-term solution.

NATO members must formalize methods of blocking contact with the Wagner Group through their international activities.

Last, NATO members must formalize methods of blocking contact with the Wagner Group through their international activities. France's subtle political support for Khalifa Heftar⁹² in Libya would have briefly aligned France with Wagner Group⁹³, particularly in Heftar's April 2019 offensives. Although France has since disavowed Heftar⁹⁴ and any potential connections with Wagner in Libya, NATO members must avoid becoming strange bedfellows with Wagner Group in the future. To this end, NATO members should adopt best practices that prevent accidental friendly contact with Wagner Group—perhaps members can draw on US Leahy Law⁹⁵, which prevents the US government from providing military assistance to individuals with a history of human rights abuses, or similar European practices.

The Wagner Group is the centerpiece of this article, and we argue that the Group must be countered quickly and effectively to stop its contagion effect across the continent. Still, it is surely not the only discussion point on African security policy and counterinsurgency. The group's commitment to humanitarian violations and its degradation of the long-term rule of law are worrying, particularly from a US perspective, but Wagner must be addressed within a greater strategy that considers security and good governance across Africa. PMC and mercenary groups like Wagner are neither new nor revolutionary concepts in Africa; however, their recent expansion into the political and economic life of African countries are particularly troubling trends. While Wagner Group needs to be addressed immediately, mercenary activities are a symptom of a greater failure in counterinsurgency and governance that must be addressed through long-term change by building civil society institutions and supporting free and fair governance.



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