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## Executive Summary

Russia has utilized private military companies (PMCs) as an important component of its irregular warfare strategy. Irregular warfare includes activities short of conventional and nuclear warfare that are designed to expand a country's influence and legitimacy. Instead of deploying large numbers of conventional Russian soldiers, Moscow has leveraged special operations forces, intelligence units, PMCs, and other government and nongovernment organizations to expand its influence, build the capacity of partners and allies, and secure economic gains. Some Russian PMCs have direct or indirect links with the Russian Ministry of Defense (particularly the Main Intelligence Directorate, or GRU), Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Kremlin.

While there has been growing public awareness of Russian PMCs, this report updates and documents Moscow's continuing use of PMCs around the globe—including Russia's objectives, PMC activities, and policy implications for the United States and its partners. Understanding Russian PMCs is particularly important because, as extensive interviews with U.S. government officials indicate, the U.S. government and its partners have done little to counter them. There is limited systematic analysis of Russian PMCs; limited proactive diplomatic, military, intelligence, and financial action taken against them; and little substantive interagency or international coordination against their activities.

Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative information, this report has several main findings. First, Russia has *increased* its use of PMCs as a tool of foreign policy, beginning around 2015. As CSIS data highlight, the number of countries where PMCs operate around the globe increased sevenfold between 2015 and 2021, from 4 countries in 2015 to 27 in 2021. Russian PMCs are active in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and Latin America—including in such countries as the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Within these countries, there is significant variation in the organizational structure, roles, missions, tasks, and funding arrangements among PMCs. In addition, there is a close relationship between the Russian government and numerous PMCs. The Kremlin and Russian security agencies—including

the GRU, SVR, and FSB—have provided guidance and aid to Russian PMCs.

Second, Russia's use of PMCs needs to be understood in the broader framework of its utilization of irregular warfare and gray zone methods. Organizations such as ChVK Wagner—better known as the Wagner Group—have been involved in combat operations, intelligence collection and analysis, protective services, training, site security, information operations, and propaganda to further Moscow's interests. As the 2021 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* concluded, "Private military and security companies managed by Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin extend Moscow's military reach at low cost, allowing Russia to disavow its involvement and distance itself from battlefield casualties."<sup>1</sup> The Wagner Group is probably best understood as a clandestine collection of businesses with close ties to the Russian government—including financial facilitators, cut-outs, front companies, and shell companies to hide activities and investments.

PMCs also allow Russian leaders and oligarchs—including those close to Putin, such as Yevgeny Prigozhin—a means to expand trade and economic influence in the developing world and build new revenue streams. Examples include oil and gas in Syria; gold, uranium, arms, and diamonds in the Central African Republic; oil, gold, and arms in Venezuela; and arms, infrastructure projects, and hydrocarbons in Libya.

Third, Russian PMCs present a moderate threat to the United States and its partners—but a threat that needs to be understood in context. The United States faces a range of national security threats and challenges from states, such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea; terrorist groups and other non-state actors; and transnational challenges, such as pandemics, climate change, and migration. While Russia is not a global superpower, Moscow still possesses conventional, nuclear, and irregular capabilities. Russia has meddled in U.S. elections and waged disinformation campaigns inside the United States and other countries. Russia also has substantial offensive cyber and space-based capabilities.

Despite these varied threats, Russia's growing use of PMCs does require a more substantive and coordinated response by the United States and its partners.



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Russia has used PMCs to increase its influence overseas, extract resources, and expand its military and intelligence footprint. In Libya, for example, Russian PMCs operated MiG-29 and Sukhoi Su-24 fighter aircraft, as well as Pantsir S-1 surface-to-air missile systems. Yet Russian PMCs have vulnerabilities that can be exploited. Some have a relatively poor track record. Others have been ineffective or have been involved in human rights abuses and corruption. As a June 2021 United Nations report concluded, Russian private military companies and other actors in the Central African Republic were involved in “excessive use of force, indiscriminate killings, the occupation of schools, and looting on a large scale, including of humanitarian organizations.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there is an opportunity for the United States and its partners to better exploit Russian vulnerabilities.

An effective campaign to counter PMCs should be multilateral to maximize pressure on Russia, PMCs, and the countries where PMCs are active. The goal should be to undermine the effectiveness of PMCs and prevent Moscow from significantly increasing its influence overseas. In addition, an effective campaign needs to involve a wide range of diplomatic, intelligence, financial, military, and other actions. Moving forward, the United States and other Western countries should consider the following steps.

- **Increase public awareness of PMC activity:** The United States and its partners should develop more aggressive open-source reporting—including through open-source intelligence (OSINT)—about the activities, financial arrangements, and challenges of PMCs. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), for example, has effectively used satellite imagery to publicly highlight the activity of companies such as the Wagner Group.<sup>3</sup> But AFRICOM’s activities have been the exception rather than the rule. The goal should be to make information about PMC activities publicly available, including through the internet and digital platforms.
- **Highlight PMC ineffectiveness and failures abroad:** PMCs have a mixed track record overseas. Despite assistance from PMCs in Libya, for example, the Libyan National Army (LNA) was unable to seize Tripoli and triggered an

expanding intervention from Turkey to bolster the Government of National Accord (GNA). The Wagner Group alone lost hundreds of fighters and key weapons systems in Tripoli’s heavy ground fighting and from Turkish drone strikes. Russian PMCs also struggled immensely in Mozambique, Madagascar, and the Central African Republic. Despite these problems, the United States and its partners have failed to systematically highlight PMC problems, including by providing information to countries where PMCs operate. One goal should be to pressure these countries to phase out PMCs and their contractors. As an alternative to Russian PMCs, the United States should consider offering security force assistance programs to local countries, including training by U.S. or partner government agencies.

- **Heighten legal liabilities:** PMCs lack government legal protections in foreign countries and have engaged in illegal activities, including human rights abuses. Without embassy protection, PMC contractors are more susceptible to legal complications, incarceration, and personal financial burdens than government employees. Diplomats from the United States and its partners should encourage the leaders of countries where PMCs are operating to take appropriate action against companies and their employees when they are engaged in illegal activities.
- **Increase financial pressure on PMCs:** PMCs are profit-based organizations that require revenue to exist, making them vulnerable to economic sanctions and other financial tools. Economic sanctions are one of the most important instruments for targeting PMC activities. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has already taken some steps against individuals linked to Russian PMCs, such as Yevgeny Prigozhin. But the United States has failed to build a strong multilateral sanctions campaign against Russian PMCs.
- **Target the Wagner Group:** Wagner’s unique status and relative monopoly over the Russian PMC market is a final vulnerability that should be better exploited. Wagner operates in roughly a dozen countries, while most other PMCs operate

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in only one or two. The Wagner Group also works in the countries where Russia has the greatest interest, such as Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. But the United States has not developed an effective multilateral campaign against the group. The European Union, for example, has not imposed sanctions against Wagner. The United States and its partners should develop and implement a more aggressive campaign that discredits Wagner by highlighting its ineffectiveness, corruption, and human rights abuses and countering its activities.

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PMCs such as the Wagner Group represent an important component of Russia's irregular warfare campaign, often in cooperation with the Kremlin, GRU, SVR, and FSB. Yet PMCs have sometimes been ineffectual, fraudulent, and predatory. Others have plundered natural resources from fragile states. These activities by PMCs create an opportunity for the United States and its partners to better exploit Russian vulnerabilities.



PART I

# The Rise of Russian PMCs



CHAPTER 01

# Introduction





**The Kremlin at sunset in Moscow.**

SOURCE Mladen Antonov/AFP/Getty Images

**T**here has been growing policy interest in the Russian government's use of private military companies (PMCs) in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and other regions, including as part of Russia's irregular warfare and gray zone activity.<sup>1</sup> General Stephen Townsend, the head of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), remarked that "Russian private military companies (PMCs) have a highly destabilizing influence in Africa, as they are frequently employed to secure Russian investments at the expense of Africans, to prop up corrupt regimes and establish a broader Russian military footprint globally."<sup>2</sup> A study conducted for the U.S. Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group concluded that "Russian PMCs are used as a force multiplier to achieve objectives for both government and Russia-aligned private interests while minimizing both political and military costs."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most frequently cited PMC is ChVK Wagner—more commonly referred to as the Wagner Group—which has deployed contractors to countries such as the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.<sup>4</sup> Led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch with close ties to Russian president Vladimir Putin, the Wagner Group is described by the U.S. State Department as a surrogate of Russia's Ministry of Defense, particularly its Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (more commonly referred to as the GRU).<sup>5</sup> But Russia is not

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alone in working with these PMCs. There is some indication that the Wagner Group is used as an extension of Russia's foreign policy at the state level. The United Arab Emirates, for example, provided financial assistance to the Wagner Group in Libya, where they collectively supported Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA).<sup>6</sup>

Despite a large body of research about Russian PMCs, there are still some disagreements about the threat they pose, the scale and scope of their activity, and their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Some argue that Russian PMCs present a significant threat to the United States—and to the West more broadly—as the United States withdraws military forces from parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. For instance, one study concluded that Russian PMCs could present a serious threat to the United States in the future because they can operate at all levels of war, including as battalion tactical groups with man-portable air-defense systems, anti-tank guided missiles, unmanned aerial systems, and other weapons systems.<sup>7</sup> Others contend that the threat is overstated. As one study on Russian activity in Africa concluded, “It is very unlikely that Putin will be able to wage a winning geostrategic competition against the United States in Africa. There are too many other well-established players there already, including (but far from limited to) the EU and China, with better long-term relationships in place than what Russia will be able to develop anytime soon.”<sup>8</sup> The study argued that Russia is too weak economically, politically, and militarily to compete with the United States and other major powers—even in Africa.

In light of these discussions, this report aims to build on the existing research by updating PMC activity, building a data set of PMCs and countries where they have operated, and assessing their vulnerabilities. It also attempts to understand how PMCs fit into Moscow's strategic calculations and irregular warfare actions.

The rest of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first provides an overview of the primary questions and research design of the study. The second section defines key terms, including PMCs. The third provides the organizational structure of the rest of the report.

## Research Design

This report examines Russian PMC activity across the globe. While it focuses mainly on the Wagner Group, the report examines other PMCs. It asks several sets of questions. First, why does Moscow utilize PMCs, and how do PMCs fit into Moscow's broader national security strategy and objectives? These questions are particularly relevant since Moscow has adopted a range of irregular tools and methods—including low-profile, deniable forces—to expand its power and influence. Second, what are the main Russian PMCs, where are they operating around the globe, what types of tasks are they performing, and what is their relationship to Russian government agencies? And third, what are PMC weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and what are the implications of these weaknesses for the United States and its partners?

To answer these questions, this report includes a mix of quantitative and qualitative information. First, it compiles a data set on Russian PMCs, including group names, roles and missions, tasks, countries of operation, years active, and relationships—if any—to the Russian government. To build the data set, the research team compiled information from primary and secondary sources and conducted interviews with Western government officials and subject matter experts. The data set helps reveal trends over time, including whether there have been changes in the number of Russian PMCs or in the countries where they operate.

Second, the report utilizes a range of sources, including a significant number of secondary sources from academics and journalists on Russian PMCs and their operations across multiple countries. In addition, the authors conducted extensive background interviews with U.S. government officials from the Department of Defense (U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, AFRICOM, U.S. Special Operations Command, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and various special operations units), U.S. intelligence community, and U.S. State Department. The authors also interviewed a range of government officials from countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, as well as academics, journalists, and other subject matter experts.

Third, the report leverages CSIS's satellite imagery capabilities to better understand Russian PMC activities



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at home and abroad. In conjunction with other sources of information, geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) is useful in better describing, assessing, understanding, and visually depicting where PMCs are active and what they are doing.

Fourth, the report includes a comparative case study of Russian PMCs. A comparative case study methodology is a valuable way to understand how and why Russia utilizes PMCs. What are the key drivers of Russian decisionmaking? What tasks do such groups perform? How effective or ineffective are they? Answering these questions is virtually impossible without analyzing specific cases.<sup>9</sup> The cases chosen include Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and several countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Sudan, the CAR, Madagascar, and Mozambique. The study team chose these cases because they include wide variation in several important areas, including the overall effectiveness of Russian PMCs, geographic area, and roles and missions. Each of the case studies follows the same rough organizational structure. It begins with a brief introduction and then examines roles and missions, outlines key drivers, and provides an overall assessment.

Despite these steps, there are methodological challenges in analyzing Russian PMC activity.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most significant is that Russian PMCs are frequently involved in clandestine activity. In most countries, the Russian government does not want the public to know what PMCs are doing and makes significant efforts to hide their actions—including through denial and deception operations. There are also numerous questions about the specific relationship between PMCs such as the Wagner Group and Russian government organizations such as the GRU. In addition, the financial arrangements for Russian PMCs are often deliberately complex and opaque, and the Russian government and its financial partners use a series of financial facilitators, cut-outs, and front companies to mask their operations and origins.<sup>11</sup> These actions make it challenging—and sometimes virtually impossible—to fully understand what PMCs are doing, where they are operating, what their financial arrangements are, and what their relationship is with the Kremlin and Russian military and intelligence agencies. Nevertheless, this report utilizes a combination of primary and secondary sources, interviews with government

analysts and subject matter experts, satellite imagery, and other sources of information to minimize these methodological challenges.

## Definition and Legal Context

PMCs have existed for centuries. As P.W. Singer concluded in his study of private actors in warfare, “Hiring outsiders to fight your battles is as old as war itself. Nearly every past empire, from the ancient Egyptians to the Victorian British, contracted foreign troops in some form or another.”<sup>12</sup> As explained in more detail in Chapter 2, private companies can be useful in expanding a country’s influence through deniable means, accomplishing key security tasks from conducting combat operations to training foreign forces, and even expanding economic interests. But private companies can also be problematic for governments. Some companies have been involved in human rights abuses, corruption, and other illegal activities. Other companies have suffered from low morale, incompetence, inefficiency, and ultimately poor performance.<sup>13</sup>

Companies can conduct a range of security-related activities, which are not mutually exclusive. First, some may offer general support to deployed militaries and security agencies, such as construction, food services, housecleaning, information technology, and a variety of logistics. Second, some companies provide consulting services, including strategic planning and risk assessment. Third, still others support tactical activities, such as training local forces, protecting convoys, offering personal protection, de-mining, and providing guidance on using specific weapons and weapons systems. Fourth, some engage directly or indirectly in combat operations by conducting offensive operations; engaging in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities; and performing information operations, disinformation, and propaganda.<sup>14</sup>

This study does not focus on all of these areas but rather on major military-related tasks. It defines *private military companies* (PMCs) as companies that perform operational and tactical support during military operations, train state and non-state forces, and conduct other military support services—including

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collecting and analyzing intelligence, offering protective services, equipping forces, providing site security, and conducting propaganda, disinformation, and information operations.<sup>15</sup>

Numerous countries—including the United States—have worked with PMCs. In Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, the U.S. military and State Department worked closely with such companies as DynCorp and Blackwater.<sup>16</sup> However, this report focuses on PMCs that work with—or for—the Russian government. Russian PMCs generally draw on Russian citizens, including retired Russian military, intelligence, and law enforcement professionals. But they may also hire non-Russian citizens from the Caucasus, Central Asia, Western Europe, and other areas.<sup>17</sup>

Russia legalized some types of security companies that protect Russian state-owned infrastructure abroad, perform anti-piracy missions, implement de-mining missions, and conduct related activities overseas.<sup>18</sup> These companies are registered and regulated by the Russian government. But Russia has generally refused to legalize PMCs. Mercenary activities are illegal under Article 359 of the 1996 Russian Criminal Code, which notes, “Recruitment, training, financing, or any other material provision of a mercenary, and also the use of him in an armed conflict or hostilities, shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of four to eight years.”<sup>19</sup> Russia’s banning of what it calls “mercenarism” under Article 359 contrasts with other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and China, which have legalized PMCs. All were signatories of the 2008 International Committee of the Red Cross Montreux Document on international good practices for PMC employment in armed conflict.<sup>20</sup> Russia’s refusal to legalize PMCs is the subject of considerable debate. For example, some analysts suggest that Putin has preferred to keep PMCs illegal to control them, since they can be threatened with imprisonment at any time.<sup>21</sup> Russian PMCs also do not pay taxes to the state since they are not technically legal, giving them the ability to not register or be recognized as a Russian entity.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, Moscow has clamped down on concerns that current or former PMC contractors might talk about their activities abroad. In September 2018, Putin

signed a decree that classified as secret all “information about foreign intelligence officers of the Russian Federation who are not part of the personnel [of intelligence agencies].”<sup>23</sup> It prohibited PMC contractors who worked with organizations such as the GRU, SVR, and FSB from talking about their activities abroad.

## Organization of the Report

This report is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of Russian PMCs, including PMC roles and missions. The chapter utilizes a CSIS data set of Russian PMCs to better understand where they are operating and their relationship to Russian government agencies. Chapters 3 through 6 are case studies of Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and sub-Saharan Africa, respectively. Chapter 7 outlines the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Russian PMCs and implications for the United States and its partners.





CHAPTER 02

# The Global Expansion of Russian PMCs





Russian Special Forces soldiers from the army's intelligence unit take part in a military drill at a training ground near Mol'kino.

SOURCE Sergei Venyavsky/AFP/Getty Images

**T**his chapter asks two sets of questions. First, how does Moscow's use of PMCs fit into its broader foreign policy goals and activities? What are the trends in Russia's use of PMCs over the past several years? Second, what are the main Russian PMCs, what are their primary tasks, and where have they operated? To help answer these questions, this chapter compiles and reviews primary and secondary literature on PMCs, including Russian-language literature. It also constructs a data set of Russian PMCs, which includes a list of Russian PMCs, countries of operation, approximate dates of PMC deployments, assigned tasks, and relationships to Russian government agencies, among other factors.

Based on the analysis, this chapter makes several main arguments. First, there has been an *expansion* of Russian PMCs across the globe. Beginning around 2015, there was a major increase in the number of countries where PMCs operated, including in Africa in such countries as the CAR, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Madagascar, and Sudan; Europe in Belarus and Ukraine; the Middle East in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq; Asia in Afghanistan and Azerbaijan; and Latin America in Venezuela. Second, Russian PMCs have been extremely heterogenous. There has been significant variation in the organizational structure, roles, missions, tasks, and funding arrangements among PMCs. Some of this variation is deliberate, including attempts to mask the actions and financial arrangements of PMCs. Third, numerous Russian PMCs have been

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quasi-arms of the Russian government and have had direct or indirect relations with the Russian Ministry of Defense (particularly the GRU); the FSB, the main successor to the KGB; the SVR; and the Kremlin. Yet PMCs represent only one tool in a broad tool kit that Moscow utilizes to expand its power and influence abroad—and are by no means the most important tool.

While the number of Russian PMCs has increased in recent years, it is important not to overstate the threat. The United States faces significant national security challenges from state actors, such as China and Russia, and transnational actors and activity, such as terrorism, climate change, migration, and pandemics. Even focusing on Russia, Moscow is attempting to expand its influence by building conventional, nuclear, and irregular capabilities. PMCs are only one of several instruments that Russia uses for irregular warfare, and they are not always effective. As the case studies and Chapter 7 highlight, Russian PMCs have significant weaknesses and vulnerabilities that can be more effectively exploited.

The rest of this chapter is divided into five sections. First, it outlines the evolution of Russian foreign policy, with a particular focus on irregular warfare and gray zone activity. Second, it briefly examines the history of PMCs in Russia. Third, it analyzes the main reasons why Russia utilizes PMCs. Fourth, the chapter explores major PMC tasks. And fifth, it summarizes the main takeaways.

## Russia's Embrace of Irregular Warfare

Russia's use of PMCs is part of a broader strategy to expand its influence and undermine U.S. and Western power through irregular means. Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, have long waged irregular warfare against the West, including through *aktivnyye meropriyatiya* (active measures), *informatsionnye protivoborstvo* (information confrontation), and *maskirovka* (denial and deception). During the Cold War, for example, active measures encompassed a range of activities, such as disinformation (or *dezinformatsiya*), forgeries, front groups, agents of influence, and covert broadcasting.<sup>1</sup> Led by Service A of the KGB, active measures were different from routine espionage and

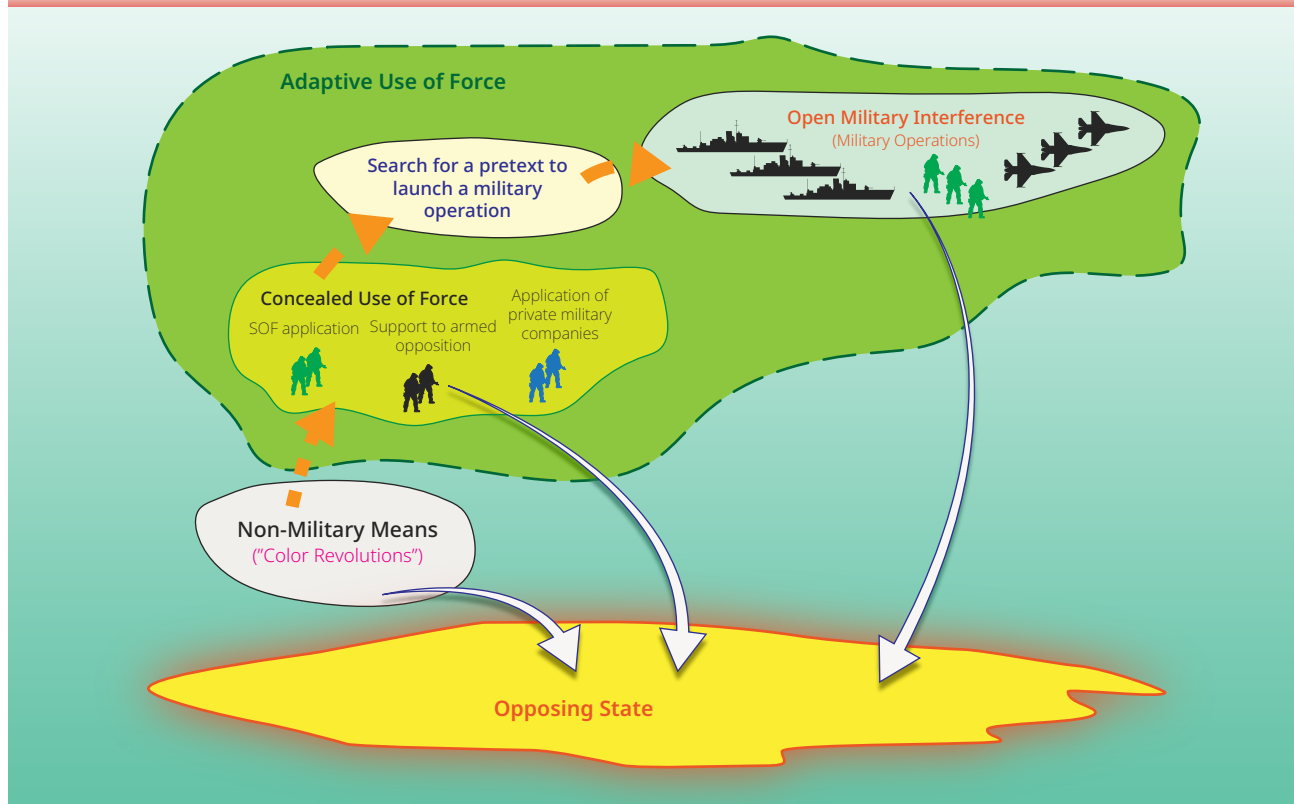
counterespionage activities, such as stealing U.S. and allied secrets.<sup>2</sup> Instead, they were designed to be an offensive instrument of Soviet foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

As defined here, irregular warfare includes activities short of conventional and nuclear warfare that are designed to expand a country's influence and legitimacy, as well as to weaken adversaries.<sup>4</sup> It includes numerous tools of statecraft that governments can use to shift the balance of power in their favor: information operations (including psychological operations and propaganda), cyber operations, support to state and nonstate partners, covert action, espionage, and economic coercion.<sup>5</sup> Many of these tools, such as information and cyber operations, can be used for both irregular and conventional warfare. They are simply a means. In irregular warfare, however, a country designs and uses these tools to undermine its adversaries as part of a balance-of-power competition without engaging in set-piece battles. Other government officials and scholars have used different terms—such as “political warfare,” “hybrid warfare,” “gray zone activity,” “asymmetric warfare,” and “the indirect approach”—to capture some or all of these activities.<sup>6</sup>

Following the end of the Cold War, as the United States conducted military operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other areas, Russian leaders assessed that the United States and other Western countries engaged in a “new,” clandestine approach to overthrowing governments and expanding influence.<sup>7</sup> Rather than using large numbers of conventional military forces to achieve political objectives, the United States increasingly used irregular methods. As highlighted in Figure 2.1, Russian leaders such as Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, concluded that this approach involved a “concealed” use of force led by special operations forces and PMCs.

These types of operations might begin with an aggressive information campaign dedicated to undermining the legitimacy of the target country.<sup>8</sup> As the security situation deteriorates, the United States and other Western governments could then leverage special operations forces, intelligence units, local militias, and PMCs as the main ground forces—but not large numbers of U.S. conventional forces—to minimize political

## "New" Approach for Achieving Politico-Military Goals



risks.<sup>9</sup> As Gerasimov argued, “wars are expanding and their content is significantly changing. The number of subjects involved in the armed struggle is increasing. Along with armed forces of sovereign states, various gangs, private military companies, and self-proclaimed ‘quasi-states’ are also fighting.”<sup>10</sup> U.S. air force and naval power were still important in this new way of warfare to strike targets.<sup>11</sup> But ground forces included a growing number of clandestine forces, including PMCs, such as Blackwater, DynCorp, MPRI, Titan, and CACI.<sup>12</sup>

Take Libya. As Gerasimov argued, the United States and its partners had used a range of irregular forces—including PMCs—to overthrow the Qaddafi government in 2011. “During the operations in Libya,” Gerasimov remarked, “a no-fly zone was established and a naval blockade was carried out in combination with the joint operations of private military companies from the NATO countries and the opposition’s armed formations.”<sup>13</sup> Russian officials also accused the United States and other Western countries of using PMCs in other coun-

tries, such as Ukraine, to weaken Russia. As Gerasimov concluded, “there are facts of participation of private military companies in the Ukrainian events.”<sup>14</sup>

In some ways, Moscow’s decision to use PMCs was an emulation of U.S. actions.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, there is a long history of “military emulation” among states, which includes purposeful efforts by one state to imitate the institutions, technologies, or practices of another state.<sup>16</sup> The United States and other governments had long used private contractors to train foreign security personnel, provide site security, conduct offensive

▲ **FIGURE 2.1**

Gerasimov’s View of the “New” Approach to Conduct Warfare

**SOURCE** Valery Gerasimov, PowerPoint Slides, Moscow Conference on International Security, May 23, 2014. The slides were published in Anthony H. Cordesman, *Russia and the ‘Color Revolution’: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the U.S. and the West* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-%E2%80%9Ccolor-revolution%E2%80%9D>.



operations, and provide security details for foreign leaders. Moscow began doing the same—though in its own way.

## The Evolution of Russian PMCs

Russia has a long history of utilizing private companies and entrepreneurs to conduct such activities as providing site security, training foreign forces, and conducting combat operations.<sup>17</sup> During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, Russian leaders negotiated agreements with the Cossacks, predominantly East-Slavic speaking people that dwelled in the northern areas of the Black and Caspian Seas. Cossacks defended border settlements during Russian expansion in exchange for special rights to natural resources and some administrative autonomy.<sup>18</sup> As one assessment concluded, the Cossacks “were not only skilled in unconventional warfare, but also highly valued mercenaries.”<sup>19</sup> During the Soviet period, some volunteers and former soldiers took part in overseas wars, though Moscow relied predominantly on military and intelligence professionals.<sup>20</sup> Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a growing number of former Russian security personnel established private security companies that operated in Russia and abroad.<sup>21</sup>

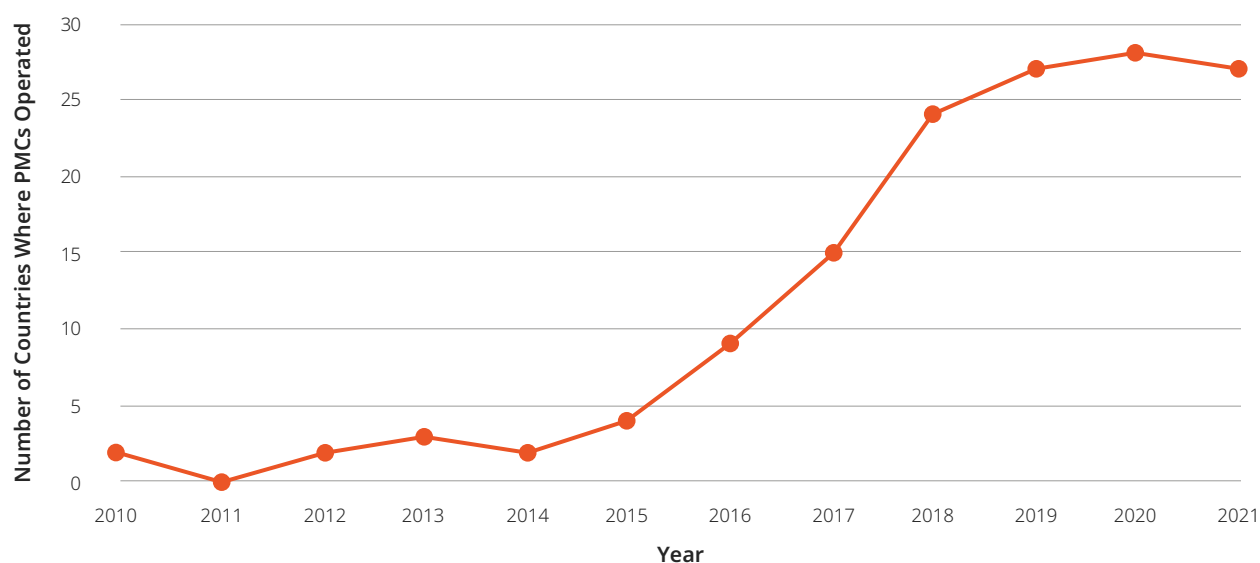
As Figure 2.2 highlights, there has been a significant expansion in the number of countries where Russian PMCs operate since around 2015. In 2021, Russian PMCs are most active in Africa, including in Botswana, the CAR, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Madagascar, and Sudan. Russian PMCs also are operating in Latin America (e.g., Venezuela), Europe (e.g., Belarus, Serbia, and Ukraine), the Middle East (e.g., Iraq, Syria, and Yemen), and Asia (e.g., Afghanistan and Azerbaijan).

The PMC rise beginning around 2015 was likely caused by Moscow’s broader desire to expand its influence. Russia successfully annexed Crimea in 2014 and then started a war in eastern Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> As highlighted in Chapter 3, PMCs were an important part of Russia’s war in Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> In 2015, Russia also directly intervened in the Syrian war to prevent the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad’s government and, as highlighted in Chapter 4, used Russian PMCs.

CSIS data show that Russia then began to expand the use of PMCs outside of Ukraine and Syria—into Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and even Latin America. The data suggest that Russia uses PMCs to increase its influence in a growing number of countries on four continents, build the

▼ **FIGURE 2.2** Number of Countries Where Russian PMCs Operated, 2010–2021

**SOURCE** Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.



Company Name	Suspected Links with Russian Government	Locations Where PMCs Have Operated
Anti-Terror Group	Ministry of Defense (especially GRU)	Iraq
Redut-Aniterror/Centre R	Ministry of Defense	Abkhazia, Iraq, Somalia, Syria
Moran Security Group	Ministry of Defense	Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria
Slavonic Corps	Ministry of Defense	Syria, Ukraine
ChVK Wagner	Ministry of Defense (especially GRU); FSB; Kremlin	Belarus, Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela
Rossiskie System Bezopasnosti (RSB) Group	FSB; Ministry of Defense	African Waters (Gulf of Guinea, Gulf of Aden, and Strait of Malacca), Libya, Sri Lanka, Ukraine
E.N.O.T.	FSB	Azerbaijan, Belarus, Serbia, Syria, Tajikistan, Ukraine
Shchit (Shield)	Ministry of Defense (especially 45th Guards Brigade of the Russian Airborne Forces)	Syria
MAR PMC	FSB; Ministry of Defense	Abkhazia, Libya, South Ossetia, Syria, Ukraine, Transnistria
Patriot	FSB; Ministry of Defense (especially GRU)	Burundi, Central African Republic, Syria, Yemen
Sewa Security Services	Ministry of Defense (especially GRU)	Central African Republic

capabilities of state and non-state forces, and expand economic interests. One of the most notable examples is the Wagner Group, which has its roots in various PMCs, including Antiterror-Orel, Moran Security Group, and the Slavonic Corps. A breakaway group from the Slavonic Corps created the Wagner Group under Dmitry Utkin.<sup>24</sup> He was a commander in the GRU's military unit 64044 between roughly 1988 and

▲ **FIGURE 2.3** Example of Russian PMCs

**SOURCE** Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

2008 who kept his ties with the GRU when he became involved in Russian PMCs.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 2.3 highlights examples of Russian PMCs, from the Wagner Group to E.N.O.T., Patriot, and Shchit (Shield). Some groups, such as Moran, RSB, and Shchit,

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resemble Western PMCs. Other groups, such as Wagner and Patriot, have been involved in combat operations.<sup>26</sup> A Russian PMC's services can vary by contract, so it may perform a wide range of tasks in different countries and over an extended period of time. A number of these PMCs have operated in close coordination with Russian government agencies, particularly the Ministry of Defense (including the GRU), FSB, SVR, and the Kremlin. In Syria, for example, the Wagner Group has worked closely with the FSB, GRU, and the General Staff's Chief Administration.<sup>27</sup> The Wagner Group has particularly close ties with the GRU, with Dmitry Utkin's involvement.<sup>28</sup> In Libya, Russian PMCs—including the Wagner Group and Rossiskie System Bezopasnosti (RSB) Group—have worked alongside Moscow's Special Operations Forces.<sup>29</sup> Another PMC operating in Syria, the Slavonic Corps, has worked with the FSB.<sup>30</sup> Yevgeny Prigozhin also has close ties with Putin and communicates regularly with senior Russian government officials.<sup>31</sup>

## Drivers

There are likely several reasons why the Russian state—and individuals with ties to the state—utilize PMCs: to expand Russian influence, build the capacity of partners, and increase the funding for Russian government officials, oligarchs, and others.

### Expand Russian Influence through a Low Profile

Russian officials support the use of PMCs to expand Russian influence through ostensibly deniable means. As highlighted previously in this chapter, Russian leaders increasingly utilize irregular and asymmetric means to expand Russian overseas influence with a lower profile. These actions complement—or, in some cases, substitute for—conventional and overt forms of statecraft.<sup>32</sup> As President Putin remarked: “I believe that such companies are a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state.”<sup>33</sup> Moscow leverages PMCs to expand Russian influence while propagating pro-Russian narratives through PMC-linked media and disinformation outlets.<sup>34</sup> There are two main reasons for using PMCs to increase influence using a low profile.

First, PMCs may be involved in sensitive activities to expand Russian influence—from military operations to intelligence collection—making it sometimes helpful to use deniable actors.<sup>35</sup> As one Russian officer remarked, “If the state does not want to be affiliated with their participation in any conflict or project, or they want to shift other dirty business in a war to others, then PMCs will be excellent performers for these purposes.”<sup>36</sup> While Western and local governments publicly highlight the activities of Russian PMCs such as the Wagner Group in areas such as Libya and the CAR, PMCs still offer a lower profile than active-duty Russian troops. After all, contractors are at least one step removed—and sometimes two or three steps removed, with various subsidiaries and front and shell companies—from the Russian government. This reality allows Russian leaders to presumably separate PMC activities from the government.

Second, Russian leaders consider PMCs less politically risky in expanding influence for two types of audiences: the Russian population and a wider international audience. The death of contractors is generally less sensitive for Russian domestic audiences than the death of soldiers, allowing Moscow to avoid a “body bag” effect.<sup>37</sup> A Russian public opinion survey found that while over 50 percent of those polled approved Russia's growing involvement in Syria, only 19 percent endorsed the deployment of Russian soldiers on the ground.<sup>38</sup> Part of the antipathy toward military casualties may come from Russia's experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s. At a Politburo meeting in October 1985, for instance, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev read letters from Soviet citizens—especially the mothers of dead Russian soldiers—who were increasingly irate at the casualty rates.<sup>39</sup> Nearly 15,000 Soviet soldiers died and another 35,000 were wounded.<sup>40</sup> But these political concerns are less acute with PMCs. In addition, Moscow has used PMCs to conduct actions in countries that its leaders consider peripheral, particularly where it is too politically risky to send large numbers of Russian conventional or special operations troops.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, Russia has utilized PMCs in developing countries in Africa, along with the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia.

PMCs are also ostensibly cheaper than regular military forces for attempting to expand Russian influence. PMC



**In addition, Moscow has used PMCs to conduct actions in countries that its leaders consider peripheral, particularly where it is too politically risky to send large numbers of Russian conventional or special operations troops.**

contractors may cost less than government soldiers since they do not require permanent salaries or benefits. Once contracts run their course or if PMCs' services are no longer needed or assessed as counterproductive, the Russian government can fire contractors or refuse to renew contracts.<sup>42</sup> Yet it is unclear how much money PMCs actually save—if any—since they can sometimes negotiate large government contracts.<sup>43</sup>

### **Build Partner Capacity**

Moscow also utilizes PMCs to strengthen the capabilities of state and non-state partners.<sup>44</sup> The goal is to improve the capacity of partners in ways that further Russian interests. Examples include training and equipping foreign forces, embedding advisers in foreign security forces and ministries, and improving specific tactics and capabilities—such as air and maritime patrol, intelligence collection and analysis, and counterterrorism.

In Syria, for example, Russian PMCs such as Moran Security Group, Slavonic Corps, Wagner Group, E.N.O.T., and Patriot helped the Syrian government and other forces retake territory from rebel groups. In Venezuela, Wagner Group contractors helped protect President Nicolás Maduro, who came under pressure by the United States to step down.<sup>45</sup> In Ukraine, PMCs such as E.N.O.T. and the Wagner Group helped improve the capability of Ukrainian rebel groups in areas such as Donbas. PMC-run media entities, such as the Prigozhin-owned Kharkiv News Agency, waged aggressive disinformation campaigns to foment discontent and

instability, promote pro-Russian and separatist narratives, and indoctrinate young Ukrainians. Russian PMCs also played an active offensive role, including during the Battle of Debaltsevo in January and February 2015.<sup>46</sup> Wagner Group contractors directed artillery barrages and infantry maneuvers that forced Ukrainian forces to fall back. According to the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), Wagner also conducted anti-air strikes, including the shootdown of an Il-76 aircraft at Luhansk International Airport.<sup>47</sup> In Libya, Wagner Group personnel improved the precision of the LNA's artillery and mortar rounds, exacted a damaging toll with sniper fire, and enabled General Khalifa Haftar's forces to temporarily seize territory. In Syria, the Wagner Group conducted operations in several major battles, including in the first liberation of Palmyra (March 2016), second liberation of Palmyra (December 2016), an offensive against Dayr az Zawr (fall 2017), and the Battle of Khasham in Dayr az Zawr (February 2018).<sup>48</sup>

### **Increase Financial Interests**

A final rationale for Moscow's use of PMCs involves furthering economic interests, including among Russian oligarchs and other business leaders. As Kimberly Marten concluded in her overview of the Wagner Group, "one of their key purposes is to further the personal interests of the corrupt clique of individuals around Putin."<sup>49</sup> In fact, Putin publicly encouraged the Wagner Group to "pursue their business interests in any spot on the planet."<sup>50</sup> Russia is home to a large and lucrative domestic private security sector.<sup>51</sup> As one Russian parliamentary official summarized, "Our history is such that we always had to fight wars. Why not exploit this experience [for profit]?"<sup>52</sup> PMCs allow Russian leaders, including those close to Putin, such as Yevgeny Prigozhin, a means to expand trade and economic influence in the developing world and build new revenue streams.<sup>53</sup> Examples include oil and gas in Syria; gold, uranium, arms, and diamonds in the CAR; oil, gold, and arms in Venezuela; and arms, infrastructure projects, and hydrocarbons in Libya.<sup>54</sup>

Prigozhin has operated as a dealmaker and financier for the Wagner Group.<sup>55</sup> He is a convicted felon from St. Petersburg, with a past in organized crime, who established himself as a caterer in his hometown and

managed to build ties to Putin and his entourage.<sup>56</sup> Prigozhin's business interests are much broader than the areas with PMC deployments, and they range as far away as Hong Kong and Thailand.<sup>57</sup> Prigozhin's role in Sudan, for example, highlights the interplay between Russia's paramilitary operations, support for preserving the authoritarian regime, and exploitation of natural resources. During his 30-year tenure, former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir increased economic and security cooperation with Russia, receiving military aid and offering agreements spanning some of Sudan's most lucrative sectors, including oil, natural gas, agriculture, and gold.<sup>58</sup>

To expand his global operations, Prigozhin has relied on a vast network of financial facilitators, front companies, and shell companies to evade sanctions and transact in U.S. dollars, despite being blocked from the U.S. financial system. Between 2018 and 2019, for example, Thai and Hong Kong-based entities such as Shine Dragon Group Limited, Shen Yang Jing Cheng Machinery, and the Zhe Jiang Jiayi Small Commodities Trade Company Limited facilitated over 100 transactions, exceeding \$7.5 billion in total, that were sent in the interest of Prigozhin.<sup>59</sup> In addition, Prigozhin owns or controls two companies that conduct mining operations in the CAR: the Russia-based M Finans and the CAR-based Lobaye Invest. M Finans's main lines of business are the mining of precious metals and the provision of private security services. Both are linked to Wagner Group operations in the CAR.<sup>60</sup>

Despite these goals, it is not clear whether Russian oligarchs such as Prigozhin actually make a profit. In Africa, for example, Prigozhin's mines are probably artisanal operations spread out over large spaces with mining done by handheld sieves. Consequently, some analysts assess that Russian oligarchs such as Prigozhin are using investments to launder money.<sup>61</sup>

## Main Tasks

To achieve these objectives, Russian PMCs undertake several tasks, including combat operations, intelligence collection and analysis, protective services, training, site security, and information operations and propaganda. These activities allow PMCs to offer a diverse

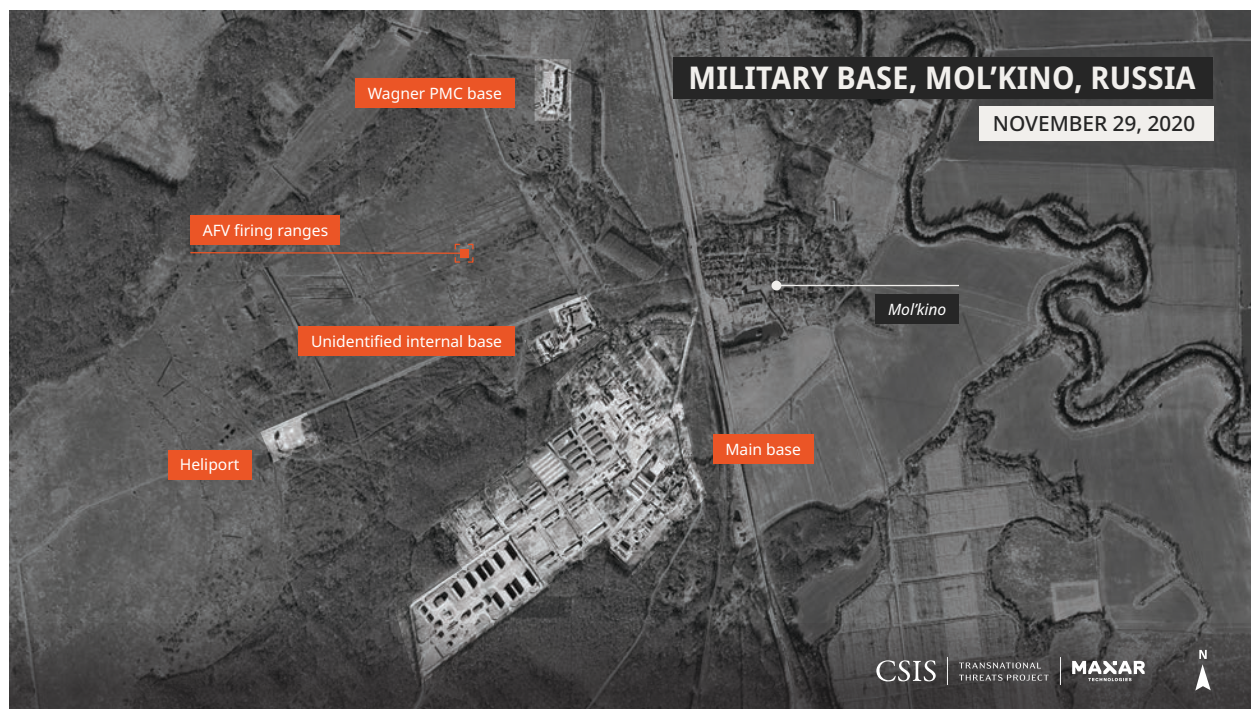
**PMCs allow Russian leaders, including those close to Putin, such as Yevgeny Prigozhin, a means to expand trade and economic influence in the developing world and build new revenue streams.**

set of services to state and non-state actors, sometimes in close collaboration with Russian security agencies.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, their missions vary considerably around the globe. In some countries such as Syria, Ukraine, Libya, and the CAR, Russian PMCs have played a major role and have conducted a wide range of activities. In other countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, and Madagascar, they have played a much more limited role.<sup>63</sup>

**Conducting Combat Operations:** PMCs provide key operational and tactical capabilities for specialized tasks, such as fire support, combined-arms maneuver, anti-air support, and direct action. Contractors include infantry, forward advisers, combat engineers, forward air controllers, reconnaissance personnel, mine clearance workers, and artillery personnel.<sup>64</sup> Among the PMCs most active in combat operations is the Wagner Group. As a former Wagner contractor noted, "Wagner is no ordinary private military company. It is a miniature army. We had it all, mortars, howitzers, tanks, infantry-fighting vehicles, and armored personnel carriers."<sup>65</sup> In Mozambique, for example, the Wagner Group was involved directly in fighting Islamic rebels in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.<sup>66</sup> Russian PMCs are also involved in smaller-scale operations, such as targeted assassinations, kidnapping, sabotage, subversion, and blackmail.<sup>67</sup>

**Collecting and Analyzing Intelligence:** Some PMC units—particularly ones that have worked for, and with, Russian intelligence agencies such as the GRU, FSB, and SVR—recruit human intelligence sources,





▲ **FIGURE 2.4.1** Satellite Imagery of Russian Military Base in Mol'kino, Russia  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 2.4.2** Satellite Imagery of Wagner Group Base in Mol'kino, Russia  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



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guide ISR platforms and systems, collect signals intelligence, and analyze intelligence and open-source information.<sup>68</sup> In eastern Ukraine, for example, PMC units leverage their GRU and FSB training to conduct a variety of intelligence-related missions, such as intelligence collection using human and technical means. In Syria, PMCs have positioned intelligence specialists on the front lines to better direct Russian airstrikes and enable pro-regime ground maneuvers.

**Conducting Protective Security Services:** PMCs provide protective details for senior local government officials, including serving as presidential guards.<sup>69</sup> In Venezuela, for example, Russian PMC contractors have provided security for President Nicolás Maduro. As one study for the U.S. Army concluded, “There are few details about the Russian PMCs themselves (equipment, C2, etc.). However, it appears their presence in Venezuela was part of an overall deterrence and security assistance mission supporting the Maduro regime.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in the CAR, Russian PMCs have served as personal security forces for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra.<sup>71</sup>

**Training and Equipping Forces:** Some PMCs provide training, equipment, and other types of assistance to host-nation military, intelligence, and law enforcement forces.<sup>72</sup> In some cases, Russian PMCs provide training and advice to non-state forces, from General Khalifa Haftar’s LNA to European right-wing activists. There is some evidence, for example, that Russia used PMCs such as E.N.O.T. Corporation to train far-right activists from countries such as Belarus.<sup>73</sup>

Before deploying abroad, PMCs conduct rigorous preparation at training camps inside Russia. Around 2015, for example, the Wagner Group established a permanent training presence at a GRU facility in the village of Mol’kino, near the Krasnodar airport.<sup>74</sup> The Wagner Group has conducted training at a base attached to the location of the 10th Special Mission Brigade of GRU Spetsnaz in Mol’kino. According to CSIS satellite imagery analysis in Figure 2.4.1, the main base features a headquarters, barracks, airborne training and obstacle course, weapons and munitions storage, and other military facilities. North of the main military base, Wagner has a separate facility, as highlighted in Figure 2.4.2. The Wagner base encompasses approximately six acres and

consists of approximately nine permanent structures of varying sizes. Images show varying numbers of cargo trucks, small trucks, and civilian vehicles.

**Providing Site Security:** Some Russian PMCs secure key energy infrastructure, mining, and mineral extraction sites for host nations and Russian companies operating the sites.<sup>75</sup> This also includes conducting security for transport convoys.<sup>76</sup> In Venezuela, Russian contractors have participated in guard duty at oil extraction sites.<sup>77</sup> Russian PMCs have also provided security for state-owned enterprises, such as Gazprom, Rosatom, Rosneft, and Russian Railways.<sup>78</sup>

**Conducting Propaganda and Disinformation:** Finally, PMCs and associated media organizations disseminate pro-Russian messages and narratives to key online audiences while also building field organizations, such as “patriotic youth camps,” on the ground.<sup>79</sup> PMCs also serve as a tool to expand Russian soft power, including themes of “Russian patriotism” and Slavic identity among ideologically minded citizens in the former Soviet states and Balkans.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusions

PMCs are only one tool in Moscow’s efforts to expand its power and influence overseas. Moscow has used intelligence units, special operations forces, and PMCs to conduct a wide range of activity abroad—such as collecting intelligence, training and equipping foreign forces, conducting combat operations, waging cyber operations, engaging in information and disinformation operations, extracting resources, and conducting covert action.

Moscow’s use of PMCs has increased in recent years and reflects lessons learned from earlier deployments, a growing expansionist mindset, and a desire for economic, geopolitical, and military gains. Ukraine has served as an important recent testing ground for PMCs beginning in 2014. The Russians then refined that model as PMCs worked with local forces in countries such as Syria and Libya. Over time, Moscow has expanded its use of PMCs to Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. This use reflects a shift to a “tip of the spear” strategy. PMCs now fill various roles to undermine U.S. influence and support Russia’s expanding geopolitical,

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military, and economic interests. Based on these actions, PMCs pose a threat to the United States by expanding Russia's political, military, intelligence, and economic influence. But this threat needs to be understood in context. Russia has conducted a range of concerning activities, such as attempting to influence the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, conducting offensive cyber operations against the United States and its partners, orchestrating information and disinformation campaigns inside the United States and other countries, engaging in espionage, and threatening North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries such as the Baltic states.

With operations across numerous countries on four continents and an increasingly refined and adaptable operational model, PMCs are likely to play a role in Russian strategic competition for the foreseeable future. The report now turns to case studies of PMC involvement, beginning with Ukraine. As noted in Chapter 1, the cases include Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and several countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Sudan, the CAR, Madagascar, and Mozambique. Each of the case studies follows the same rough organizational structure. It begins with a brief introduction and then examines roles and missions, outlines key drivers, and provides an overall assessment.

PART II

Case Studies





CHAPTER 03

# Ukraine





**Military personnel, believed to be Russian servicemen, march outside the territory of a Ukrainian military unit in the village of Perevalnoye outside Simferopol.**

SOURCE Reuters/David Mdzinarishvili

**R**ussia's first major introduction of PMCs to the battlefield came in Ukraine, during Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and in the ongoing covert war in eastern Ukraine's breakaway Donbas region.<sup>1</sup> In the initial stages of Russia's semi-covert intervention, PMCs played only auxiliary roles, augmenting Russian Special Operations Forces (SOF) and GRU Spetsnaz units, also known as "little green men," that were primarily responsible for executing the Crimea operation. Operating under Russian commanders, PMCs, including the FSB-aligned E.N.O.T. Corps and other groups, were used primarily as blocking forces to prevent Ukrainian military reinforcements from crossing into the Crimean Peninsula. Russian SOF and Spetsnaz took on more complex tasks, such as seizing key military and civilian installations.<sup>2</sup> Despite this initially limited combat role, PMCs in Crimea displayed their utility as a main element of Russia's "hybrid army" of Russian regular forces combined with SOF, local militias, and PMCs that would execute Russia's military operations in eastern Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

As Russia escalated its intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015, PMCs took on increasingly central roles in orchestrating Russia's Donbas campaign and its support to separatists in the so-called "people's republics" of Luhansk and Donetsk. What began as ad hoc auxiliary deployments of dozens of mercenaries in support roles to Russian SOF and GRU Spetsnaz evolved into PMCs serving as a primary assault force in the Donbas, with as many as 2,500 to 5,000 PMC

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mercenaries on the ground during peak fighting in 2015. PMCs' roles in eastern Ukraine would continue to evolve, including taking on Russian SOF-like roles in training and advising Donbas separatist militias and supporting Moscow's propaganda efforts. For the Kremlin, PMCs largely succeeded in their mission to enable Donbas separatists to seize and secure territory in eastern Ukraine and ensure Russian influence over perhaps the most vital country in its "near-abroad." However, like Moscow's overall effort in Ukraine, PMCs were neither decisive in shifting the balance of power on the ground after the initial victories in 2014 and 2015, nor were they "deniable," as Russia's intervention sparked outcry and sanctions from the international community regarding PMCs such as the Wagner Group.

The Wagner Group has maintained a relatively low profile in Ukraine since 2015 when it sent many of its fighters to Syria. But Russian PMCs are still active in the conflict zones of eastern Ukraine. In a 2019 interview, General Vasyl Hrytsak, then head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), confirmed that Ukrainian intelligence possessed evidence of Wagner still operating in the contested regions of Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> The Ukrainian Joint Forces Operation documented 32,000 Russian-led occupiers in Donbas—with Russian mercenaries and regular forces accounting for 11,000—as of December 2018.<sup>5</sup> Wagner was specifically identified as conducting sabotage operations, including destroying ammunition depots and intimidating the local population by conducting public acts of sabotage.<sup>6</sup> Russian PMCs also play an integral role in supporting Ukrainian separatists that engage in active conflict throughout eastern Ukraine. These skirmishes escalated in March 2021 when Russian regular forces mobilized tanks and armored vehicles around Donetsk. Russian PMCs followed suit in both Donetsk and Luhansk by deploying to the highest degree of readiness, which involved summoning personnel back from vacation and medical institutions as well as replenishing ammunition.<sup>7</sup>

The rest of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first provides an overview of the roles and missions of Russian PMCs in Ukraine. The second section analyzes the main drivers of Russia's utilization of PMCs in Ukraine. The third offers an overall assessment.

**What began as ad hoc auxiliary deployments of dozens of mercenaries . . . evolved into PMCs serving as a primary assault force in the Donbas.**

## **Roles and Missions**

Russian PMCs conducted several roles and missions in Ukraine: combat, paramilitary, intelligence, and information warfare.

### **Combat Tasks**

As Russia turned its focus from Crimea to eastern Ukraine in spring 2014, PMCs grew in both manpower and significance over the course of Russia's irregular campaign in the Donbas. Several dozen Russian PMCs, including RSB Group, Antiterror Orel, MAR, and E.N.O.T. Corps, were deployed to the front lines of Russia's first major operation in the Donbas, the battle for Luhansk in April 2014. As Russian and separatist progress stalled in Luhansk and in neighboring Donetsk following initial gains that spring against Ukrainian forces, Russia began covert preparations to escalate its intervention in the summer of 2014. Central to that escalation was the recently formed Wagner Group and its commander and GRU veteran Dmitry Utkin.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in August 2014, Wagner units would take on direct combat roles in Russia's Donbas counteroffensive against the Ukrainian army, culminating with the seizure of the strategic city of Debaltseve in early 2015.<sup>9</sup>

**Raiding and Special Missions:** As part of a Russian-led conventional and irregular force that surged to over 6,000 troops in eastern Ukraine in August 2014, several hundred PMC fighters deployed into eastern Ukraine to conduct a variety of specialized missions for the multi-prong counteroffensive in Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>10</sup> With superior tactical training compared to other PMCs, Wagner Group operatives—who swelled to as many as 1,500 by year's end—embedded into Russia's



battalion tactical groups to spearhead raids, ambushes, and diversionary attacks on Ukrainian forces. PMCs operated both unilaterally and jointly with Ukrainian separatist militias and played key kinetic roles in the encirclement and defeat of Ukrainian army forces at the key battle of Ilovaisk.<sup>11</sup>

**Combined Arms:** PMC units trained and equipped by Russian conventional forces provided additional combat power to supplement ground operations. Wagner Group specialists employed armor, rockets, and heavy artillery capabilities against Ukrainian strongpoints in order to support separatist forces in key battles in Luhansk and Donetsk throughout 2014.<sup>12</sup> Russian PMCs also deployed anti-air systems to defend Russian government and separatist positions and equipment to conduct offensive missions. Wagner Group specialists equipped with Russian Igla MANPADs were likely responsible for the shootdown of a Ukrainian Il-76 military transport aircraft near Luhansk Airport in June 2014, killing 40 Ukrainian paratroopers.<sup>13</sup>

**Ground Assault:** As the front lines in eastern Ukraine largely stabilized in the fall of 2014 following the Russian counteroffensive, Russia again began covert preparations for a 2015 offensive to consolidate separatist advances and seize remaining key terrain, including the Donetsk Airport and the junction town of Debaltseve. The hybrid Russian force in Donbas surged to 10,000 troops, but unlike the summer campaign, regular Russian units fell to the rear to take on combat support roles while PMCs moved to the front, replacing Russian SOF and Spetsnaz as the driving force for operations.<sup>14</sup> With 2,000 to 3,000 Russian mercenaries on the ground by January 2015, PMC units operating in small, mobile formations and employing “shock-troop” tactics conducted persistent ground assaults on Ukrainian army frontline positions and led separatist militias in intense urban fighting.<sup>15</sup> The Wagner Group ascended the PMC ranks to become the primary assault force, leading multiple prongs of attack and withering artillery barrages on Debaltseve, leading to the city’s capture in February 2015 and a decisive victory for Russia and the Donbas “republics.”<sup>16</sup>

## Paramilitary

As regular Russian forces downsized their presence and operations in eastern Ukraine following the victories of

early 2015, PMC units assumed many of the key roles previously conducted by Russian SOF in leading the militias of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR, respectively). PMCs assumed primarily paramilitary rather than combat missions, leading Moscow’s efforts to train, organize, and equip separatist militias; consolidate their control in Donetsk and Luhansk; and maintain pressure on the front lines with Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

**Train, Advise, Assist:** In 2015, PMC commanders, such as Wagner Group’s Dmitry Utkin, largely assumed command over training, organizing, and advising DPR/LPR militias and developing them into more cohesive fighting units. While providing training in mission planning and combat tactics, PMC operatives exercised command-and-control over militia operations, coordinating persistent attacks on Ukrainian frontline outposts.<sup>18</sup>

**Equipping and Enabling:** Russian PMCs, including Wagner Group, E.N.O.T. Corps, and MAR, also deployed specialized personnel to train and equip Donbas militias on various equipment and weapons systems, including artillery, armor, air defense, combat engineering, and logistics.<sup>19</sup> Russian PMC specialists as of 2017 also continued to operate more complex and high-value Russian systems, such as electronic warfare and ISR platforms, to enable LPR/DPR operations.<sup>20</sup>

## Intelligence

PMC units leveraged their GRU and FSB training to conduct a variety of intelligence-related missions in the Donbas, including intelligence collection, subversion and sabotage, and other covert and clandestine missions, such as targeting killings.<sup>21</sup>

**Collection:** PMC operatives conducted human and technical intelligence collection in eastern Ukraine, likely on both Ukrainian and Donbas separatist targets, as well as battlefield reconnaissance missions. Intelligence specialists from PMCs, such as E.N.O.T. Corps, also provided intelligence instruction and training to LPR/DPR militias.<sup>22</sup>

**Sabotage and Subversion:** PMC operatives transitioned from destabilization and political influence operations at the onset of the Ukraine crisis to sabotage operations, which aimed at inciting and mobilizing Donbas residents against Kyiv, or, at the very least,

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intimidating the local population. Russian PMCs also used sabotage and subversion against Ukrainian forces, facilities, and critical infrastructure.<sup>23</sup>

**Covert Influence and Lethal Action:** In addition to cultivating DPR and LPR political officials and militia commanders as Russian proxies, PMC operatives also conducted covert action to eliminate dissident rebel leaders who refused to follow Russian directives. Wagner Group commander Utkin and the LPR interior minister reportedly coordinated assassinations of uncooperative commanders and fighters, while other Wagner units conducted full disarmaments of disobedient militia groups.<sup>24</sup>

## Information Warfare

PMC-run media entities, in coordination with Russian state and state-aligned outlets, waged aggressive information campaigns in Ukraine, first to provoke discontent and instability, then to promote pro-Russian and separatist narratives and to indoctrinate young Ukrainians.<sup>25</sup>

**Agitprop:** Beginning in Crimea and then in the Donbas, PMCs were used to seize local radio and TV stations to foment discontent, stir uprisings against Ukrainian authorities, and wage psychological warfare against Ukrainian forces.<sup>26</sup>

**Propaganda and Disinformation:** As the LPR and DPR consolidated territory and authority, PMC-linked propaganda outlets—including the Prigozhin-owned Kharkov News Agency and other units in Donetsk and Luhansk with ties to the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA)—shifted their attention to promoting pro-Russian, pro-separatist, and anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation. While Russian state and Donbas local media promoted pro-Kremlin and separatist themes, Russian PMCs worked alongside hacktivists to wage aggressive online influence and social media campaigns, painting Ukraine as a “neo-Nazi” and “terrorist” state and using increasingly sophisticated disinformation techniques, including “deepfakes” of alleged Ukrainian atrocities, and portraying Russia as the “protector.”<sup>27</sup>

**Political and Ideological Indoctrination:** In addition to disseminating media propaganda, PMCs also conducted direct indoctrination of Russian-speaking youth in the Donbas through the establishment of “Russian

patriotic youth camps.”<sup>28</sup> PMCs provided ideological, political, religious, and military instruction to youth groups in Donetsk and Luhansk and established an international camp with Slavic- and Russian-speaking youth from Belarus, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and “international volunteer” associations.<sup>29</sup>

## Key Drivers

PMCs provided Moscow an ideal tool through which to pursue its military, geopolitical, and ideological objectives in Ukraine: destabilizing and then consolidating control over Crimea and the Donbas, undermining and pressuring Kyiv and its Western backers for diplomatic concessions, and doing it all while denying any official Russian involvement.<sup>30</sup>

## Military

PMCs provided key combat and paramilitary capabilities for Russia’s campaign in the Donbas. They also served as the test case for Russia’s hybrid warfare doctrine, which sought to blend conventional and unconventional forces, kinetic and non-kinetic approaches, and overt and covert action for deception and deniability. Russian military officials envisioned PMCs serving such irregular warfare roles, and Ukraine would serve as the testing and training ground.<sup>31</sup> The fighting in the Donbas afforded Moscow the opportunity to experiment with various PMC operations and lines of effort to see which companies emerged as the most capable to serve Russian interests—with the Wagner Group emerging as the strongest force.<sup>32</sup> PMCs also demonstrated to Moscow an ideal employment of *maskirovka* techniques—including deception, denial, disguise, and camouflage—that are central to Russian hybrid warfare doctrine.<sup>33</sup>

PMCs also provided the Kremlin a means to execute Russian strategy and operations in eastern Ukraine while downsizing the military footprint of regular Russian forces and reducing the risk of military casualties.<sup>34</sup> As Russia’s Donbas campaign progressed from defensive (spring 2014), to counteroffensive (summer 2014), to offensive (2015), to consolidation and stabilization (2016 onwards), PMCs were able to fulfill key missions in each phase of the campaign. Moreover, the battlefield evolution of PMCs over this period—from

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auxiliary force, to subordinate and embedded force, to an independent military formation—demonstrated their utility not only to Russia’s military interests in Ukraine but potentially elsewhere around the globe.

In this role, Russian PMCs not only serve as a force multiplier, but also a threat multiplier. Despite their clandestine nature, Russian PMCs are closely monitored by Ukrainian intelligence. Escalation by Russian regular forces and PMCs can increase pressure on the Ukrainian government. For example, the March 2021 buildup of 100,000 Russian forces along Ukraine’s border was clearly visible.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the signals intelligence (SIGINT) captured by Ukrainian intelligence, which also indicated Russian PMCs deploying to the highest force readiness, indicated that Russia might be prepared to take escalatory actions.<sup>36</sup>

## Geopolitical

Moscow’s deployment of Russian PMCs to Ukraine served not only Russian military objectives but also its political and strategic objectives and reflected the broader geopolitical context of Moscow’s decision to invade Ukraine. Underpinning the Kremlin’s decision for military intervention in Crimea, and then eastern Ukraine, was the fear of Kyiv’s Western realignment following the 2014 Maidan revolution, the weakening of pro-Russian political forces there, and the risk of Ukraine falling fully out of Russia’s orbit and into the orbit of the European Union and NATO.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Putin likely opted for a strategy predicated on speed and opportunism to seize the initiative and key terrain—focused first on Crimea because of its geostrategic position and pro-Russian population—but in a covert manner to deny official Russian involvement, sow confusion, and slow responses from the international community. Russia’s hybrid warfare doctrine, with PMCs as a central element, provided the blueprint to execute such a strategy, enabling Russia to project power in support of political objectives—but do so deniably. As Russia’s invasion shifted theaters from Crimea to the Donbas, PMCs became even more critical to Moscow’s strategic balancing act of executing military action with deniability to complicate international responses.

PMCs also have served Moscow’s diplomatic objectives for Ukraine by providing a means to continue to strengthen and enable the separatist LPR and DPR’s

military capabilities after the drawdown of regular Russian forces and, in turn, increase Russian leverage at the negotiating table—while still denying or obfuscating Russian involvement. Moscow’s use of coercive diplomacy succeeded in winning generally favorable terms for Russian and Donbas separatist interests during the Minsk I (2014) and Minsk II (2015) agreements.<sup>38</sup> While European diplomats negotiated ceasefires, lines of contact, and future avenues for a political settlement, Russian PMCs were on the ground assisting separatists in consolidating power and enhancing their military capabilities to ensure future leverage.

Beginning in March 2021, Russia commenced a military buildup on its Ukrainian border, increasing the number of soldiers garrisoned there to approximately 110,000.<sup>39</sup> The buildup, which coincided with a rise in clashes between the Ukrainian military and pro-Russia separatists, prompted the United Kingdom to announce their anticipation to deploy warships to the Black Sea and prompted fears that conflict in eastern Ukraine could reignite.<sup>40</sup> As a political settlement to the Ukraine conflict remains unlikely in the near term, PMCs also serve Moscow’s immediate political objectives for Ukraine: to keep it weak, fractured, and destabilized. The status of the Donbas and a divided Ukraine remains a central point of political discord in Kyiv and, for Russia, a means to prevent a strong, unified Ukrainian government—with pro-Western and anti-Russian leanings—from emerging. Moreover, despite the significant improvements in Ukrainian military capabilities since 2015, the looming risk of Russian invasion, enabled by the presence of PMCs on the ground, provides Moscow leverage and a check on Kyiv’s policies and on any efforts toward reunification.<sup>41</sup>

## Ideological

The war in Ukraine provided Russia a platform to showcase not only its military capabilities and geopolitical resurgence but also Moscow’s ideological commitment and connection to Russian-speaking and Slavic peoples. PMCs have played a key role in helping Moscow exercise its soft power. PMC propaganda outlets amplified the Kremlin’s rhetoric of resurgent “Russian nationalism,” the threat posed to Russian minorities by “globalists” and “fascists” in Kyiv and Western capitals, and the “spiritual rejuvenation” of fellow Russian Orthodox and



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Russian-speaking citizens in Crimea and the Donbas that came through the support of and from Moscow.<sup>42</sup> PMCs' establishment of "Russian patriotic youth camps" in eastern Ukraine also served to expand Russian influence in the near abroad, building real-world and virtual connections in multiple European countries through which Russia can project influence and potentially mobilize in the future.<sup>43</sup>

## Assessment and Outlook

Russia's invasion of Ukraine—first during the annexation of Crimea, then in heavier fighting in the Donbas—provided a "proof-of-concept" of Moscow's use of PMCs for foreign interventions and expeditionary warfare. With SOF-like capabilities, PMCs such as Wagner Group were able to strengthen the military capabilities of separatist militias and orchestrate joint operations against Ukrainian forces, allowing Russia to consolidate its territorial gains in the Donbas, freeze the conflict with Ukraine on terms favorable to Moscow, and entrench Russian influence. While PMCs enabled Moscow and its Donbas proxies to seize and secure control over the new "independent" republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, their battlefield achievements largely stalled after 2015, rendering the front lines of eastern Ukraine another Russian-backed frozen conflict. While the intensity of clashes increased over spring 2021, and the July 2020 ceasefire generally collapsed, the lines of territorial control have remained unchanged since 2015 and will likely remain frozen barring the resumption of open hostilities.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Russian attempts to maintain "plausible deniability" for their actions fooled few Western governments, resulting in sanctions on Russian government and PMC officials and organizations.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Russia's employment of PMCs largely has succeeded in facilitating Russian objectives in Ukraine, for several reasons.

**Focused, Limited Objectives:** After the annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin retained fairly limited objectives for the intervention in eastern Ukraine, even after the surge of Russian military forces into the Donbas in the fall of 2014. Russian military objectives focused on expanding and consolidating gains in southeastern Ukraine with like-minded separatists and avoided "mission creep" into seeking greater gains

into northern and western Ukraine, thus avoiding triggering potential Western involvement. Capable PMCs, particularly better-trained outfits such as the Wagner Group, were able to execute operations in support of these limited objectives.

**Weakened Opponent and Lack of International Pushback:** The battlefield success of PMCs in eastern Ukraine resulted in part from a relatively weak, disorganized, and demoralized Ukrainian army during the combat phases of 2014 and 2015, as well as ineffective pushback—both militarily and diplomatically—from the international community. Over time, reforms in military organization, training, and equipping launched in 2015, and improved Western support enabled Ukrainian forces to stabilize the front lines with Donbas separatists and prevent further Russian-backed separatist encroachment.<sup>46</sup>

**Proximity and Familiarity:** Russian PMCs benefited from the geographic proximity of the fighting in eastern Ukraine to Russian territory, as well as cultural similarities to the Ukrainian proxies they were charged with training and enabling. Russia's hybrid battalion tactical groups were able to rapidly deploy into the Donbas in the summer of 2014 and then sustain training, weapons, logistics, and intelligence support to PMCs on the ground once they assumed key responsibilities. PMCs also benefited from the cultural, historical, language, ideological, and political affinity of the Donbas region with Russia. These factors likely facilitated training, advising, and enabling efforts, as well as the ability of PMCs to cultivate loyal proxies and strong intelligence networks.

While the conflict in eastern Ukraine remains partially frozen—even as fighting ramped up in 2021—Russian PMCs remain well-positioned to continue deployments in the Donbas to bolster LPR and DPR separatists and maintain readiness for any resumption of hostilities with Kyiv. Along with helping to consolidate Russian-backed victories in Crimea and Donbas, the effective employment of PMCs in the Ukrainian intervention has demonstrated the application of Russian hybrid warfare doctrine, the role PMCs can play, and their ability to operate both independently and jointly with regular Russian military operations.<sup>47</sup> The lessons learned in Ukraine on exploiting PMCs'

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combination of military-like capabilities and official “deniability”—particularly in the face of lackluster international pushback—were applied in Russia’s next major foreign operation: Syria.



CHAPTER 04

# Syria



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**A Russian soldier stands guard as troops escort a convoy of Syrian civilians leaving the town of Tal Tamr in the northeastern Hasakeh province.**

SOURCE Delil Souleiman/AFP/Getty Images



**R**ussian PMC activities in Syria have been nested under two larger goals: first, Russian leaders wanted to stabilize Syria, which was under particular threat from opposition and extremist forces by 2015, as a strategically important hub for Moscow in the Middle East. Second, Moscow aimed to prevent U.S.-led regime change of a Russia-friendly Assad government. PMCs are a valuable component of Moscow's military campaign in Syria, its largest out-of-area operations since the end of the Cold War. PMCs serve as a quasi-deniable, low-cost, attritable force whose roles evolved as battlefield needs precipitated a steady increase in Russian ground forces. Though Russia's initial strategy was for Syrian, Iranian, and Shia militias to conduct the bulk of the ground fighting, developments over the course of the war forced Moscow to introduce its own expeditionary forces to bolster the campaign, which included PMCs. Initial PMC roles, such as site security, VIP escort, and weapons transfers, therefore, evolved into increasingly direct roles in pro-regime combat operations in places such as Palmyra in 2016 and 2017 and Dayr az Zawr from 2017 on. PMC contractors in Syria have numbered between 1,000 and 3,000 personnel, including contingents from the Wagner Group, Vegacy, E.N.O.T., Vostok Battalion, and others.

Syria has served as an important testing ground for the application of a hybrid-PMC deployment model, which has since been exported to other battlegrounds, particularly in Libya. PMCs have acted as a ground force

with skill sets similar to Russian Spetsnaz through which Moscow can limit regular Russian military casualties and provide deniability for high-risk Russian actions. PMCs synchronize military advances with economic priorities by allowing Russia to capitalize on ground advances in oil- and gas-rich areas through the securing of key pipelines, oil fields, refineries, and gas plants to stage future ground advances and draw profits. Notably, Russian PMCs operating in Syria often have high-end conventional Russian military support and capable partners in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Syrian Army Tiger Forces that have better enabled them to gain and hold ground in contested cities, bases, and energy infrastructure locations. These maneuvers, however, are not without risk, as demonstrated in the February 2018 engagement between Wagner Group and U.S. forces at the Conoco plant east of Dayr az Zawr, which led to hundreds of Wagner casualties.<sup>1</sup>

## Roles and Missions

Russian PMC roles and missions in Syria evolved in response to battlefield needs. Early PMC groups such as the Slavonic Corps were considerably inept at combat missions, focusing instead on site security and train-advise-assist missions. However, by late 2015, the dire battlefield situation for the Assad regime along with the introduction of Russian military forces boosted Russian PMCs to play a more substantial role in the conflict, expanding their portfolio from paramilitary and economic missions to direct involvement in combat tasks.

### Paramilitary

As Syrian rebels, al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate al-Nusra Front, and extremist forces that would later become the Islamic State took control of swaths of territory in Syria in late 2012, Russian PMCs were first deployed to fulfill primarily paramilitary roles, such as training, advising, and enabling partner forces in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). The Slavonic Corps, the predecessor to the Wagner Group, deployed to Syria in 2013 to assist Syrian forces in recapturing oil facilities from Islamic State militants.<sup>2</sup> The Slavonic Corps focused their recruitment on former military personnel in

**Syria has served as an important testing ground for the application of a hybrid-PMC deployment model, which has since been exported to other battlegrounds, particularly in Libya.**

Russia.<sup>3</sup> However, the group suffered from outdated weaponry and poor logistics assistance from the Syrian government. After demonstrating a poor fighting capability in one of its early combat missions (against Islamic State fighters in the village of Sukhna), the group was disbanded and reformed as the Wagner Group. Since 2015, PMC paramilitary activity has centered on training and advising the SAA and the 5th Volunteer Assault Corps, which is composed of a litany of pro-regime militias.

**Training and Equipping:** PMCs have trained and advised Syrian army units and a number of pro-Assad and foreign militias fighting for the regime, including the 5th Corps and Shia militias such as the Palestinian Liwa al-Quds.<sup>4</sup> The 5th Corps was established by Russia in late 2016 and equipped with a mix of armored vehicles, including T-62 tanks and BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, logistics vehicles, and artillery systems, such as the M-1938 (M-30) howitzer.<sup>5</sup> PMCs also have provided training to other Russian-backed Syrian militias, such as Sayadou Da'esh (ISIS Hunters), which emerged in early 2017 and was deployed to protect strategic installations in and around Palmyra, including the military airport and oil and gas fields. Other Russian PMCs, such as Vegacy Strategic Services, have also conducted minor training missions for pro-regime militia forces, such as Liwa al-Quds.<sup>6</sup>

**Enabling:** Russian PMCs often have served as a liaison between non-state partner forces on the ground. With assistance from PMCs, the Russian military gradually improved its air-ground integration with pro-regime

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forces over the course of the campaign to a level sufficient to defeat increasingly beleaguered opposition and Islamic State fighters.<sup>7</sup> During the Aleppo campaign in 2016 and 2017 and the pro-regime offensive to Dayr az Zawr from 2017 to 2019, PMCs coordinated airstrikes by the Russian aviation group at Hmeimim Airfield, the Russian military's primary base in Syria. PMCs, in coordination with Russian Spetsnaz, called in airstrikes, which precipitated offensive clearing maneuvers by Syrian and Iranian militia forces.<sup>8</sup>

## Combat Tasks

As the Syrian war has progressed, Wagner forces increasingly have taken on conventional and SOF-like missions. Whereas before 2016 PMCs primarily aided and enabled partner forces on the ground, evolving battlefield needs required PMCs and other Russian forces to take on direct combat roles. This has included urban assault operations to clear rebel-held pockets in western Syria, battlefield reconnaissance to aid Russian airstrikes, and embedding with pro-regime forces to enable ground advances in the push to Dayr az Zawr. In response, PMCs such as Wagner organized themselves to reflect their latest focus on direct combat missions—with formations mirroring that of a Russian battalion battlegroup.<sup>9</sup> Wagner forces in Syria have been composed of several reconnaissance and assault companies (90 to 100 men each), a group command, a tank company, a combined artillery, and reconnaissance and support units.<sup>10</sup>

**Urban Combat:** Retaking territory from opposition or extremist forces has required tough urban clearing operations that have exposed ground combatants to high casualties. Rather than relying solely on Russian military and intelligence personnel, Moscow increased its use of PMC personnel with similar skill sets but without official Russian status. Wagner forces, for example, were observed participating in operations at Latakia, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Greater Damascus, as well as the counteroffensive to retake Palmyra in 2016 and 2017.<sup>11</sup>

**Targeting:** The centerpiece of Russia's campaign in Syria has been its aerospace forces, which have employed heavy, persistent, and often indiscriminate airstrikes against rebel-held areas. Russian and regime airstrikes, however, suffered from less capable pro-re-

gime troops and imprecise air-to-ground targeting at the onset of Russia's intervention.<sup>12</sup> Thus, beginning in 2016, Russia began deploying reconnaissance task elements, including forward air controllers, to better direct airstrikes. Russian SOF and PMC specialists both have performed forward air control, embedding with pro-regime forces on the front lines, including in the siege of Aleppo in 2016. PMCs have been increasingly integrated into these missions to limit regular Russian military casualties and provide some deniability for Russian actions.

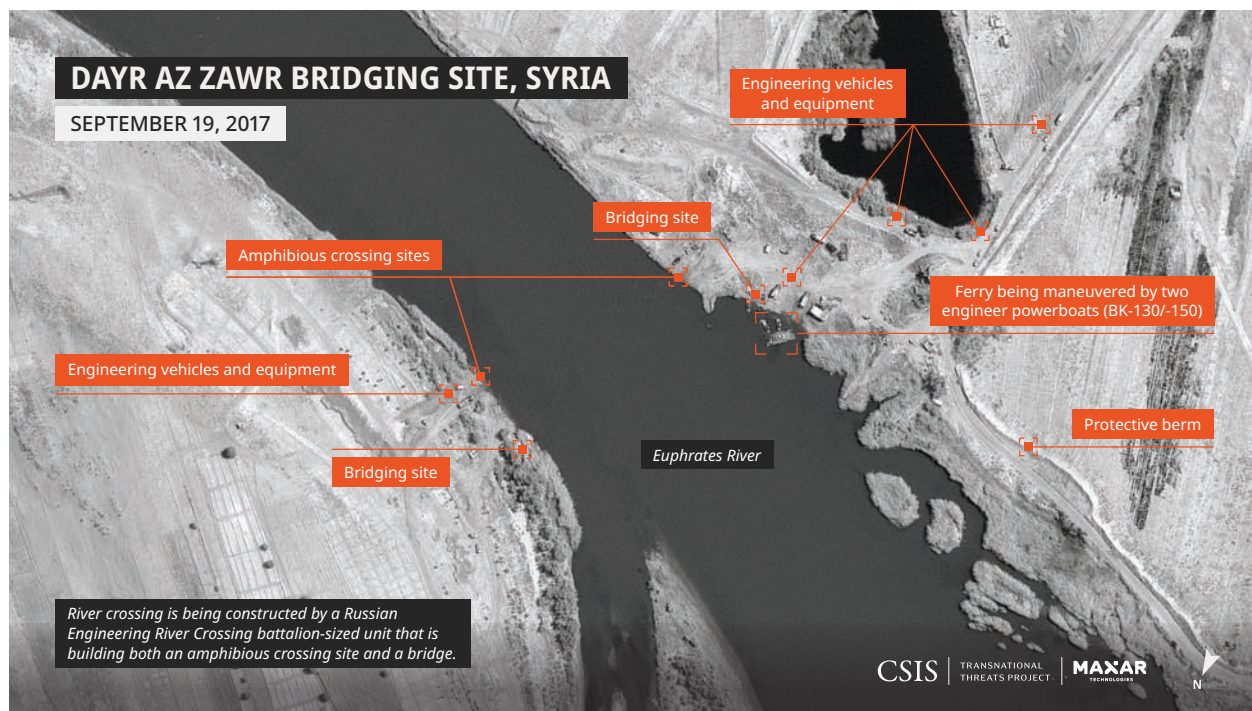
**Maneuver:** PMCs such as the Wagner Group have served as a key unofficial Russian maneuver element on the ground, holding and clearing territory with the help of Russian SOF.<sup>13</sup> Wagner forces also have benefited from Russian military logistics, as demonstrated by the flotillas installed by the Russian combat engineers to aid Wagner and Assad-aligned forces across the Euphrates during the campaign to take Dayr az Zawr.

**Fires:** Russian PMCs have aided Assad-aligned forces during the military campaign in part by directing artillery fires by conventional Russian forces, or the PMCs themselves. PMCs have directed artillery strikes, usually as the first wave of combat, setting rebel forces on the run before regime forces and partners clear the area.<sup>14</sup> Wagner forces, which have included a combined artillery group, have relied on legacy Soviet artillery, such as 122 mm D-30 howitzers, BM-21 Grad launchers, M-30 howitzers, and 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers.<sup>15</sup>

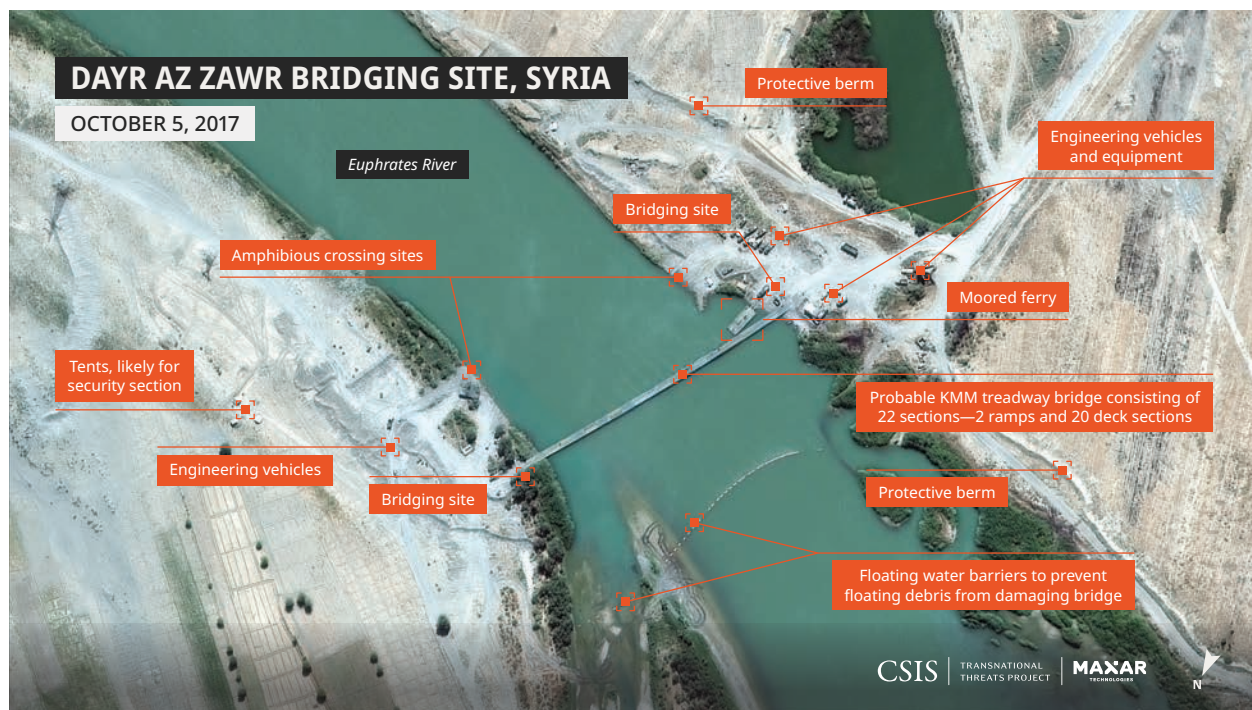
**Site Security:** As opposition forces and the Islamic State captured swaths of Syrian territory beginning in 2013 and accelerating through 2015, Russian PMCs that had initially served as security companies evolved to provide logistical links between Russian special operators in Syria and local Assad-friendly militias, while continuing to provide site security at key military and infrastructure sites.<sup>16</sup> Personnel from multiple PMCs deployed to secure key military facilities such as Hmeimim Airfield and key energy infrastructure facilities in central and eastern Syria.<sup>17</sup>

**Oil, Gas, and Ports:** PMCs have played a crucial role capturing oil fields, refineries, gas plants, and other energy infrastructure from rebels. Russian efforts, led in part by Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin, went





▲ **FIGURE 4.1.1** Russian Forces Crossing the Euphrates, September 2017  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 4.1.2** Russian Forces Crossing the Euphrates, October 2017  
**SOURCE** CSIS.

so far as to use PMCs to test well-established deconfliction lines between the United States and Russia to potentially secure key energy infrastructure around Dayr az Zawr. Russian PMCs also have provided site security for Russian firms that have secured energy contracts in Syria over the course of the war. One of Prigozhin's firms, Evro Polis, which signed petroleum, gas, and other contracts with the Assad regime, has solicited PMC support for site security missions.<sup>18</sup> In another example, the Russian PMC Shchit (Shield) has provided security services for OAO Stroytransgaz, a Russian engineering construction company owned by Gennady Timchenko, which also took an interest in phosphate mines outside of Palmyra. The same firm also was granted contracts to expand Syria's port of Tartus, a key Russian military and Syrian trading hub. Although it is not explicit why the site security contract was given to Shchit—not Wagner—Shchit is reportedly a PMC intended only to provide security services and does not have the capability to participate in battles, unlike Wagner.<sup>19</sup>

## Intelligence and Information Operations

Russian military intelligence and information operations have included PMC operatives, KSO forces, and likely GRU intelligence officers.<sup>20</sup> Though Russian intelligence and information operations have included a range of activities, PMCs such as Wagner have positioned intelligence specialists on the front lines to better direct Russian airstrikes and enable pro-regime ground maneuvers.

**Military Intelligence:** PMC elements embedded in pro-regime units have performed intelligence sharing, training, and liaising missions. PMC specialists have collected battlefield intelligence and served as forward air controllers, embedding with pro-regime troops to facilitate Russian air support. PMC intelligence specialists typically have deployed to serve at established Russian bases such as Hmeimim and Tiya Airfields.<sup>21</sup>

**Propaganda:** While Russian PMCs themselves have not conducted significant information operations in Syria, as companies such as Wagner Group have done in Libya and sub-Saharan Africa, their presence in Syria has served indirectly as a means of propaganda

for the Kremlin. Because PMCs seemingly demonstrate popular support for Assad and the Syria conflict by acting “outside” of the Russian state to fight the Islamic State in Syria, Moscow can pass off PMC fighters as enthusiastic volunteers that convey the will of the Russian people. Local partners also have leveraged Russian PMC battlefield successes for propaganda. Wagner forces, for example, sometimes identify as Syrian forces in videos and interviews, providing increased legitimacy to the Assad government through battlefield victories.<sup>22</sup>

## Key Drivers

Building off its experience in Ukraine, Russia again turned to PMCs in Syria to help achieve important goals—including stabilizing the Assad regime and countering efforts by the United States and its partners. In addition, PMCs have played a crucial role capturing oil fields, refineries, gas plants, and other energy infrastructure from rebels. Russian PMCs have played an increasingly direct role in pro-regime combat operations over the course of the Syrian civil war and have often synchronized with Russian economic priorities, including securing key energy infrastructure.

## Geopolitical

Russia's direct intervention in the Syrian war is primarily motivated by a desire to stabilize a strategically important partner and to prevent the United States and its partners from overthrowing the Assad regime and replacing it with a pro-Western government.<sup>23</sup> The campaign, however, is also opportunistic, and PMCs have played key roles in seizing various opportunities to advance Russian foreign policy interests. Moscow has leveraged its successes in Syria to enhance Moscow's stature on the global stage as a mediator of a brutal war, mitigate the threat from the Islamic State, draw profits from favorable energy deals, and push out the United States and its partners. In order to achieve these goals, Russia willingly has taken on significant risk. It has conducted large-scale attacks against civilian and humanitarian infrastructure to erode the will of the rebels and deny resources, moved a naval carrier group into the region, placed special operators—including PMCs—on the front lines to direct airstrikes,



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and bolstered a Syrian military that was falling apart by 2015. Russia has deployed PMCs as part of this effort to reduce costs, increase deniability, and avoid the scrutiny of publicly reported casualty numbers.

Aside from enabling partner military advances on the ground, Russia also has deployed PMCs as a means of pushing back U.S. influence in the region. Probably motivated by a desire to test U.S. resolve to defend its primary Syrian partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as well as to gain contracts to defend regime oil and gas fields, the Wagner Group and pro-regime forces in January 2018 began planning an assault on a Conoco plant east of Dayr az Zawr, held by the SDF and a small contingent of U.S. special operations forces.<sup>24</sup> In early February, Wagner units, elements of the 5th Corps, and other Syrian and foreign Shia militia began massing armored vehicles, artillery, and hundreds of fighters in Dayr az Zawr. On the night of February 7, they crossed to the eastern side of the Euphrates River to begin the assault using Russian pontoon bridges.<sup>25</sup> After repeated U.S. warnings to the Russian military through their deconfliction line and Russian disavowals of having forces present, around 500 Wagner-led fighters advanced toward the Conoco facility under supporting fires from artillery, tanks, mortars, and multiple-launch rocket systems.<sup>26</sup> In a fierce hours-long firefight, heavy U.S. air and artillery strikes pinned down pro-regime forces near the town of Khasham and devastated the assault force, with estimates of Russian PMC casualties ranging from 100 to 300 killed, compelling pro-regime withdrawal.<sup>27</sup>

## Military

With military skills and capabilities, PMCs are well suited for Russia's light-footprint approach in Syria and have helped enable Moscow to project limited power, strengthen partners, establish new military footholds, and alter the balance of power in out-of-area conflicts toward preferred outcomes, all while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability for the Kremlin. Rather than deploying large numbers of Russian ground forces, Moscow has leveraged air assets, unmanned aerial vehicles, information assets, special operations forces, and then PMCs to enable and augment surrogate ground forces, such as the Syrian army, Lebanese Hezbollah, and militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, Paki-

stan, and other countries.<sup>28</sup> This approach has been a major advancement for the Russian military. PMC contractors are also viewed as more expendable and less risky than Russian soldiers, particularly if they are killed during combat or training missions.

Russia has wielded its paramilitary mission in Syria in a strategic manner by training, equipping, and enabling the pro-regime forces that are foremost loyal to the Assad regime and can capture and hold territory. Russia assessed that some Syrian army units—such as the 25th Special Mission Forces Division (otherwise known as Tiger Forces) were capable and effective against rebel forces.<sup>29</sup> To augment these capable and motivated ground units, Russia has needed to deploy special advisers, particularly from Wagner Group, to improve their readiness and effectiveness for major operations, such as the Dayr az Zawr offensive.

In 2017, in order to strengthen the military power of the Assad regime and out of fear that the explosion of militia groups was unduly benefitting the Iranians, Russia began pressuring the SAA to rein in the increasing number of militias. Russia took a more heavy-handed approach in centralizing command and control (C2) of the militias as a means of strengthening its state partner and diminishing Iran's influence over Syrian fighting forces.<sup>30</sup> In their efforts to streamline C2 and solidify control, the Russians by 2017 prioritized their equipping efforts, including artillery and fighting vehicles, to Tiger Force units under Colonel Suhail Hassan.

## Economic

Syria's lucrative oil, mineral, and gas sectors emerged as a key driver of Russian activity and of PMC usage as Assad gradually re-expanded his control over central and eastern Syria. As they do elsewhere globally, PMCs and associated energy, mining, security, and logistics firms operating in Syria have provided Moscow a means to expand trade and economic influence in Syria; build new revenue streams, particularly from oil, gas, and mineral extraction; and reduce the impact of sanctions. The Syrian government likely has been willing to solicit or allow Russian PMC economic activities in exchange for their continued military assistance to the regime.

Pro-regime offensives in eastern Syria (2017–2019) focused on securing key energy infrastructure sites.



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Russian and Syrian forces pushed from Palmyra through the central Syrian Badiya desert, seizing key oil and gas fields and assisted heavily by Russians PMCs, who played prominent advisory and combat roles.<sup>31</sup> Russia has used market incentives to reward PMCs who secure opposition-held territories.<sup>32</sup> Two Russian companies, for example, hired PMCs to secure key energy infrastructure sites in Syria: Evro Polis (oil and gas) and Sroytransgaz (phosphate mining), which secured a mining site in central Syria.<sup>33</sup> The subsequent recapturing of Dayr az Zawr refocused Russian and Syrian efforts in what would later be known as the “Race for the Euphrates,” in which the Russians and Syrians competed with the U.S.-backed SDF for control of vital oil and gas fields in the region. In the Middle Euphrates River Valley, Russian foreign policy, interested in pushing back on U.S. influence, intersected with Russian and Syrian objectives to secure energy infrastructure, from which profits would be crucial to rebuilding Syria.

In 2021, Russia retained a monopoly over major oil deals with the Assad regime. The Syrian parliament awarded two Russian firms—Mercury LLC and Velea LLC—with contracts for oil exploration.<sup>34</sup> Both had ties to Yevgeny Prigozhin. The exclusive access to Assad-controlled oil fields was helpful to Russian PMCs, and Prigozhin-linked companies extracted \$20 million per month in resources from Syria during 2018.<sup>35</sup>

## Assessment and Outlook

Russia’s military campaign in Syria has been successful in achieving Moscow’s strategic objectives at a manageable cost in terms of Russian casualties and finances, due in significant part to its effective deployment of PMCs. Russian operations and tactics also have been well aligned to its strategic goals, focusing on airpower and SOF (including PMCs) to enable regime offensives on the ground.<sup>36</sup> PMCs such as the Wagner Group have demonstrated clear success in bolstering pro-regime forces, recapturing and holding territory via expeditionary operations, and securing key energy infrastructure sites for profit. Russian PMCs also have fulfilled these important ground missions in a quasi-deniable manner, obfuscating casualty numbers and avoiding public scrutiny.

Though Russian PMCs have played a mostly successful role in helping Moscow achieve its geopolitical objectives in Syria, the campaign has exposed vulnerabilities, as well as benefits from factors unique to the Syrian conflict that are unlikely to be replicated in other theaters.

**Regular Russian Military Support:** PMCs have benefited from high-end conventional Russian military support, including C2, ISR, cruise missile strikes, and combat aircraft, helicopters, drones, and rockets.<sup>37</sup> When PMC forces came up against a militarily superior adversary, as the Wagner Group did in February 2018 in Dayr az Zawr against U.S. forces, PMC fighters performed dismally and suffered heavy losses.<sup>38</sup> Although Russian PMCs can increase the number of security forces on the ground, they generally lack the standard of training and skill possessed by Russian regular forces and frequently fall short of securing military objectives, as will be seen in Chapter 6 in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Weak Opposition and Capable Ground Partners:** Russian efforts have benefited from having limited objectives and facing Syrian rebel groups that often have failed to coordinate their activities and have lacked key defensive assets, such as anti-air weaponry. On the other hand, PMCs have benefited from having relatively capable allies and partners, such as Iran and Hezbollah, as well as Syrian forces they have been able to train and equip, such as Tiger Forces, to capture and hold territory.

**Fading Deniability:** PMC casualties, particularly from the Wagner Group, have become increasingly exposed in international media over the course of the war, casting doubt on whether the Russians could feasibly deploy PMCs on such a scale in the future and still expect to maintain a means of operating deniably. These media reports, compounded by other findings of war crimes by PMC forces, may raise the burden of PMC deployments in future conflicts.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, Russian PMCs have successfully performed their roles and missions in Syria in advancing Russian strategic interests and are well positioned to maintain a presence in Syria for the foreseeable future, an outcome that was only achievable through ground operations and deepening ties to the Syrian regime. At T-4 Air

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Base, for example, PMC forces played a role in securing the site and using it as a staging ground as part of its campaign to retake eastern Syria in 2017.<sup>40</sup> As of 2020, the Russians have expanded their presence at T-4 to become an all-purpose air, ground, and intelligence base, which will allow them to project power in the region for decades to come. T-4 will also continue to serve as a staging ground from which Russian PMCs can secure energy infrastructure projects, such as controlling oil fields, from which Prigozhin and others in Putin's circle will profit.<sup>41</sup>

This harmonization of multi-mission roles of PMCs—military, political, and economic—and integration into host-nation proxy forces demonstrates the hybrid-PMC deployment model that Moscow applied to other theaters. Russia appeared eager to replicate the partner-force capability it cultivated in Syria in the Libya conflict. Reports indicate that in 2019, the Wagner Group, in coordination with the Syrian and Russian governments, recruited former Syrian forces to fight in Libya under military leader Khalifa Haftar.<sup>42</sup> The accumulation of battlefield experience in Syria saw the realization of PMCs as a multi-mission hybrid deployment force, one that Russia next sought to employ in Africa.



CHAPTER 05

# Libya



This grab obtained from a video published on the LNA War Information Division's Facebook page allegedly shows military convoys heading toward western Libya.

SOURCE -/AFP/Getty Images



**R**ussia began deploying PMCs to Libya in 2015 to bolster General Khalifa Haftar, his LNA, and the eastern-based government in the city of Tobruk in its civil war with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. What began as a limited mission in 2015 and 2016, consisting of only dozens of PMC troops to train and equip LNA troops, evolved into the most significant combat deployment outside of Syria by Russia, the Wagner Group, and other Prigozhin-linked entities. Russian PMC activity surged in the summer of 2019 to bolster Haftar's failing western Libya campaign and enable an LNA offensive against Tripoli. By 2020, up to 800 to 2,000 Wagner contractors were on the ground in Libya and were supported from the air by Russian combat aircraft.<sup>1</sup> Despite major LNA setbacks in and around Tripoli due to a Turkish-backed GNA counteroffensive and subsequent Wagner Group withdrawals, Russia's PMC footprint in Libya has been robust, with hundreds of personnel on the ground deployed to multiple training sites, forward bases, and key energy and infrastructure facilities. They conducted a variety of missions vital to Haftar's offensive and continue to support Russian interests in Libya, despite pressure to leave as unification and reconstruction efforts progress.<sup>2</sup>

Russia's deployment of PMCs to Libya should be understood within the context of Moscow's broader support to General Haftar and his political allies in eastern Libya. In 2015, Russia began to provide military, diplomatic, and financial support to Libya's rival

eastern-based government in Tobruk—known as the House of Representatives—in its war against the GNA in Tripoli.<sup>3</sup> But with the Russian and Syrian regime's battlefield achievements in Syria in 2017 and 2018, Moscow saw an opportunity to harness the combat experience and capabilities of PMCs from Syria and export them to Libya. In doing so, the Kremlin hoped to bolster Haftar's efforts to seize control of all of Libya and gain a vital ally and even proxy for Russia in a location of strategic importance. Indeed, the sailing of Russia's only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, into Tobruk harbor in January 2017 and the welcoming of General Khalifa Haftar aboard signaled a new phase of Russia's involvement in Libya and of its use of PMCs in out-of-area conflicts.<sup>4</sup> Russian PMCs' roles and missions evolved and expanded over the course of the Libyan intervention but have consistently served Moscow's broader geopolitical, diplomatic, military, and economic objectives for the conflict and the broader North African and Mediterranean region. And Russian-linked forces have shown no intention of leaving—the PMCs ignored a UN-imposed deadline for foreign fighters to leave Libya by January 23, 2021, instead constructing additional trenches and defensive fortifications and continuing operations that may undermine the unification process.<sup>5</sup>

## Roles and Missions

This section analyzes Russian PMC roles and missions in Libya in several areas: paramilitary, combat tasks, intelligence, information operations, and site security.

### Paramilitary

Beginning around 2016, Russian PMC activity and support started centering on equipping, training, and advising the LNA and its commander, General Khalifa Haftar. These actions were helpful as the LNA pushed into central and western Libya alongside Haftar's other backers, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The vanguard of Russian military efforts has been the Wagner Group, which deployed several hundred contractors—perhaps as many as 2,000 at the height of the Russian intervention in 2020—to multiple military sites, airfields, and forward bases around eastern and central Libya for specialized mission support to

Haftar.<sup>6</sup> Despite ongoing peace and unification efforts, pro-Turkish-government media reported in April 2021 that the Wagner Group was preparing to deploy an additional 300 troops from Syria to Benghazi to pressure tribes in southern Libya to support Haftar as his role waned under the unified government.<sup>7</sup>

**Equipping:** Russian logistics aircraft reportedly began shipments of weapons and materiel as early as 2015 to the airport in Tobruk, with support from Egypt.<sup>8</sup> The early stages of Russian support helped Haftar and his political backers in the breakaway House of Representatives government seize and consolidate control over key sites in eastern Libya. In 2016, LNA forces armed with Russian-provided arms—including desert vehicles, infrared-guided missiles, and combat aircraft with night-strike capability—seized key oil terminals in the central Libyan oil crescent after years of battles with local militias. In 2017, Russian-provided weaponry propelled Haftar's forces to victory in the vital city of Benghazi, again after several years of indecisive battles.<sup>9</sup> The sophistication of weapons and equipment provided to LNA forces continued to increase over the course of Russia's intervention, including advanced fighting vehicles and strike aircraft.

**Training:** While equipping LNA units in eastern Libya, Russian PMC personnel in 2016 began specialized training of Haftar's forces on ground warfare tactics and key weapons systems that Russia was now providing, including tanks, artillery, and attack aircraft. By 2017, a mix of dozens of Wagner Group, GRU, and Spetsnaz special forces had established two training bases in Benghazi and Tobruk to perform training and liaison roles to the LNA.<sup>10</sup> By 2018, the Wagner Group alone had reportedly deployed 300 personnel to Benghazi, with training focused on combat arms, including artillery, tanks, and UAV operations.<sup>11</sup> Russian special forces and the Wagner Group during this time period were also building and expanding their training presence across the border in Egypt, training LNA forces in ground and drone operations at Sidi Barrani Airfield, located about 60 miles from the Egypt-Libya Border, and at Marsa Matrouh Airfield, near the Egyptian coastline.<sup>12</sup>

**Enabling:** As Haftar's forces—with joint UAE, Egyptian, and Russian support—began their push into central and western Libya in 2018, Russian PMC and paramilitary

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advisers began directly enabling LNA operations air-strikes, ISR, and electronic warfare support, while also embedding with frontline LNA units to help advise and direct LNA advances.<sup>13</sup> Spetsnaz specialists bolstered their presence at Sidi Barrani to direct LNA air activity.<sup>14</sup> After LNA forces advanced in central Syria and took control of the strategic Al Jufra Air Base in 2018, Wagner Group contractors forward deployed there the following year as the primary hub for enabling LNA advances northwards toward the capitol in Tripoli.<sup>15</sup> Russian PMC troops also provided tank and artillery crews to assist LNA counterparts as well as vital logistics and combat service support to LNA units from their expanding base presence, including combat medicine, vehicle and weapons maintenance, and logistics management.<sup>16</sup>

### Combat Tasks

While Russian special operations and PMC personnel had been training and equipping LNA forces from 2015 to 2018, PMC activity surged in the summer of 2019 to bolster Haftar's flagging western Libya campaign and enable the LNA offensive against Tripoli, after initial failure in the spring of 2019. By early 2020, between 800 and 1,200 Wagner mercenaries were on the ground in Libya and were supported from the air thanks to the arrival of Russian combat aircraft. Beginning in the fall of 2019, Wagner Group forces began to take on direct combat roles for the Tripoli offensive, with several hundred Wagner Group specialists forward deployed with LNA units in and around Tripoli. Russian mercenaries executed a variety of key combat tasks, though with mixed battlefield success.

**Snipers:** Dozens of Wagner Group snipers—some reportedly with experience fighting in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine and in Syria—began arriving in Libya as part of a deployment of 200 Wagner operatives in the fall of 2016, providing additional ground combat advantage to Haftar's forces.<sup>17</sup> Wagner Group snipers deployed to the front lines of fierce LNA-GNA fighting on the outskirts to Tripoli, inflicting GNA casualties.<sup>18</sup>

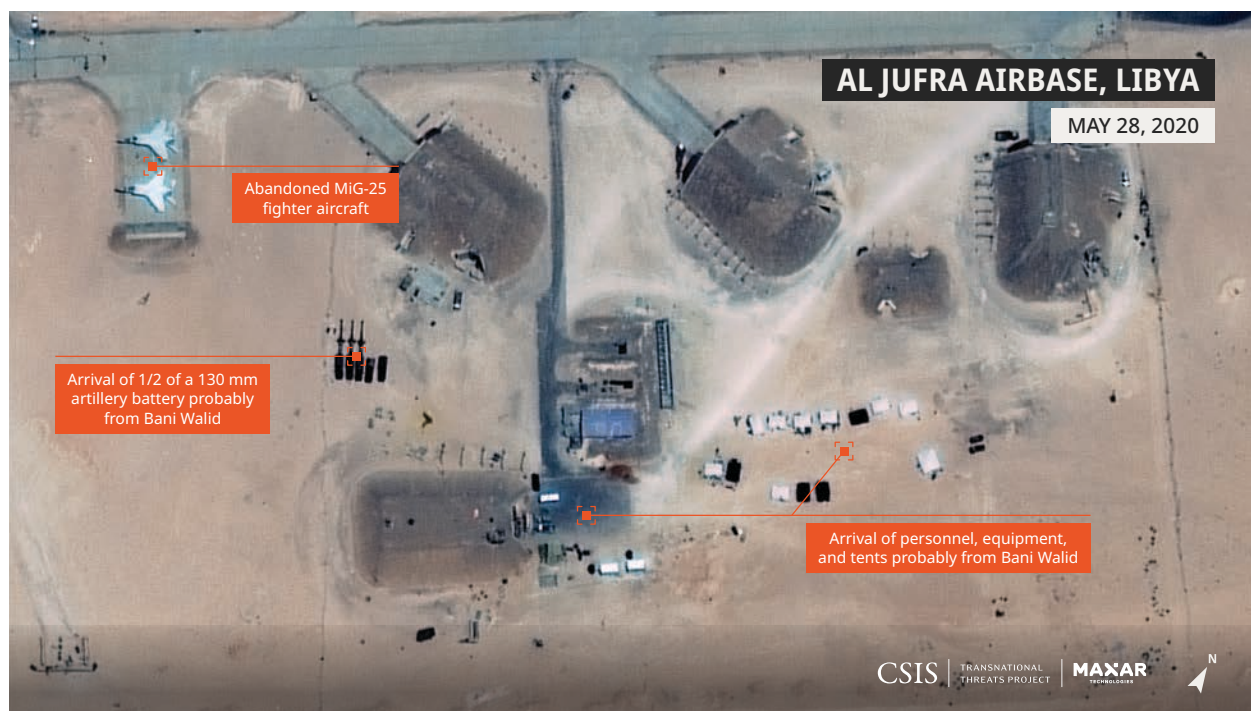
**Rockets and Missiles:** Russian mercenaries further amplified LNA combat power with the deployment and fielding of several different ground firepower systems. PMC anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) units with advanced Kornet ATGMs were deployed in and around Tripoli in the fall of 2019. These forces were

able to strike GNA facilities and deployments with increased accuracy and without line of sight through Tripoli's mix of hilly and urban terrain.<sup>19</sup> PMC specialists also deployed precision-guided artillery and rocket systems, staging from Al Jufra before onward deployment northwards in Tripoli.<sup>20</sup>

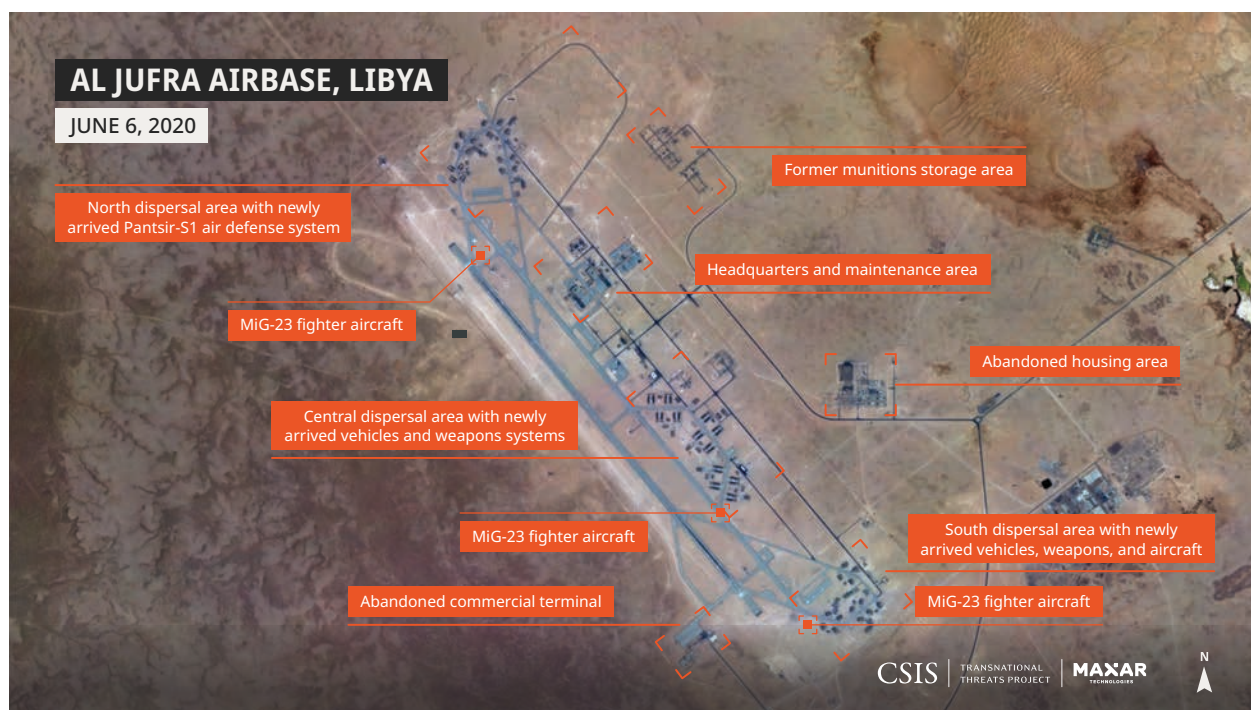
**Airpower and Close Air Support:** Russia escalated its direct military involvement in Libya in the spring of 2020 with the deployment of combat aircraft, possibly piloted by Wagner Group mercenaries, with the objective of bolstering the LNA's stalled offensive following Turkish reinforcement of GNA forces.<sup>21</sup> Imagery released by AFRICOM in May 2020 depicted the deployment of at least 14 Russian aircraft, including Su-24 attack aircraft, MiG-29 fighters, and Su-35 interceptor escort aircraft, from bases in Russia and Syria to Libya's Al Khadim and Al Jufra Airfields.<sup>22</sup> CSIS imagery detected the arrival of MiG-29 fighters and Su-24 attack aircraft at Al Jufra as well as related logistics and facility improvements to support a continual air presence.<sup>23</sup> As shown in Figure 5.1.1, this included personnel, equipment, and a 130 mm artillery battery, all likely coming from Bani Walid. Wagner Group forward air controllers deployed on the ground with LNA forces to provide enhanced close air-support and offensive firepower to the LNA and Wagner Group ground forces battling GNA units backed with Turkish-armed UAV support.<sup>24</sup>

**Air Defense:** Russia deployed several air defense and anti-aircraft systems into Libya, primarily operated by Wagner Group specialists deployed on airfields and military facilities to defend against Turkish airstrikes on Russian aircraft, weapons, and logistics.<sup>25</sup> CSIS imagery from June 2020 detected that Russian Pantsir S-1 surface-to-air missile (SAM) and anti-aircraft artillery systems were deployed on the northern side of Al Jufra Air Base, most likely to deter and defend against Turkish strikes on Russian combat aircraft. The Wagner Group also deployed and operated Pantsir S-1 SAM systems at Al Watiyah Air Base southwest of Tripoli beginning in 2019, which were probably responsible for the shootdown of a U.S. drone operating in the area in November 2019.<sup>26</sup> However, Russian PMC units lost several Pantsir S-1 SAM systems to Turkish airstrikes and eventually were forced to abandon multiple batteries as GNA forces retook Al Watiyah in April 2020.





▲ **FIGURE 5.1.1** Imagery of Al Jufra Air Base, Libya, with Arrival of Wagner Group Forces  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 5.1.2** Imagery of Al Jufra Air Base, Libya  
**SOURCE** CSIS.

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## Intelligence

Russian intelligence officers played a key role in advising and directing Haftar's forces while simultaneously attempting to entrench Russian influence inside the LNA and government bodies in Tobruk. Russia's intelligence deployments included a mix of GRU intelligence officers, elite Spetsnaz troops, and PMC operatives, some of whom previously served with GRU or Spetsnaz. While it is difficult to precisely determine which units perform which missions, the study team assesses that PMC operatives—primarily from the Wagner Group—and Spetsnaz served in military and operational intelligence roles, while GRU officers conducted intelligence liaison roles and covert influence operations, based on traditional roles and missions.

**Military Intelligence:** Russian intelligence by 2018 had established two bases in Tobruk and Benghazi with dozens of GRU officers and Spetsnaz troops to perform training, liaison, and intelligence sharing roles with the LNA intelligence units.<sup>27</sup> As the LNA and Russian military footprint expanded with Haftar's westward push, Wagner Group intelligence specialists embedded with LNA units began directing ISR support to LNA operations from the Al Jufra and Al Watiyah Air Bases.<sup>28</sup> Wagner Group drone pilots reportedly took over operational control of the LNA's fleet of UAE-provided, Chinese-made Wing Loong drones stationed at those bases. Wagner-piloted drones reportedly provided vital tactical intelligence for the LNA's gains in and around Tripoli in late 2019, while armed versions of the Wing Loong conducted precision strikes on GNA targets and positions.<sup>29</sup>

**Covert Influence:** While providing Haftar and the LNA with military, political, and intelligence support, Russian PMCs simultaneously conducted intelligence operations against them, attempting to cultivate Haftar as a Russian proxy and entrench Russian influence for long-term Russian advantage. With Wagner Group operatives in the lead, Russia's initial intelligence objective was to strengthen Moscow's influence with Haftar with the provision of advisers and military aid to bolster his advances in central Libya.<sup>30</sup> However, as LNA advances stalled in 2019, Russian intelligence began hedging its bets against overreliance on Haftar, who

was proving both militarily ineffective and politically resistant to Moscow's pressure.<sup>31</sup> Russian operatives pushed to surround Haftar with pro-Russian officials, particularly long-time partners from the Qaddafi-era security services, while courting and promoting Qaddafi's son, Seif al-Islam, as another future Libyan leader.<sup>32</sup>

## Information Operations

Supplementing Russian state and state-sponsored networks, PMC-linked media companies, including those connected to Prigozhin and the IRA, leveraged acquisitions of regional media outlets and social media influence operations for a blend of propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation operations about the Libyan conflict. Moscow's objective was to propagate pro-Russian, Haftar, and Qaddafi narratives and anti-GNA, Turkey, and U.S. disinformation among both Libyan and regional audiences.<sup>33</sup>

**Propaganda:** Beginning around 2015, Russian state and state-sponsored Arabic media, including RT and Sputnik Arabic, started broadcasting the Kremlin's core narratives around the Libyan conflict on TV, radio, online sites, and associated social media accounts, bolstering Haftar and disparaging the GNA, Turkey, and the United States. But beginning in 2018, Russian PMCs took on a direct, if semi-covert, role in disseminating propaganda when a Prigozhin-linked firm acquired a secret ownership stake in Al-Jamahiriyah TV, the former Libyan state-run broadcasting organization and now pro-Qaddafi Libyan satellite network, and its associated Jana News Agency.<sup>34</sup> Prigozhin-backed PMC media specialists also began consulting with Libya Alhadath, a satellite news channel in eastern Libya.<sup>35</sup> Across these broadcast platforms, Russian personnel have propagated Moscow's key themes while varying the level of support and positive coverage for Qaddafi and Haftar based on Russian goals at the time.

**Online Influence:** While leveraging traditional media platforms to broadcast propaganda, Prigozhin-sponsored and IRA-linked actors also have waged online influence campaigns in an attempt to shape the views of Libyan citizens about the conflict and to manipulate the local media environment to the Kremlin's advantage. For their online campaigns, Russian operatives have blended authentic and inauthentic social media accounts, online media front organizations

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and associated Facebook pages, and the social media and internet pages of traditional media outlets such as Al-Jamhuriya TV to bolster pro-Russian narratives and sow disinformation, particularly on GNA, Turkish, and U.S. activity.<sup>36</sup> In October 2019, Facebook removed a network of 14 Facebook accounts, 12 pages, one group, and one Instagram account that originated in Russia, were focused on Libya, and were directly linked to Prigozhin and the IRA.<sup>37</sup> The accounts used a combination of authentic Egyptian accounts and fake and compromised accounts to drive traffic to sponsored news sites and pro-Kremlin outlets, with particular focus on promoting Haftar and Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi.<sup>38</sup>

### Site Security

PMC personnel from the RSB Group and the Wagner Group have deployed at multiple oil, gas, infrastructure, and port facilities across eastern and central Libya, including Tobruk, Derna, Benghazi, and Sirte, to provide site security and other specialized services.<sup>39</sup> While deriving income for their services, PMCs also have exploited security deployments to gain leverage over these Libyan national and privately owned companies for concessions for Russian firms and, in some cases, political advantage for Moscow.

**Infrastructure and Logistics:** One of the first Russian PMC deployments to Libya occurred in 2017, when operatives from the RSB Group deployed to an industrial facility—reportedly a cement plant—in Benghazi at the invitation of Haftar to conduct de-mining services in the area after years of battles with local militias.<sup>40</sup> The RSB Group has also provided maintenance and repair services at Libyan military facilities.<sup>41</sup>

**Oil, Gas, and Ports:** Russia's main site security efforts have focused on securing contracts for oil and gas terminals, petrochemical complexes, and oil fields along Libya's coastline and southern desert. Wagner Group forces played their first major role in securing oil and gas facilities in 2019 during the LNA assault on the strategic city of Sirte. Wagner units remained deployed in Sirte through 2020 to defend against GNA and Turkish advances on the oil infrastructure, including placing landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along the front lines.<sup>42</sup> Russian PMCs grew more aggressive in militarizing oil and gas sites

nationwide in 2020, as Moscow and its allied House of Representatives government in Tobruk sought leverage over Tripoli and its international backers. The Wagner Group possessed multiple key Libyan National Oil Corporation facilities, including the Ras Lanuf petrochemical complex, Zueitina oil port, and Zallah oil field, and in June 2020 took over security at Libya's largest oil field.<sup>43</sup> Haftar, with Russian PMC support, was essentially enforcing a blockade of Libya's oil crescent, depriving the GNA of critical revenue.

## Key Drivers

Russian PMCs such as the Wagner Group served as the spearhead for Moscow's pursuit of a variety of evolving, mutually reinforcing objectives in Libya through intervention in the civil war. A mix of geostrategic, diplomatic, military, and economic interests impacted Russia's level of involvement in the conflict. Russian support expanded from modest, behind-the-scenes financial and tactical support from 2015 to 2017, to a significant expansion of combat support from 2018 to 2021. It eventually included the deployment of semi-deniable mercenaries such as the Wagner Group and their augmentation with conventional Russian military power, such as strike aircraft.<sup>44</sup> As the Libyan peace and reconstruction processes proceed, Wagner troops have remained in the country despite calls for their exit. This is likely a bid to preserve Russian influence and strategic interests during and after unification, as well as to potentially position Russia-linked personnel for reconstruction contracts.<sup>45</sup> Overall, Moscow's presence in Libya has been driven by a blend of geopolitical, military, and economic goals, and Russia has exploited the multifaceted capabilities of PMCs in its attempt to achieve them.

### Geopolitical

Like previous interventions in Ukraine and Syria, Moscow's decision to escalate its involvement in Libya was both geostrategic—in seeking to increase its geopolitical position in North Africa and on the Mediterranean with an eye toward Europe—and opportunistic—in exploiting a perceived policy vacuum and ambivalence from the United States toward the conflict. With the Libyan civil war, Russia perceived an opening to exploit



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**Russian PMCs such as the Wagner Group served as the spearhead for Moscow’s pursuit of a variety of evolving, mutually reinforcing objectives in Libya through intervention in the civil war.**

the instability and expand Russian influence, using PMCs to bolster Haftar, tip the conflict in their favor, and reap the geopolitical rewards of a new strategic foothold.<sup>46</sup> Russia’s intervention was also intended to advance the Kremlin’s overarching desire to enhance Moscow’s stature on the global stage and become a central player in the overlapping regional affairs of the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The competition has been not only with the Kremlin’s traditional rival in the United States, but also increasingly with Turkey, with whom Moscow has engaged in proxy competitions in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

By entrenching itself in Libya and gaining influence with and over Libya’s domestic actors, Russia also aimed to secure a conflict end-state amenable to Russian interests. Like the Geneva process for Syria and the Minsk process for Ukraine, Russia’s intervention gave it a seat at Libya’s diplomatic table and a de facto veto over any resolution of the conflict. Indeed, with diplomatic leverage gained from its power and influence on the ground, Moscow was able to ensure the selection of an acceptable slate of representatives in Libya’s transitional government.<sup>47</sup> And also like Syria and Ukraine, Moscow sought to position itself as a “mediator” in the diplomatic negotiations while simultaneously aiding and enabling one side—the LNA—to strengthen its collective bargaining position over Libya’s future.

While gaining influence inside Libya, Moscow’s intervention and use of PMCs also has served to advance a regional foreign policy objective: to strengthen ties

to regional players, such as the UAE and Egypt. Russia, the UAE, and Egypt deepened their cooperation through joint military operations in support of Haftar and maintained a relatively united front in diplomatic negotiations. Moscow’s relationship with Cairo, in particular, deepened through their cooperation in Libya. Since 2017, Russian PMCs have deployed to Egypt’s Sidi Barrani Airfield to direct joint Russian-Egyptian military support to Haftar—highlighted in Figure 5.2—as well as at the Mersa Moutrah seaport along the Egyptian coast.

### **Military**

Moscow’s deployment of PMCs to Libya, particularly after the expansion of Wagner Group forces in 2019, has enabled Russia to pursue key military and security objectives. At the broadest level, the use of PMCs has allowed Russia to project power, establish a new military foothold in North Africa, and alter the balance-of-power through relatively limited means and costs while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability for the Kremlin. More specifically, Moscow had several key security goals—some pragmatic, some expansionist—that drove its intervention and battlefield priorities.

First, the Kremlin—and Putin, in particular—viewed intervention in Libya and support to Haftar as means to restore stability and order in a vital country where Moscow believes the United States created significant chaos and instability following its military operation to overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011. In General Haftar, Russia sees a like-minded strongman committed to imposing order and fighting terrorism, militancy, and what Moscow and its allies in Libya—Egypt, the UAE, and, to some extent, France—see as the risk of Salafism and political Islam taking hold as the governing ideology (though Haftar and the LNA have partnered with Libya’s Madkhali Salafist faction for key operations).<sup>48</sup> PMCs such as the Wagner Group have offered a means to assist Haftar in seizing and asserting control—albeit with mixed or no success—in key cities such as Benghazi, Sirte, and Tripoli.<sup>49</sup>

Second, in Haftar, Moscow sees not only an ally but also a potential proxy who PMC personnel have been able to help cultivate, enabling Russia to keep its military intervention limited and engage in proxy warfare to achieve its objectives in a deniable manner.<sup>50</sup> By embedding Wagner Group forces with LNA



▲ **FIGURE 5.2** Imagery of Il-76 on Military Base, Sidi Barrani, Egypt  
**SOURCE** CSIS.

commanders and troops on the ground, Russia could enable Haftar's offensive, demonstrate Russia's commitment and value to Haftar, and thus gain influence over him as the LNA's preferred outside sponsor. Through tailored and high-impact support, such as its surging of Wagner Group troops to stalled front lines in Tripoli in the fall of 2019, Moscow sought to ensure Haftar's role as both an effective and loyal proxy.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, by relying on this proxy structure rather than deploying regular forces, Russia has retained a degree of separation from the conflict. This is particularly important regarding Turkey. By avoiding direct confrontation with Turkish forces, Moscow has been able to pursue its interests and compete with Ankara without disrupting other lines of Russian-Turkish cooperation.<sup>52</sup>

Third, as the spearhead of Russian combat power, PMCs provided a means to expand Russia's military footprint across multiple key sites in Libya as part of Haftar's westward offensive, and with it, the potential for long-term military basing for conventional or overt military assets in the Libyan theater. The Wagner Group's

close ties to the GRU and Spetsnaz facilitated battlefield interoperability when Russia deployed conventional military capabilities, such as strike aircraft in 2020, and the group advanced Russia's strategic military objectives to secure military positions on the Mediterranean.<sup>53</sup> It is unclear if Russia has decided to expand its military footprint and capabilities even further through permanent naval basing at deep-water ports in Derna and Tobruk or the deployment of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) weaponry (e.g., coastal defense cruise missiles) and advanced SAM systems (e.g., the S-300 or S-400). Nonetheless, Russia's robust basing and posture at a half dozen facilities in Libya and Egypt, secured by PMCs such as the Wagner Group, has given Moscow a means to complicate, deter, and potentially contest U.S. and Turkish military operations in the region.

### Economic

Through the deployment of PMCs and in enabling Haftar's military campaign, Moscow also has sought leverage to expand its economic influence in Libya and extract key concessions for Russian firms in exchange for Russian military support. The RSB Group and then

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Wagner Group forces moved swiftly to secure contracts for protecting oil, gas, port, infrastructure, and other industrial facilities as those areas fell to the LNA.<sup>54</sup> The PMC contracts have served not only to provide revenue streams for their oligarch owners—an important way for the Kremlin to balance and reward them for foreign intervention—but as a way to increase leverage of Haftar and the House of Representatives for more significant investment opportunities for Russia. Haftar reportedly promised Moscow major economic concessions in exchange for its support, including in the energy, transportation, construction, and arms sectors.<sup>55</sup> Russia also aided Haftar by printing currency in order to restore liquidity to the economy in areas under his control.<sup>56</sup>

Libya's oil and gas sector, in particular, emerged as a key driver of Russian activity in Libya. Russian PMC control over Libyan National Oil Company export terminals on the Mediterranean and oil and gas fields farther inland probably have assured Russia preferred access to Libyan energy resources, lucrative contracts for security as well as production, and a key lever over decisionmaking in both Tripoli and Tobruk. As with most of Russia's other efforts and motivations in Libya, influence over Libya's energy sectors and ports has increased its economic and geostrategic positioning vis-à-vis Turkey.<sup>57</sup>

In 2021, with Libyan unification efforts ongoing under the transitional government, Russia attempted to leverage the influence and access of PMCs to secure lucrative reconstruction contracts and other economic development opportunities. On April 15, 2021, Putin told Libyan transitional prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah that Russia would “continue to promote the inter-Libyan political process in order to achieve long-term stability in Libya, strengthen its sovereignty and unity, and ensure progressive socioeconomic development.”<sup>58</sup> Dbeibah and Russian prime minister Mikhail Mishustin met the same day to discuss investment opportunities.<sup>59</sup>

## Assessment and Outlook

Russia's intervention in Libya and deployment of PMCs achieved significant LNA territorial gains while strengthening Moscow's geostrategic position in Libya, but it also has revealed the limits of its PMC-led proxy

warfare approach. In terms of successes, Wagner Group forces played a pivotal role in enabling advances into central and western Libya, including key terrain along the Libyan coast and oil crescent as well as strategic locations in central Libya, such as Al Jufra Air Base. Russia's willingness to use force—albeit semi-deniable force—in the form of PMCs has allowed Russia to gain and consolidate a military, diplomatic, intelligence, and economic presence and entrench its influence in eastern Libya—and all at a reasonable, limited cost. This positioned Moscow to influence the composition of the transitional government in Libya and, potentially, to secure further economic and military influence in the region throughout the reconstruction process.

Russia's intervention in Libya, however, and its deployment of PMCs did not achieve their primary objective: to tip the balance of the Libyan civil war in Haftar's favor and seize the capital in Tripoli for a decisive victory. The Turkish-backed GNA counteroffensive in spring 2020 compelled the withdrawal of hundreds of Wagner Group mercenaries from Tripoli's front lines and the subsequent collapse of many of the LNA's gains achieved over the previous year. GNA forces retook full control of Tripoli in June 2020 and pressed the counteroffensive through the fall of 2020 along the Libyan coast, with the main front line settling near the strategic city of Sirte.<sup>60</sup> The Wagner Group lost hundreds of fighters killed in action, along with key weapons systems, in the course of the fighting—particularly from Turkish drone strikes.<sup>61</sup> In assessing the limited effectiveness of Russia's PMC approach in Libya, several factors stand out.

**Counter-Escalation:** Haftar's Wagner-enabled assault on Tripoli triggered a major counter-escalation from Turkey, which Russia was unable and unwilling to match, continuing to rely instead on the limited and quasi-deniable PMC approach. Turkey and the GNA were able to seize the initiative with the decisive use of advanced military hardware, such as Turkey's lethal and effective Bayraktar TB2-armed UAV, and deployments of thousands of its own mercenaries from Syrian militias.<sup>62</sup> In other words, Turkey took Russia's technology and mercenary-centric approach for its own intervention—and to significant effect. Unlike in Syria, Russian PMCs in Libya lacked the high-end conventional Russian military support and capable



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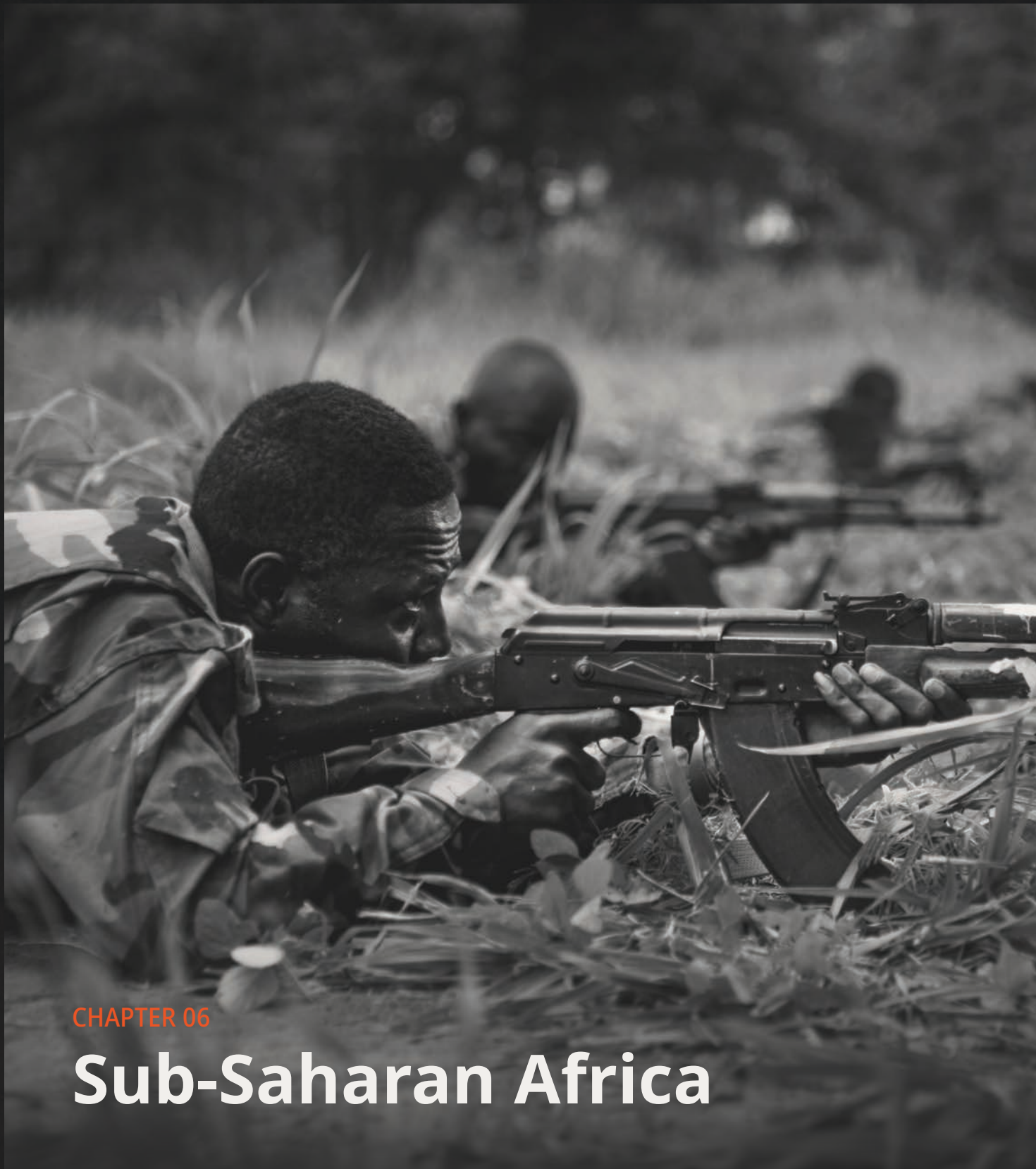
allies and partners needed to gain and hold ground and sustain victory. But like in Syria, when the Wagner Group came up against a technologically superior adversary in Turkey, as they did against the United States in Dayr az Zawr in 2018, the results were significant losses.<sup>63</sup>

**Imperfect Proxy:** The limits of Moscow's PMC-led approach to Libya were also due to the limits of its partner and would-be proxy, Khalifa Haftar. PMC operatives by 2019 assessed Haftar's inherent weaknesses, including his flawed leadership and military decisionmaking, but they likely hoped to mitigate these challenges through enhanced military support.<sup>64</sup> Neither proved true, as the LNA's military deficiencies were significant against a Turkish-backed GNA. In addition, Haftar deviated from Russia's preferred courses of action, both militarily and diplomatically.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, given Haftar's tenuous and perhaps weakening hold over a heterogeneous coalition of allies across eastern and central Libya, his ability to secure Russian interests became highly questionable.<sup>66</sup> As Moscow's confidence in Haftar as a viable leader and proxy diminished, it had to begin cultivating ties to potential alternatives, such as Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi.

**Military and Digital Exposure:** While Russia's limited approach to expeditionary warfare has numerous advantages, its ability to keep its operations deniable and covert became virtually impossible. AFRICOM regularly published satellite imagery indicating Russia violated the UN arms embargo, deployed combat aircraft, and moved arms and PMC personnel into theater—puncturing its veneer of deniability.<sup>67</sup> PMCs' would-be covert efforts in the digital realm were also problematic. Prigozhin-linked digital fronts took clumsy and unsuccessful approaches to hide their hand in disinformation and social media influence efforts, resulting in multiple takedowns by social media companies for inauthentic content.<sup>68</sup> PMC propaganda efforts also have had uncertain success and occasionally backfired, as tone-deaf propaganda was detected and often mocked by savvy Libyan users.<sup>69</sup>

While Russia's PMC-led intervention met its limit on the front lines of Tripoli, it also ensured a new strategic foothold in North Africa and on the Mediterranean. Through its intervention, Moscow also gained leverage over the GNA in Tripoli and the other international

players seeking to resolve the conflict, helping to ensure Moscow's role in the unification process and an end-state amenable to Russian interests.<sup>70</sup> Based on their further entrenchment and continued activity in defiance of the UN-imposed deadline for foreign fighters to withdraw from Libya in January 2021, PMC forces and key assets such as combat aircraft are likely to remain deployed at sites across eastern Libya, such as Al Jufra and Al Khadim, for the foreseeable future. They will likely remain committed to supporting Haftar's influence during the transitional period. PMC influence may be used as leverage to secure economic and security agreements with the interim government, providing financial benefits to the oligarchs backing the PMCs and ensuring the longevity of Russian influence in the region.



CHAPTER 06

# Sub-Saharan Africa



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**New recruits for the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) perform a drill during a medal presentation in Berengo.**

SOURCE Florent Vergnes/AFP/Getty Images



**F**ollowing its use of PMCs in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya, Russia has expanded the geographic scope of its PMC deployments in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, Russia has targeted resource-rich countries with weak governance, including Sudan, the CAR, Madagascar, and Mozambique. Though PMC tasks have varied from case to case to meet local needs, in each of these countries Russia has exchanged military and security support for economic, geopolitical, and military gains. However, PMCs have achieved varying levels of success in different countries and with different types of missions.

This chapter begins with brief overviews of the roles and missions performed by PMCs in four of Russia's major deployments in sub-Saharan Africa—Sudan, the CAR, Madagascar, and Mozambique—followed by an assessment of the key drivers common across these deployments and the overall outlook for Russian PMCs' future operations on the continent. These cases, which include some of Russia's largest recent PMC deployments on the continent, were selected to demonstrate the variety of activities Russian PMCs have conducted in the region, including both successes and failures. As discussed in Chapter 2, Russian PMC presence has expanded to include at least 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Though these case studies are broadly representative of Moscow's motivations in the region, further examination of each case would be necessary to parse unique local needs, opportunities, and challenges.



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## Sudan

In Sudan, Russia initially deployed Wagner Group to provide a range of political and military assistance to then-president Omar al-Bashir in exchange for gold mining concessions and the right to establish a base on the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup> In November 2017, Moscow facilitated a series of security and economic agreements with Sudan, including a mining operations agreement for M-Invest—a Russian firm tied to Prigozhin.<sup>2</sup> PMC troops began to arrive the following month. After the 2019 revolution, Moscow continued its relationship with the Sudanese transitional government, including its pursuit of the same defense agreements and the continuation of mining operations.<sup>3</sup> However, their connection has weakened as Khartoum has grown more receptive to U.S. diplomacy—for example, some PMC troops in Sudan have been redeployed to the neighboring CAR.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in late 2017, Russian PMCs have conducted a variety of missions in Sudan, both in support of the regime in Khartoum and to further the PMCs and the Kremlin's economic interests.

### Site Security

With mining concessions secured as part of the initial agreement between Moscow and Khartoum, Meroe (also written Miro) Gold—a shell company that serves as M-Invest's Sudanese division—arrived in Sudan in December 2017 and began geological exploration at five sites.<sup>5</sup> With mining operations still underway as of 2021, it is likely that the security forces stationed at the mines—some of whom are reported to be Russian—are also affiliated with one of the Russian PMCs.<sup>6</sup>

Meroe Gold's headquarters was identified in Khartoum, and satellite imagery in Figure 6.1 depicting a Ural-4320 parked outside confirms both the location and its ties to the broader PMC security mission.<sup>7</sup>

### Training and Intelligence

Russian PMC troops began training Sudanese troops as early as 2018. From roughly March to July 2018, 500 Russian troops operated a training camp on the Sudan-CAR border, about 15 km south of Um Dafuq. Their training included installation and disassembly of weapons, vehicle operations, and paramedic skills.<sup>8</sup> In January 2019, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Af-

fairs confirmed that Russian PMCs were operating in Sudan to train the Sudanese military and police forces in response to the regular anti-government protests that started in December.<sup>9</sup>

PMC training services have extended to Sudanese intelligence operations as well. In January 2018, a source linked to the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) confirmed to the *Sudan Tribune* that Wagner was working closely with NISS, and opposition activists alleged that they were tasked with training the NISS special operations forces.<sup>10</sup>

### Weapons and Equipment

In addition to troops and training, PMCs have delivered shipments of equipment to the Sudanese regime. This has included Ural-4320 heavy transport vehicles and an Mi8-T transport helicopter. For example, 20 Ural-4320s valued at roughly \$630,000 were shipped to Meroe Gold on May 25, 2018.<sup>11</sup> The distinctive appearance of the Ural-4320s has allowed local activists to identify the presence and activities of PMC troops throughout the country. Some of the equipment has been intended for mining rather than military operations. Since 2017, Meroe Gold has imported geological equipment as well as heavier mining and excavation equipment.<sup>12</sup> Since the revolution, Russia has continued to supply the transitional government as well. For example, in exchange for Sudanese assistance in defending the airspace around the Russian naval base at Port Sudan, Moscow agreed to supply Khartoum with weapons and other military equipment.<sup>13</sup>

### Information Operations

PMC specialists—operating through M-Invest and Meroe Gold—designed plans for the Bashir regime to discredit the anti-government protesters. This included using disinformation and fake videos to depict protesters as being opposed to Islam, linked to Israel, and supportive of LGBTQ rights. They also proposed spreading rumors that protesters were paid actors and developing comprehensive social media campaigns.<sup>14</sup> These strategies included some of the same techniques the IRA used to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Based on leaked correspondence between Prigozhin and Bashir, it is unclear how many of these suggestions the regime followed before it fell.<sup>15</sup>



▲ **FIGURE 6.1** Imagery of Meroe Gold Headquarters in Khartoum, Sudan  
**SOURCE** CSIS.

Under the transitional government, Russia has continued to leverage social media campaigns and its own state media presence via Russia Today (RT) Arabic to portray Russia as a friend to the Sudanese people—in direct opposition to meddling Westerners—and to advance its interests in the region.<sup>16</sup> For example, in May 2021 Facebook identified and removed a network of inauthentic profiles and pages that had been spreading pro-Russian content in Sudan. This content included propaganda in favor of Prigozhin-linked aid and the creation of a Russian military base at Port Sudan.<sup>17</sup>

### Suppression of Protests

It is likely that PMCs were involved in suppressing the December 2018 wave of anti-government protests directly, in addition to the recommended information operations. Local observers and human rights watchdogs noted the presence of Ural-4320s—the same type of armored vehicles Russia supplied in both Sudan and the CAR—driven by European-looking men speaking Russian in the city during the protests.<sup>18</sup>

## Central African Republic

Russia has followed a similar model in the CAR, where it has exchanged military training, equipment, information operations, and security services for concessions to develop gold, uranium, and diamond mines.<sup>19</sup> Several PMCs have been reportedly conducting activities in the CAR, including the Wagner Group, Sewa Security Services, and Patriot.<sup>20</sup>

### Weapons and Equipment

PMCs have played a key role facilitating the provision of Russian arms and equipment to the government in Bangui. The CAR, which has faced ongoing internal upheaval from armed rebel groups for nearly a decade, requested foreign assistance and equipment in 2017 from the United Nations and international partners. The CAR has been under a UN arms embargo since 2013, but the United Nations granted Russia a waiver to send weapons and equipment to Bangui in December 2017.<sup>21</sup>

The first shipment of weapons and equipment arrived in Bangui on January 26, 2018, on an Il-76 operated by the Russian army and routed through Khartoum.<sup>22</sup> This was followed by eight more shipments by early February, with additional shipments of pistols, assault and sniper rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers, RPGs, and anti-aircraft weapons to equip two battalions planned over the following year.<sup>23</sup> A second round of weapons arrived in 2019. The shipment timeline closely corresponds to the arrival and activities of PMC troops, and it is likely that the Wagner Group has facilitated the intake and distribution of these weapons and equipment.

Although there is a small airstrip to the east of the training camp PMCs established at Berengo, an analysis of satellite imagery shows minimal activity there, though comments from a former government official indicate that the airstrip may be used for transporting diamonds.<sup>24</sup> Instead, most equipment shipments have continued to be routed through Bangui. Shipments have continued periodically since 2018, though not all equipment has been of high quality. For example, of the 10 BRDM-2 armored vehicles that arrived at Bangui M'Poko International Airport on the morning of October 15, 2020, one tank broke down immediately after exiting the An-124, and two more broke down as they drove through the capital on display.<sup>25</sup>

In 2020, UN and CAR experts became concerned that the Wagner Group was also directly supplying weapons and training to members of the insurgent group Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation (3R). On July 15, 2020, an anti-personnel land mine exploded in northwest CAR, killing one UN peacekeeper and injuring two others. There was some evidence that Wagner provided 3R with anti-personnel and anti-tank mines.<sup>26</sup>

## Training

According to an official statement from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 military and 170 civilian instructors were sent to the CAR in late January 2018.<sup>27</sup> This corresponds to reports that Wagner troops arrived in late January and established a base and training camp southwest of Bangui in the ruins of Jean-Bédél Bokassa's former palace at Berengo, implying that some or all of these instructors were Wagner employees.<sup>28</sup>

A comparison of satellite imagery before the PMC's arrival at Berengo and annually since 2018 indicates that the troops made repairs to the existing palace structures and built additional facilities.<sup>29</sup> In addition to these improvements at the ruins, imagery shows the development of adjacent training facilities, including firing ranges, revetments, and other defensive positions. Figures 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 depict the state of the Berengo base as of January 2021.

Updated estimates on the number and type of Russian personnel present are unclear; Moscow has not been transparent and most UN reports lack this level of detail.<sup>30</sup> A June 2021 UN Security Council report, however, estimated that as many as 2,100 Russian PMC personnel were present in the CAR.<sup>31</sup> In June 2020, there was a significant increase in PMC personnel at Berengo, as troops were transferred to the CAR from neighboring Sudan.<sup>32</sup> On December 22, 2020, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it was sending an additional 300 military instructors to the CAR after paramilitary groups supporting former president François Bozizé advanced on Bangui, allegedly in a coup attempt ahead of the December 27 election.<sup>33</sup> Local news reports in spring 2021 noted a continued redeployment of PMC personnel from Sudan to the CAR. This included the March arrival of a Russian convoy in Birao, which augmented the Wagner Group's existing presence at the Abakava Airfield outside of the city.<sup>34</sup>

Increased activity by Russian trainers has also attracted the attention of multilateral organizations present in the CAR. In March 2021, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a press release denouncing the operational proximity of Russian PMCs and peacekeepers with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). Among other activities, the press release noted the regular presence of Russian PMC personnel at MINUSCA bases, medical evacuations of Russian PMC personnel to MINUSCA facilities, and allegations of human rights abuses committed by Russian PMC personnel operating alongside CAR armed forces.<sup>35</sup> These allegations of human rights abuses were documented in greater detail in the June 2021 UN Security Council report.<sup>36</sup>





▲ **FIGURE 6.2.1** Imagery of Wagner Group Base with Firing Range, Training Area, and Airfield, Berengo, Central African Republic  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 6.2.2** Imagery of Main Wagner Group Base, Berengo, Central African Republic  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 6.3** Key Locations in the Central African Republic

**SOURCE** Neil Edwards, *Coup-Proofing: Russia's Military Blueprint to Securing Resources in Africa* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/coup-proofing-russias-military-blueprint-securing-resources-africa>; CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

## Combat Tasks

Though claiming to be present in the CAR to serve only as instructors, PMC troops participated in combat—including leading assaults on towns and villages—in early 2021 in response to the December 2020 rebel advance toward Bangui. For example, on February

15, 2021, PMC and local troops launched a two-day operation against rebels in Bambari, during which they also indiscriminately targeted civilians at the Al-Takwa mosque and at the medical center at Élevage, an internally displaced persons site.<sup>37</sup> UN investigators reported widespread testimony affirming the Russians' participation in these active operations, noting that they often oper-

ated separately from local forces rather than in an instructional or direct support role.<sup>38</sup>

## Site Security

Russian PMCs' security activities in the CAR primarily relate to the mining access negotiated between Moscow and Bangui. In June and July 2018, the Central African Ministry of Mines and Geology granted diamond and gold mining permits in Yawa and Pama—towns in the Lobaye and Ouham prefectures, respectively—to Lobaye Invest SARLU, a PMC shell company directed by Evgueny Khodotov and connected to Prigozhin. Lobaye Invest subsequently established presences near the cities of N'Délé, Bria, Birao, and Alindao.<sup>39</sup>

One of the most significant gold mining operations was established at Ndassima, 60 km north of Bambari, the capital of Ouaka prefecture. Three Russian journalists—Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandre Rastorguev, and Kirill Radchenko—were killed in July 2018 while attempting to film Russian activity at Ndassima for a

documentary. The perpetrators have not been identified; the local investigation has stalled; and though the Russian foreign ministry attributed their deaths to an armed robbery, independent investigations have cast suspicions on the Wagner Group.<sup>40</sup>

### Protective Services

In addition to security at mines, Sewa Security Service—a Russian security company with close ties to the GRU—provides personal security to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra.<sup>41</sup>

### Political Advising

Prigozhin-linked operatives in the CAR also assist Moscow in maintaining a more direct line to Touadéra: Valery Zakharov, a former GRU official with ties to the FSB, serves as his national security adviser.<sup>42</sup> Zakharov received pay through a Prigozhin-linked shell company at least once, in July 2018, and he resided at the headquarters of Lobaye Invest near Bangui.<sup>43</sup> Khodotov, a former St. Petersburg police officer leading Lobaye Invest, works closely with Zakharov. Both Zakharov and Khodotov coordinate regularly with officials at the Russian embassy in the CAR.<sup>44</sup>

### Information Operations

Russian PMCs have also been involved in coordinating disinformation and propaganda campaigns in the CAR. This includes distribution of propaganda leaflets, videos (including children's cartoons), and radio broadcasts. This propaganda claims that Russia and the Wagner Group are uniquely qualified and successful in bringing peace and stability to the CAR, in opposition to the unsuccessful MINUSCA.<sup>45</sup> PMCs also supported propaganda in favor of Touadéra's reelection in the December 27, 2020, presidential election.

Russia has also conducted information campaigns on social media, though it is not the only state power doing so in the CAR. On December 15, 2020, Facebook revealed that it had detected and removed competing inauthentic posts linked to both French and Russian sources. Many of the French posts sought to discredit Russian activities in the country, including through criticism of Wagner troops' use of the palace of deceased emperor Bokassa. The Russian activity was linked to individuals previously associated with activities of

the IRA, which interfered in the 2016 U.S. election and whose techniques have also been used in Sudan. The Russian and French operations not only shared opposite messages, but even engaged with one another—the first time that Facebook has witnessed this interaction.<sup>46</sup>

## Madagascar

In Madagascar, contractors linked to Prigozhin and the Wagner Group supported candidates in the 2018 presidential election; have provided military training and security assistance; and have conducted information operations in exchange for economic agreements granting access to mines (chromium, magnesium, and gold), oil, agriculture, and the port of Toamasina.<sup>47</sup> Though incumbent president Hery Rajaonarimampianina—the original candidate the Wagner Group came to support—lost the election, he facilitated the promised agreements prior to leaving office.<sup>48</sup> Overall, Wagner has had mixed success in Madagascar. Its political support was unsuccessful, and its mining operations have been met with substantial opposition and worker strikes. Still, Russian operatives successfully established a news platform through which to push propaganda and likely have benefited economically from revitalization projects in Toamasina.

### Political Advising

In early spring 2018, Prigozhin-linked entities including Wagner—likely with GRU cooperation—sent 15 to 20 political analysts and campaign funds to Madagascar to support incumbent president Rajaonarimampianina's reelection bid, as well as the prospects of at least five other candidates.<sup>49</sup> Though the analysts were instructed to redirect efforts between candidates several times, none proceeded past the first round of voting. The PMC analysts lacked sufficient background knowledge about Madagascar, and some had no prior experience conducting political field work.<sup>50</sup> These operatives eventually supported the victor, Andry Rajoelina, in the later rounds of the election.

### Training and Security Assistance

In April 2018, additional PMC troops arrived to provide security for the political analysts and military training for local partners, allegedly with the assistance of FSB and GRU officers.<sup>51</sup> The following month, Lieutenant



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General Evgeniy Burdinskiy—the chief of the Main Organizational Mobilizational Directorate and deputy chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces—met with Malagasy prime minister Christian Ntsay. Following the meeting, Burdinskiy and Ntsay signed a military cooperation agreement.<sup>52</sup>

As in Sudan and the CAR, the Wagner Group also has provided security to geologists and at mining sites in Madagascar.<sup>53</sup> Ferrum Mining—a Russian shell company linked to M-Invest in Sudan and Lobaye Invest in the CAR—signed a strategic partnership agreement with Madagascar’s state-owned chromium mining company Kraomita Malagasy (KRAOMA) on August 8, 2018, and began operations in October 2018.<sup>54</sup> However, missing wages, contract disputes, difficult working conditions, and dissatisfaction with the Russians’ lack of cultural awareness and poor communication led to workers’ strikes beginning in late November, putting the mining operation on hold.<sup>55</sup> In March and April 2019, KRAOMA announced a series of changes in an attempt to resolve the conflict, including a profit sharing renegotiation; back pay for workers; and a platform for ongoing dialogue between workers, management, the Malagasy government, and PMC representatives. Operations partially resumed in March, though tensions remain.<sup>56</sup>

### Information Operations

During the 2018 election, Russian contractors were responsible for producing and spreading advertisements and propaganda in support of their assigned candidates online and through local print and televised news networks. However, this operation did not have a strong effect due to the contractors’ lack of experience.<sup>57</sup> Following the election, Russian operatives have continued to establish new platforms from which to conduct propaganda operations in Madagascar. For instance, the Russians established *Afrique Panorama*—a news platform in English and French based in Antananarivo. *Afrique Panorama* is one piece of a broader Prigozhin-linked initiative intended to spread influence through media in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>58</sup>

### Economic Development

In addition to the economic benefits that PMCs aim to derive from natural resources and agriculture, the

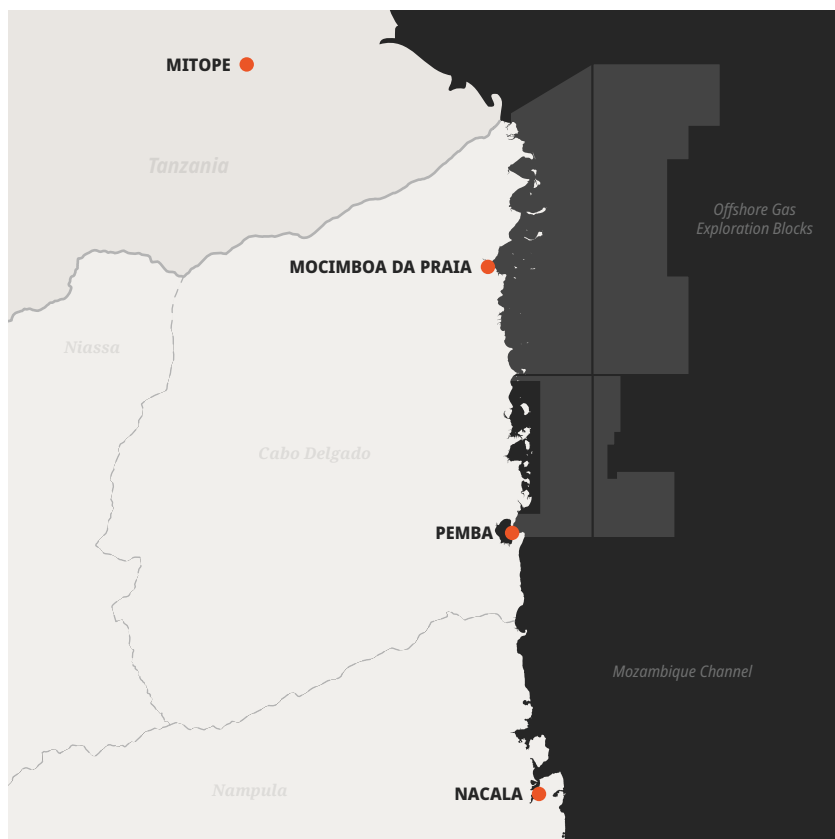
Russians have partnered with the Malagasy government on an initiative to revitalize the port of Toamasina. For years, Madagascar planned to renovate Toamasina—the nation’s first commercial port, which is located in its second-largest city—to modernize the docks and facilities, ultimately multiplying the port’s traffic fivefold by 2035.<sup>59</sup> The Malagasy government has promised a portion of the renovation contracts to Russian contractors. This is expected to be mutually beneficial: the island should reap the benefits of a modern port and job creation, while the Russians should receive additional funding and, likely, shipping access through the port.<sup>60</sup>

## Mozambique

In Mozambique, the Wagner Group provided equipment and direct military support to counter the ongoing Islamist insurgency in the country’s northern province, as well as propaganda and disinformation support, in exchange for access to the country’s rich liquified natural gas reserves and other natural resources, including diamonds.<sup>61</sup> Russia had already begun developing a closer military relationship with Mozambique in years prior to this effort. For instance, defense and foreign ministers from the two nations negotiated a series of agreements on topics such as military-technical cooperation, naval coordination, and access to ports in 2018.<sup>62</sup> Then, on August 22, 2019, during President Filipe Nyusi’s visit to Moscow, Russia and Mozambique signed a series of agreements on defense cooperation, technical cooperation related to geology and mining, and cooperation in the energy sector.<sup>63</sup>

### Combat Tasks

Cabo Delgado, the country’s northernmost province, has been beset by a growing local Islamist insurgency, which began in 2017. In 2019, the Wagner Group won a contract to assist the Mozambique government in combating the insurgents, beating out several other PMCs based throughout sub-Saharan Africa that had more advanced knowledge of local conditions, such as Umbra Aviation, OAM, and Black Hawk.<sup>64</sup> This surprised competitors and international experts, who worried that Wagner lacked appropriate experience to operate successfully in the country. But Wagner had allegedly



◀ **FIGURE 6.4** Key Locations in Northern Mozambique

**SOURCE** Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

ber 2019.<sup>69</sup> Additional PMC troops arrived in February and March 2020 to support a new advance, but it was too late.<sup>70</sup> In April 2020, the Dyck Advisory Group—a South Africa-based PMC with more experience in the region—was hired to replace the Wagner Group.<sup>71</sup>

## Weapons and Equipment

The Wagner Group provided a series of weapons and equipment shipments to Mozambique in addition to troop deployments. For example, on September 25, 2019, a Russian An-124—the same type of plane that had transported troops less than two weeks earlier—arrived at Nacala Airport with additional large-caliber weapons, ammunition, and other equipment, including an Mi-17 at-

tack helicopter.<sup>72</sup> On October 8, 2019, a Russian ship unloaded 17 containers of weapons—many of which were identified as explosives—at the port of Nacala.<sup>73</sup> Russia also supplied additional equipment in early 2020 to support an attempted resurgence after Wagner's initial failure in the fall of 2019. On February 23, another An-124 arrived in Nacala loaded with military cargo, including another Mi-17 helicopter.<sup>74</sup>

## Site Security

As one component of Wagner operations in northern Mozambique, troops defended energy infrastructure near the Tanzanian border from insurgent attacks. Russian energy company Rosneft and diamond company Alrosa signed cooperation agreements with Mozambique to conduct geological surveys and prepare to establish portfolios in the country.<sup>75</sup> Had the PMC troops not failed in their combat missions and retreated, they likely would have been tasked with ongoing security, just as they have done in countries such as Sudan and the CAR.

outbid its competitors with lower prices and the lure of high-level political connections.<sup>65</sup>

In September 2019, roughly 200 PMC troops, including elite units and three combat helicopters with crews, arrived in Mozambique. Bombing operations commenced the following month.<sup>66</sup> Wagner troops were observed operating in the region's capital, Pemba, and allegedly established bases in the Mozambican port town of Mocimboa da Praia and the town of Mitope in Tanzania as they conducted a series of joint operations with local troops along the Tanzanian border.<sup>67</sup>

As experts had predicted when Wagner won the contract, they quickly struggled to fulfill their mission. Wagner had little experience conducting counterinsurgency operations in the dense bush of northern Mozambique and difficulty coordinating with local forces, including because of language barriers and mutual mistrust.<sup>68</sup> Following several failed joint offensives with local troops and significant casualties, Wagner troops retreated south to Nacala in Novem-

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## Information Operations

Russian contractors also conducted several propaganda and disinformation campaigns, primarily online, targeting civilians in Mozambique. For example, in October 2019, Facebook removed a closed network of accounts linked to Prigozhin that had been spreading disinformation in eight African countries, including Mozambique.<sup>76</sup> Several of the pages targeting Mozambique were launched in September 2019, shortly before the country's elections, and expressed support for the incumbent president.<sup>77</sup> The Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC)—a self-described nongovernmental organization and think tank linked to an anonymous businessman in St. Petersburg—was among the Facebook pages suspended in October. AFRIC has simultaneously spread pro-Russia information, invested in election monitoring and polling activities, and built relationships with local politicians in countries including Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.<sup>78</sup>

## Key Drivers

As with Russia's interventions in other countries such as Libya, Moscow's PMC strategy in sub-Saharan Africa has been driven by a combination of economic, military, and geopolitical interests. Although geostrategic and military objectives have varied between countries based on a variety of unique local factors, economic motivations—centered around mining concessions and exploitation of natural resources—have united these different cases across the continent and point to a new evolutionary stage in the PMC model.

### Economic

One of the strongest motives for Russian PMC involvement in sub-Saharan Africa has been the economic benefit of mining concessions and priority access to natural resources. In particular, the countries with PMC operations have granted Russia access to minerals and energy—two of the only sectors in which Russia remains competitive.<sup>79</sup> Across each of these cases, Moscow has prioritized mining concessions and access to resources in negotiating its security cooperation agreements.

Russia's mining and energy sector efforts across these four case studies not only have been similar in

their goals and execution but also have been directly linked via a web of shell companies. This financial network not only includes local shell companies, such as Meroe Gold (Sudan), Lobaye Invest (the CAR), and Ferrum Mining (Madagascar), but also financial nodes in locations including St. Petersburg and Novorossiysk, Russia, as well as Hollywood, Florida.<sup>80</sup>

Russia also has aimed to earn profit from nuclear energy markets in sub-Saharan Africa. Beginning in 2017, Rosatom—Russia's state-owned nuclear energy corporation—started conducting outreach to dozens of nations in sub-Saharan Africa to offer cooperation deals.<sup>81</sup> Moscow also has sought to integrate these opportunities into its contractor agreements with leaders in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, one of Russia's original energy agreements with Sudan permitted them to establish a nuclear power station with a 1,200-megawatt capacity and a floating power station with an 80-megawatt capacity.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to natural resources and energy markets, Moscow has pursued other economic benefits when possible. For example, in Madagascar, PMCs won contracts to renovate the port of Toamasina, earning direct financial compensation for their efforts as well as improved access to the port itself.

### Geopolitical

Russia's strategy in sub-Saharan Africa also has supported its broader geopolitical goals—namely, expanding its sphere of influence and ability to project military power, as well as countering the influence of state competitors. Moscow has sought to revive diplomatic relationships in Africa that have lapsed since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia has aimed to leverage this “pivot to Africa” as an opportunity to build new alliances in the wake of international outrage over its annexation of Crimea.<sup>83</sup> As part of this expanded sphere of influence, Russia also has sought to extend its power projection in key regions. For example, its potential naval base at Port Sudan would grant Moscow direct access to the Red Sea—which would allow Russia to project force into the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, increase access to the Suez Canal, provide logistics support to future endeavors in Africa and the Middle East, play a more direct role in counter-piracy missions, and protect its growing investments in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>84</sup>



Russian PMC activity also has aimed to displace or compete with the influence of other nations. For example, Russia has sought to undercut France's long-standing relationship with its former colonies, such as the CAR and Madagascar. After the CAR government's request for assistance in 2017, France offered to transfer weapons seized in Somalia to the CAR after its initial price for a weapons sale proved too high for Bangui. Russia thwarted this plan by objecting to the repurposing of seized weapons on legal grounds.<sup>85</sup> Russia also sees its partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa as opportunities to directly counter the spread of U.S. and Chinese influence in the region.<sup>86</sup>

Russia frequently has used information operations to delegitimize Western diplomacy and partnerships. Russian propaganda has highlighted the successes of local government partnerships with Moscow and PMCs, directly contrasting their positive effects with the activities of the United Nations, the United States, France, and other Western powers. This propaganda has claimed that Western nations seek to recolonize countries such as the CAR and exploit local opportunities.<sup>87</sup> This directly contrasts with the framing of Russian partnerships that stress the importance of mutually beneficial agreements.<sup>88</sup>

## Military

Russia's military-based motives in these four case studies in sub-Saharan Africa can be divided into three broad categories, each of which PMC activities have helped enable or fulfill: security cooperation agreements, arms sales, and basing.

First, Moscow has focused on defense and security agreements as it has strengthened its relationships with these and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Beginning in 2015, Russia has committed to more than 21 military cooperation agreements in Africa—from just 4 prior to 2015.<sup>89</sup> In some of these countries, such as the four detailed in this chapter, PMCs' services have fulfilled terms of these agreements. Moscow also has continued to capitalize on its growing diplomatic relationships—in part facilitated by the ongoing services of PMCs—with African leaders to expand the number and scope of these agreements. On October 23 and 24, 2019, Putin convened the leaders of 43 of the continent's 54 countries at the first Russia-Africa

Summit.<sup>90</sup> One of Putin's top priorities was to expand military cooperation. During the summit, Moscow fielded additional requests for security aid, including a request from Touadéra for additional assistance in the CAR, and signed several new economic and security agreements.<sup>91</sup> Russia's growing portfolio of defense agreements with sub-Saharan African leaders reinforced its geopolitical ambitions, expanding its sphere of influence and leverage over local partners.

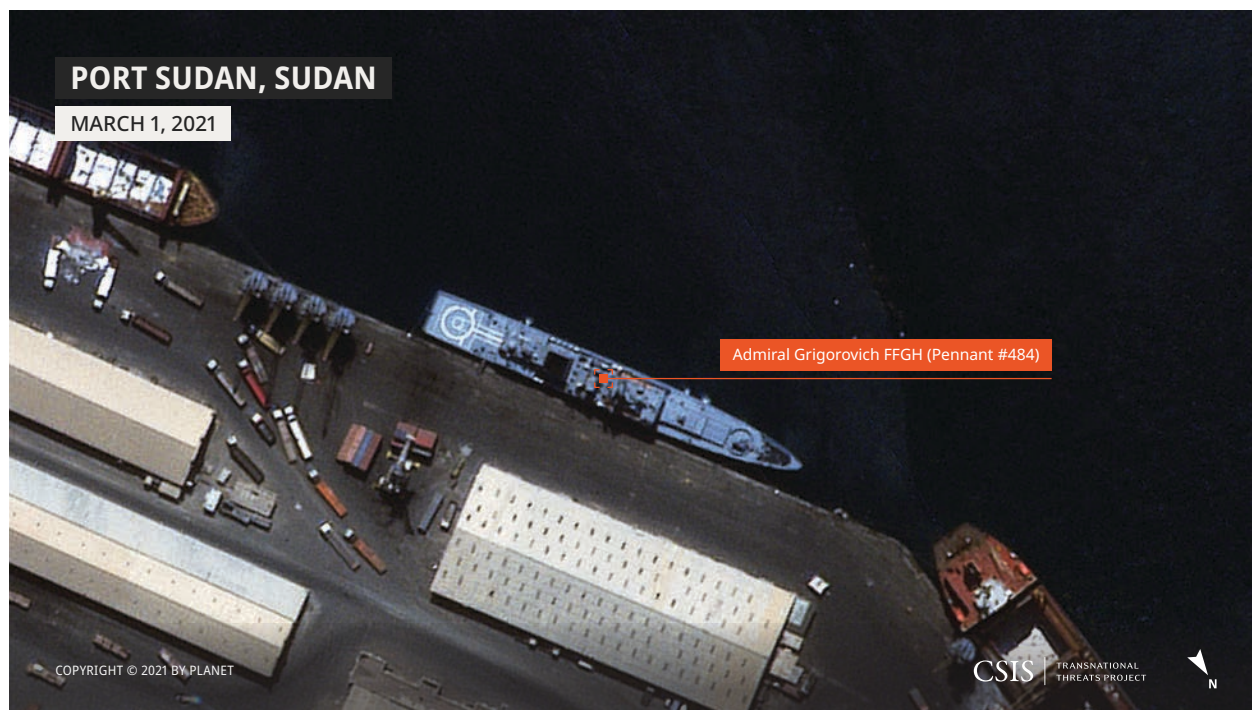
Second, Russia has established itself as a growing leader in arms sales in Africa. Many of these sales have been facilitated by Russian PMCs, either by directly receiving shipments on the ground or by cultivating relationships with African leaders that have enabled the arrangements. In 2020, Russia commanded nearly 38 percent of the continent's arms market, as compared to 16 percent controlled by the United States, 14 percent by France, and 9 percent by China.<sup>92</sup> Although the sum of Russian arms sales in the region has increased, the total profit from arms sales in the region has been relatively small, both in comparison to other regions and to the more immediate profits from natural resource exploitation.<sup>93</sup> Though the expansion of Russian arms trade in sub-Saharan Africa potentially has laid the groundwork for longer-term economic gain, in the short to medium term Russia is more likely using arms sales to establish political capital and dependency on Russian assistance, rather than for substantial economic gain.<sup>94</sup>

Finally, PMC deployments have coincided with Moscow's aims to establish military bases in key strategic locations on the continent. According to some reports, Russia intended to establish military bases in as many as six countries, including Sudan, the CAR, Madagascar, Mozambique, Egypt, and Eritrea.<sup>95</sup> Russian PMC services on behalf of target countries have strengthened local governments' reliance on Moscow and their willingness to negotiate basing rights or other concessions for PMC services. In addition to strategic positioning, local bases could play an important role in facilitating ongoing PMC activities, such as providing a location to refuel, store ammunition, and rotate personnel—a lesson directly learned from PMCs' experience in Syria.<sup>96</sup>

For example, Russia's first potential basing success—facilitated in large part due to the multidimensional



▲ **FIGURE 6.5.1** Imagery of Prospective Naval Base at Port Sudan  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 6.5.2** Imagery of Russian Frigate at Port Sudan  
**SOURCE** CSIS.

support provided by Russian PMCs to the government in Khartoum—was the negotiation of a naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea, a key location for naval power projection to which Moscow has long sought to gain access.<sup>97</sup> In November 2020, the Russian and Sudanese governments finalized an agreement permitting Russia to establish a naval base at Port Sudan—its first military base in Africa since the Cold War. Satellite imagery in Figures 6.5.1 and 6.5.2 depict the intended location of the new base and the March 2021 visit of a Russian Admiral Grigorovich-class guided missile frigate. Per the November agreement, the base would include a naval logistics center and repair yard and could host up to 300 people and four naval ships (including nuclear-powered vessels).<sup>98</sup> Russia would also be permitted to use Sudanese airspace and establish temporary military posts to guard the base.<sup>99</sup> The deal was set to last for 25 years, with the possibility of subsequent 10-year extensions. Various Russian sources have claimed that the port was primarily intended to support counterpiracy missions and to protect convoys.<sup>100</sup> Still, retired Russian admiral Viktor Kravchenko also noted that in the future, the naval logistics center could be upgraded to a “full-fledged naval base.”<sup>101</sup> However, the Sudanese government suspended plans to develop the base in late April 2021, possibly under pressure from the United States as U.S.-Sudanese relations continue to improve.<sup>102</sup>

## Assessment and Outlook

Overall, Russian PMCs have experienced mixed levels of success in sub-Saharan Africa. Though Moscow’s agreements with local partners have stressed mutually beneficial arrangements, their successes largely have come from fulfilling their half of the deals—particularly regarding access to natural resources, security cooperation agreements, and rights to ports and military basing. Their failures primarily have related to the missions the PMCs have been hired to fill—for example, defeating insurgents in Mozambique, supporting political candidates in Mozambique, or preserving the Bashir regime in Sudan. The PMCs often have won contracts based on their affordability over competitors, and local partners have received what they have paid for. In the cases in which PMCs have failed to fully

achieve their objectives, Moscow has still benefited by establishing relationships of dependence on continued Russian assistance, with the exception of Mozambique.

Despite the challenges and setbacks Russia has faced in these countries, Moscow continues to refine the PMC model to adapt to different local contexts, particularly to continue targeting resource-rich countries with weak governance or ongoing security crises. In assessing Russia’s mixed success in sub-Saharan Africa, four key factors stand out.

### **Variable Levels of Preparation and Qualification:**

In most cases in which Russian PMCs have failed to carry out their missions, their failures have been the result of poor preparation or lack of qualifications for the task. For example, in Madagascar, the PMC political consultants lacked awareness of the Malagasy political environment, and some lacked field experience entirely. Meanwhile, in Mozambique, the Wagner Group suffered its worst failure on the continent due to troops’ inexperience conducting counterinsurgency operations in the local terrain and an inability to coordinate—or even communicate at all—with local troops. One of the strongest similarities between these four PMC deployments in sub-Saharan Africa has been their lack of awareness of local needs and cultural norms.

**Financial Networks:** In pursuit of economic gain—primarily through access to natural resources—Moscow has established a network of shell companies operating in sub-Saharan Africa with connections in Russia and elsewhere, including the United States.<sup>103</sup> With economic motives largely driving PMCs’ involvement in sub-Saharan Africa, sanctions and other financial tools could be employed to disrupt this network’s operations. For example, efforts such as the Department of the Treasury’s designations of PMC-linked front companies in the CAR and Sudan in 2020 may help disrupt local revenue streams that fund PMC activities on the continent.

**Tensions with Local Partners:** In all of these cases, Russian PMCs have faced some form of tensions with the receiving society or partner military forces. In countries such as Mozambique and Madagascar, these tensions directly have undermined Moscow’s goals. In Mozambique, the Wagner Group’s inexperience in local battle conditions, cultural ineptitude, and lack



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**Despite the challenges and setbacks Russia has faced in these countries, Moscow continues to refine the PMC model to adapt to different local contexts, particularly to continue targeting resource-rich countries with weak governance or ongoing security crises.**

of shared language made coordination with partner military forces difficult, leading to both tactical and strategic failures. In Madagascar, M-Invest's lack of transparency and poor treatment of workers resulted in labor strikes, cutting off Russia's access to chromium and other natural resources.

Even in countries where Russian PMCs have been more successful in achieving their goals, problems with local society have been common and have undermined long-term Russian success. For example, in the CAR, Wagner mercenaries have been regularly accused of crimes against the local population, including the rape of teenage girls in villages near PMC encampments.<sup>104</sup> They also have been criticized for elevating the role of warlords and contributing to insecurity and human rights abuses.<sup>105</sup> In a June 2021 report, UN Security Council investigators documented extensive violations of international humanitarian law by Russian PMCs in the CAR, including excessive use of force, the murder of civilians, rape, torture, occupation of schools, and widespread looting, including of humanitarian organizations.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, local opinion articles have expressed frustration at Russians for treating the CAR as an economic opportunity to exploit without reciprocal development support or as a power piece in the competition between Russia and the West.<sup>107</sup> Even a former member of the CAR government remarked, "In 2017, many thought that the

Russians would do what France had not done: clean up the country. There was a lot of hope, but for the moment it is disappointment that dominates."<sup>108</sup>

**Mutually Beneficial Partnerships:** The countries profiled in this chapter did not choose to partner with Russian PMCs because of deep existing relationships with Moscow, but rather because of a perception of the PMCs' unique ability to effectively address the states' problems at a reasonable price and without involving Western partners, who some perceive as more threatening. This was particularly clear in cases such as the CAR and Madagascar, where Russia directly undercut a traditional reliance on France. For example, Touadéra's spokesman, Albert Yaloke, remarked: "The rebellion in our country has cost us a lot . . . No one came to our aid except the Russian Federation."<sup>109</sup> In its propaganda, Russian operatives have stressed the mutually beneficial nature of its partnerships, contrasting this with depictions of the United States and its Western allies as seeking colonial relationships that prioritize their own interests above—or at the expense of—local partners. Local perceptions of countries such as the United States can influence their choice of partners and willingness to sustain those relationships. For example, the negotiations that led to PMC deployments to Sudan were in part motivated by Bashir's concern about U.S. aggression.<sup>110</sup> Now, with an improving U.S.-Sudanese relationship under Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and the November 2020 removal of Sudan from the U.S. State Sponsors of Terrorism list, PMCs have redeployed some troops from Sudan to the neighboring CAR and plans to establish a Russian base at Port Sudan have been suspended. This indicates that the United States may be able to counter PMC influence by fostering its own mutually beneficial relationship with Khartoum.<sup>111</sup>

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Despite Moscow's mixed success in using PMCs to further its goals in the region, it is likely to continue to refine and employ the PMC model to further its influence in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions in which political instability and natural resources coincide. By assessing common elements across these deployments of PMCs in sub-Saharan Africa—as well as in other case studies—the United States and its allies can counter and exploit weaknesses in the Russian PMC model.

**PART III**

**Policy Implications for the United States**



CHAPTER 07

# Vulnerabilities, Opportunities, & Options



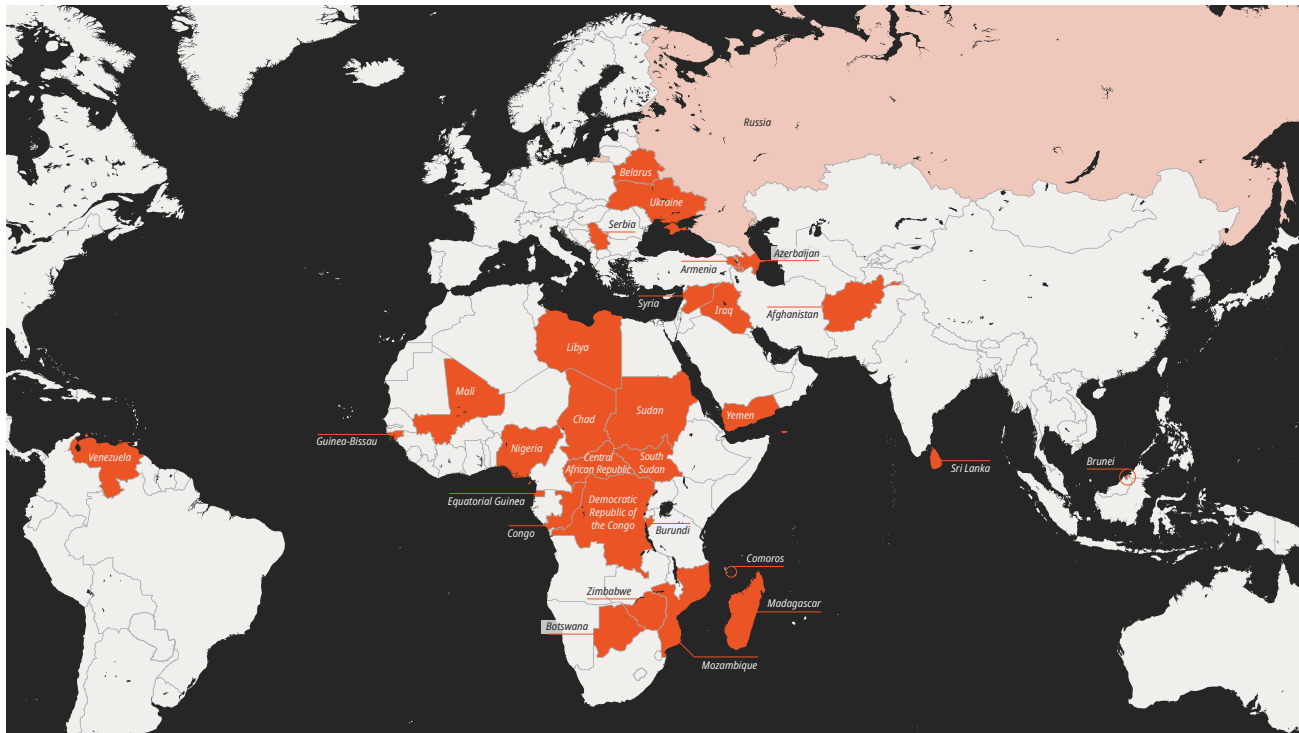


Russian president Vladimir Putin (L) meets with his Central African counterpart Faustin Archangel Touadera (2R) during the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi.

SOURCE Sergei Chirikov/Pool/AFP/Getty Images

**A**s this report highlights, PMCs are an important component of Russia's irregular warfare strategy. Irregular warfare includes activities short of conventional and nuclear warfare that are designed to expand a country's influence and legitimacy. Instead of deploying large numbers of conventional Russian soldiers, Moscow has leveraged special operations forces, intelligence units, PMCs, and other government and nongovernment organizations to expand its influence, build the capacity of partners and allies, and increase economic opportunity. As several of these case studies show, some Russian PMCs have direct or indirect links with the Russian Ministry of Defense (particularly the GRU), FSB, SVR, and the Kremlin.

Since 2015, there has been a significant increase in the number of countries where Russian PMCs operate, according to CSIS data. As Figure 7.1 highlights, Russian PMCs operated in over two dozen countries on four continents between 2016 and 2021. By 2021, Russian PMCs have been active in countries in Africa (such as the CAR, Libya, and Sudan), the Middle East (such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen), Europe (such as Belarus, Serbia, and Ukraine), Latin America (such as Venezuela), and Asia (such as Afghanistan and Azerbaijan). In addition, there has been significant variation in the organizational structure, roles, missions, tasks, and funding arrangements among PMCs. Some of this variation has been deliberate, such as masking the actions and financial arrangements of PMCs. Yevgeny Prigozhin,



▲ **FIGURE 7.1**  
Countries Where Russian  
PMCs Operated, 2016–2021  
**SOURCE** Data compiled by  
CSIS Transnational Threats  
Project.

PMCs such as the Wagner Group suspected to be closest to President Putin and the Russian government.

Russia will likely continue to utilize irregular forces and means to expand its influence, build partner capacity, and increase financial gains for Russian leaders and oligarchs in Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. Russian PMCs are concerning, but they need to be understood in a broader context. The United States and its allies and partners face numerous national security challenges from China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, terrorist organizations, and transnational threats, such as pandemics, climate change, and immigration. Regarding Russia, PMCs present one of many challenges that include offensive cyber operations, information and disinformation campaigns, conventional threats to the Baltic countries and other NATO members, military expansion into the Arctic, and a significant nuclear

for example, has relied on a complex network of financial facilitators, front companies, and shell companies to hide the financing sources for

arsenal. As the case studies in this report highlighted, Russia has had successes and failures using PMCs to achieve its strategic interests. As Russia continues to struggle with a weak economy while trying to reconstitute a more capable conventional force, President Putin will likely continue to turn to PMCs as one of his irregular warfare tools based on a perceived lower risk, accountability, and financial cost compared to other methods and means.

While the PMC deniability claim holds little merit, Russia continues to avoid significant international culpability and domestic accountability through disinformation, denial, and propaganda. Consequently, Russian PMCs still present a challenge to the United States that needs to be better countered, especially since interviews conducted for this report suggest that the U.S. government and its partners have done too little. There is limited systematic analysis of Russian PMCs across combatant commands; limited proactive diplomatic, military, intelligence, and financial action taken against Russian PMCs; and little substantive interagency or international coordination—including involving the U.S. Congress—to counter their activities. A more effective campaign to counter Russian PMCs

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likely requires modest resources to exploit their vulnerabilities, and PMC weaknesses present opportunities that the United States and its allies and partners need to capitalize on.

## Principles of an Effective Campaign to Counter PMCs

The primary goals of a U.S. campaign should be to undermine the efficacy of Russian PMCs overseas and prevent Moscow from significantly increasing its influence. These efforts should be nested in a broader U.S. and multilateral effort to balance against Russia and its military, diplomatic, intelligence, and economic activities that aim to expand Russian power and weaken the United States and its allies and partners. A more effective campaign should incorporate three components.

First, U.S. efforts should be multilateral to the greatest extent possible, particularly with European allies and partners. Multilateral cooperation will not be easy. European countries differ from the United States—and with each other—over sanctions and remain divided over issues such as the degree and nature of the Russian threat. A 2021 opinion poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations found that the majority of Europeans surveyed preferred to be neutral if there was a major disagreement between the United States and Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Second, an effective campaign needs to include multiple instruments of national power. In many cases, diplomatic, financial, intelligence, and information actions will likely be more effective than military instruments. Military operations can help impose costs at the tactical level, but the response will often need to be more nuanced. Irregular warfare activities, security cooperation, foreign internal defense, military information support operations, and other indirect activities are likely to be the most effective military approaches. Consequently, U.S. departments and agencies need to better coordinate their efforts.

Third, a response to counter Russian PMCs needs to be informed by proactive and timely intelligence. As extensive interviews for this report suggest, the Unit-

ed States needs to improve its intelligence collection, analysis, and understanding of Russian PMC activity—including PMC relations with Russian government leaders, agencies, and funding sources. Even within the U.S. military, there is far too little intelligence cooperation across combatant commands, despite known Russian PMC presence in all but one geographic combatant command (U.S. Northern Command) and activities spanning across functional combatant commands, such as U.S. Special Operations Command and U.S. Cyber Command. In discussions with U.S. military officials, the authors found little systematic attention, analysis, coordination, and action regarding Russian PMCs. This could be due to a lack of understanding of what PMCs are doing or perhaps a low prioritization for intelligence resources.

## Vulnerabilities and Opportunities

In short, the U.S. response should be multilateral, multi-domain, and driven by timely intelligence. The desired effect should be to reduce the Russian PMC footprint abroad and weaken its efficacy and influence. This effect can be achieved by exploiting several vulnerabilities that may impose costs on Russia in the form of political risk, local outrage, international sanctions, negative national and international reactions, a decrease in host nation interest, and an increase in PMC operational expenses. Based on an analysis of PMC activities in over two dozen countries, there are several ways that vulnerabilities can be better exploited:

- Increase Russian local and international public awareness of PMC activity;
- Highlight PMC ineffectiveness and failures abroad;
- Heighten PMC legal liabilities;
- Increase financial pressure on PMCs; and
- Target the Wagner Group.

### Increase Russian Local and International Awareness of PMC Activity

The United States and its partners should develop more aggressive open-source reporting—including through



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open-source intelligence (OSINT)—about the activities, financial arrangements, and challenges of PMCs.

**Vulnerabilities:** A Wagner Group commander, Marat Gabidullin, stated that one of the reasons for writing a book about his experiences was “to convey to [the] people that there is a complete deception on the part of the military and politicians surrounding the topic of PMCs. . . . The whole world knows but you [the Russian government] are hiding the truth from your own people.”<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to assess the exact degree to which the Russian people are aware of PMC activities abroad, but Russian state-run media outlets have proliferated a substantial amount of disinformation regarding PMC activities abroad.

Based on the study team’s analysis of Russian propaganda, a common Russian narrative is that PMCs—especially the Wagner Group—are staffed by Russian patriots who formerly served in the most elite military and intelligence units. Putin has erected Wagner monuments in Ukraine, Syria, and outside the Wagner training facilities in Mol’kino, Russia to reinforce the narrative, endorse their chivalry, and commemorate their sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> Some of the monuments are virtually identical: a man in full battle kit, his weapon slung low off the right shoulder, his left hand extended in a greeting, and a young child clutched behind his right leg. Although Putin rarely publicly acknowledges PMCs such as the Wagner Group, contractors are awarded military medals—sometimes from Putin personally.<sup>4</sup> One of the standard PMC awards is simply referred to as the “Wagner Medal,” and the same design is carved into the base of the Wagner monument. According to one mother of a Wagner contractor killed in Syria, she received two medals posthumously awarded to her son. She was told one medal was for “heroism and valor” and the other for “blood and bravery.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite Russia’s propaganda campaign, there is an opportunity to better inform audiences in Russia and overseas. An effective option is through firsthand accounts of contractors and stories from family members of those killed and severely injured. Marat Gabidullin’s account of leadership failures, contractor inexperience, general incompetence, battlefield disasters, war crimes, rivalries with local military forces, and a lack of government and military support was an attempt to reveal

some of the challenges of PMC activity.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Gabidullin’s book was abruptly canceled—allegedly at the request of the author.<sup>7</sup> Just as significant are stories of widows describing how they have been forgotten and left helpless after their husbands were secretly sent abroad and subsequently killed or wounded in action. In addition, some widows have provided powerful accounts of death notices coming via text message, bodies never being returned, promised death compensations getting denied, and the truth being suppressed.<sup>8</sup> In an interview with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, the widow of a PMC contractor stated that Russian authorities should acknowledge citizens who die fighting in Syria and, when possible, repatriate their bodies. “There should be something in their memory, so that the wives won’t be ashamed of their husbands and their children can be proud,” she said.<sup>9</sup>

**Opportunities and Options:** Although it is unrealistic to expect Russia to increase transparency, the United States and its partners should encourage wide-ranging open-source reporting on PMC activity at home and abroad. As Timothy Frye argued, one way Putin maintains his political power is by balancing “the competing goals of rewarding elites who might otherwise conspire against him and appeasing the public” to prevent “a popular revolt from below.”<sup>10</sup> An increase in reporting could help undermine Putin’s narrative. Foreign leaders have provided some of the harshest critiques of PMCs. In March 2021, for example, Libyan prime minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah described Russian PMCs as a “stab in our back and a threat to Libyan sovereignty.”<sup>11</sup>

More effort is also needed from the U.S. Departments of State, Defense, and Treasury to publicly highlight PMC activity. For example, AFRICOM has publicly released satellite imagery of Wagner Group activity.<sup>12</sup> But AFRICOM’s actions have been the exception rather than the rule. The goal should be to make information about PMC activities widely available by declassifying intelligence and publicly releasing analysis in congressional testimonies, declassified intelligence assessments, public remarks, and other open-source products. Congress should demand that U.S. policymakers provide a transparent account of Russian PMC activity to members of Congress and the U.S. population more broadly.

Much of the investigative work should be done outside of the government. Journalists, nongovernment organizations, and other non-state actors need to continue providing firsthand accounts of ineffectiveness, war crimes, human rights abuses, corruption, and casualties. Investigative teams from organizations such as Bellingcat have made helpful contributions linking individuals such as Yevgeny Prigozhin to Russian state-run PMC activity.<sup>13</sup> Also needed are more investigative reports into PMC finances, recruiting, training, and operations; firsthand accounts of contractors; and personal stories of sacrifices and tragedies.

But investigative reporting comes with risks. In 2018, three Russian journalists were murdered in the CAR while working on a joint project with Investigations Management Centre into the activities of the Wagner Group.<sup>14</sup> The murders suggest that the journalists were investigating actions that the Wagner Group and perhaps the Russian government did not want publicly revealed. The incident highlights the sensitivity surrounding information that may expose PMC operations or their connections and infrastructure. It also highlights how valuable investigative information may be to counter PMCs.

### Highlight PMC Ineffectiveness and Failures Abroad

PMCs have a varied track record overseas and have sometimes failed to achieve key Russian objectives.

**Vulnerabilities:** Russian PMCs, especially the Wagner Group, have been ineffective in some countries. According to Marat Gabidullin: “In 2015–2017, ‘Wagner’ [Dmitry Utkin] led a squad of gladiators—now he is leading an army of slaves.”<sup>15</sup> The expansion of PMC activities and operations, possible decrease in experienced contractors, unfamiliar operating environments, paucity of external support, lack of cooperation with local forces, greed, and hubris have contributed to an increasing number of combat-related failures.<sup>16</sup> What began as limited success in countries such as Ukraine and Syria has trended toward less successful operations in Africa and other parts of the world.

PMCs such as the Wagner Group may have once been attractive because they appeared to combine significant military capabilities, weapons proficiency,

and technology with Russian political support. But as they have expanded into other countries and regions, some have struggled. After Wagner Group casualties started accumulating in Mozambique, a former Rhodesian soldier and owner of the private security firm OAM stated that while initially “we couldn’t compete with Wagner . . . now they are in trouble there, they are out of their depth.”<sup>17</sup> The Wagner Group track record leaves much to be desired. They were defeated in Mozambique trying to eradicate Islamic extremists, failed to seize Tripoli with GNA forces, and were unable to influence Madagascar’s presidential elections. In the CAR, 80 percent of the country remained under rebel control after eight years of war.<sup>18</sup> In 2021, CAR rebels made headlines after killing several Wagner contractors and taking at least one hostage.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to media reports about combat failures, the Wagner Group’s reputation suffered after several journalists investigating the organization were mysteriously murdered, and a video went viral exposing a Syrian deserter tortured to death by Wagner contractors.<sup>20</sup> As Marat Gabidullin stated, “People who got to smell gunpowder in Chechnya or during the Georgia War are no longer striving [to join Wagner Group]. . . . And it turns out that more than half of the personnel are [at war] for the first time.”<sup>21</sup> The Wagner Group may also be experiencing leadership problems, a reported decline in training standards, and reckless operational planning tendencies. Internal turmoil and high veteran casualty rates have possibly resulted in a younger, more financially desperate, and less experienced fighting force. Current compensation levels may not be sufficient to offset the risks and close the talent gap. The Wagner Group may also be reluctant to raise contractor wages because their primary competitive advantage over other security companies is their overall low costs. According to a Moscow Times report from a former Russian military officer, the average salary for a Wagner contractor is “between \$1,800 – \$4,700 per month for a lower-ranked Wagner soldier.”<sup>22</sup> The security firm OAM lost a contract to Wagner Group for work in Mozambique after submitting a bid that included highly qualified experts with local knowledge. But they were underbid by Wagner.<sup>23</sup> Most non-Russian PMCs cannot compete with Wagner’s low prices.

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**Opportunities and Options:** It is conceivable that if the performance and reputation of Russian PMCs do not improve, competing security companies will eventually push them out of the market and governments and companies will look for other alternatives to assist with their security needs. This has already occurred in Mozambique. The Wagner Group was replaced by Dyck Advisory Group in 2020 following a poor relationship with Mozambican armed forces, botched operations, and a friendly-fire incident.<sup>24</sup> When Russian PMCs fail, it can be advantageous to publicize that information.

In addition, U.S. and partner diplomats can take proactive steps in countries where Russian PMCs are operating—or may operate in the future. The United States and other countries can provide support to foreign countries through foreign internal defense, security force assistance, and humanitarian assistance. The United States should also consider foreign military sales programs to ensure local security forces have the weapons and technology required to maintain an adequate defense, rather than need to utilize Russian PMCs. This proactive approach should be forward leaning—including looking for security vacuums that Russian PMCs may try to exploit or have already exploited.

In addition, the United States and its partners need to better understand Russian inter-service rivalry and how that relates to PMCs, especially the Wagner Group. A comprehensive understanding may lead to opportunities to capitalize on exposed friction points, turf wars, and vulnerable areas of overlap between the PMCs and Russian government agencies. While waiting for opportunities, information and influence operations should continue to highlight failures, raise awareness about hardships and cases of special treatment between services, and highlight resource inequalities.

President Putin may benefit from this infighting, which ultimately keeps Russian agencies and PMCs from uniting against the Kremlin. This is more reason to understand and, if possible, enhance friction and tension. The United States and its partners and allies need to keep pressure on the environment where PMCs and Russian government agencies overlap through the use of sanctions, litigation, humanitarian efforts, military presence, and information operations—anything that can create intrusive interference, frustration,

and distraction. Ultimately, the United States needs to find creative ways to expose, exploit, and fuel Russian inter-service rivalries. After all, as Mark Galeotti of the London-based Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) remarked: “The agencies . . . compete fiercely and ruthlessly to outshine the others. . . . This is a carnivorous and cannibalistic system.”

### Heighten PMC Legal Liabilities

PMCs lack governmental legal protections in foreign countries. PMCs have engaged in illegal activities—including human rights abuses—which have created legal opportunities that the United States and its partners should better exploit.

**Vulnerabilities:** Government and military personnel serving abroad typically possess legal protection and government support due to international laws and bilateral agreements. This protection limits the degree to which those individuals are subject to the authority of the host nation’s law enforcement and judicial systems. While protections and support vary depending on the position, assignment, mission, and host nation, Russian government officials can rely on a level of immunity from the government if they find themselves facing criminal or civil charges. But PMC contractors are not afforded the same protections and support, and they are more vulnerable to criminal and civil suits in local countries. According to one PMC contractor, “The Kremlin knows what we are doing. But we know that if we get into difficulties, our presence and the true nature of our operations will be denied.”<sup>25</sup> Without embassy or local country protections and support, PMC contractors are more susceptible to legal complications, incarceration, and personal financial burdens than government employees.

There are numerous opportunities to exploit PMC legal vulnerabilities. Journalists and UN investigators have highlighted several instances in which PMC employees committed human rights abuses, violated local statutes, and accepted or offered bribes. According to one study, the Wagner Group has demonstrated a “consistent disdain for human rights and civilian lives.”<sup>26</sup> PMC contractors have engaged in skirmishes and arguments with locals, double-crossed allies, and allegedly threatened or murdered journalists.<sup>27</sup> As noted earlier, it is likely that the Wagner Group was



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directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of three journalists investigating their activities in the CAR.<sup>28</sup> These activities leave PMCs and their contractors vulnerable to legal action.

It is also important to understand where PMCs fall under international humanitarian law. Contractors are civilians and cannot be targeted by military forces. But there are situations in which they lose that protected status. According to the law of armed conflict, PMCs lose their protected status when they are incorporated into the state's armed forces, are given combat functions for an organized armed group belonging to a party to a conflict, or become directly involved in hostilities.<sup>29</sup> Guarding military bases against attack from opposing parties, gathering tactical military intelligence, and operating weapons systems in combat operations are examples of direct participation.<sup>30</sup>

**Opportunities and Options:** The United States and its partners should inform and support efforts that link PMCs and their contractors to prosecution or civil litigation. First, the United States and its partners could conduct information campaigns to expose criminal and other illicit activity by PMCs. Since PMCs have expanded to cyber, misinformation, and disinformation operations, information activities should expose those operations to reinforce PMCs as dishonest and unreliable partners. These actions should include campaigns to educate the local population and encourage local government leaders to pursue criminal and civil action, where appropriate. These operations could be supported by special operations and intelligence units. The U.S. Treasury Department could also be instrumental by identifying illicit finance practices.

Second, the United States and its partners should pursue a diplomatic approach, with embassy officials engaging state leaders to act against PMCs and their employees. Regional and international governmental and nongovernmental organizations can also apply pressure to countries that host Russian PMCs. Organizations such as the Africa Commission and Africa Court on Human and People's Rights can pressure countries to hold Russian PMCs and their contractors accountable when they break the law. International organizations, such as the United Nations and International Federation for Human Rights, can also be helpful.

In March 2021, for example, a group of UN experts publicly expressed concern about the use of Russian PMCs—including Sewa Security Services and the Wagner Group—by the CAR government. The UN experts cited possible “grave” human rights abuses, and they called for investigations into the abuses and greater accountability.<sup>31</sup> These concerns were validated in a June 2021 UN Security Council report that presented evidence—including eyewitness testimony—of extensive violations of international humanitarian law committed by Russian PMCs and affiliated local troops in the CAR.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Human Rights Watch documented the cases of several dozen Libyans that were killed by landmines placed by Wagner Group employees, a development that enraged Libyan officials.<sup>33</sup> In May 2021, the International Criminal Court warned Russian PMCs in Libya that they could face prosecution for their alleged use of torture, arbitrary detention, and sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>34</sup> In Syria, several contractors working for a company linked to the Wagner Group were accused of torturing and murdering a Syrian man, Hamdi Bouta, at the al-Shaer gas plant near Palmyra. The victim's brother filed a complaint in Russian courts in March 2021 accusing the Wagner group of war crimes.<sup>35</sup>

Proactive diplomatic activities can raise awareness of PMC actions, drive a wedge between PMCs and the host nation, and hold PMCs and their contractors accountable. A Syrian family, facilitated by three human rights groups, pursued legal action against the Wagner Group for the suspected torture, killing, and mutilation of a Syrian citizen in 2017.<sup>36</sup>

Third, the United States and its partners could pursue broader international statutes regulating PMCs conducting mercenary activities, as many legal scholars argue that most current laws are too narrowly written.<sup>37</sup> Azerbaijan, Mozambique, and Ukraine have all enacted laws criminalizing the work of mercenaries. Legal entanglements—as well as domestic and international pressure—could drive host countries to shut down PMC activities. While this outcome may be unlikely in many cases, constant agitation and complications could cause some leaders to reconsider whether the benefits of allowing PMCs are outweighed by the costs and risks. At the very least, constant distraction by legal complications could degrade the effectiveness

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and desirability of PMC activity. In addition, legal complications could deter countries from supporting the use of PMCs in the future.

The United States may also find itself in situations where it needs to weigh military action against Russian PMCs, particularly when PMCs lose their protected status under international law. In 2018, for example, the Wagner Group assaulted the Conoco gas and oil fields at Dayr az Zawr in Syria, as highlighted in Chapter 4.<sup>38</sup> The oil fields were defended by Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by U.S. advisers and U.S. airpower. The oil and gas fields were located beyond the U.S.-Russian deconfliction line along the Euphrates River, which was established to prevent confrontations between the two countries while they targeted Islamic State forces in the region. The Wagner assault started a four-hour battle with U.S. forces, which resulted in approximately 300 Wagner Group casualties. One Wagner contractor stated that, “the guys just ended up turning into cannon fodder . . . you couldn’t go take oil fields with such weapons and amounts of ammunition—it’s simply impossible. . . . But the military said to go.”<sup>39</sup> The United States response, which was conveyed to Russian military officials, was justified by the right of self-defense under the law of armed conflict. This double-edged sword of Russian deniability may present situations for the United States to use existing authorities against PMC contractors.

### Increase Financial Pressure on PMCs

PMCs require funding, making them vulnerable to economic sanctions and other financial tools.

**Vulnerabilities:** As noted in Chapter 2, furthering Russian economic interests is one of the main drivers of PMC use. Russian PMCs are most useful when their placement, access, and activities create and maintain opportunities for revenue. PMCs generate some or all of their own funding to recruit and train skilled operators, purchase equipment, secure contracts, and deploy and support forces for operations abroad. Even the Wagner Group requires a steady budget to deploy, operate, and support contracted operations around the globe.<sup>40</sup> PMCs bogged down in business complications, such as individual or corporate sanctions or lawsuits, may become more of a risk than a benefit.

PMCs are most valuable if they contribute to Russia’s goals abroad—such as influence, capacity building, and financial gain—and avoid international sanctions.

However, seeking revenue can get PMCs into trouble, particularly when they involve corrupt oligarchs that build shell and front companies and amass personal fortunes. Financial activity can create a “principal-agent problem” in which the interests of PMC leaders may not always align with those of the Russian government.<sup>41</sup> This problem may be why Russia maintains the current legal and constitutional prohibitions concerning PMCs.<sup>42</sup> Russian PMCs have established a complex network of shell and front companies to obscure ownership, conceal their relationship with the Russian government, and evade sanctions by the United States and others. While meant to frustrate the United States and others, the constant “cat and mouse” game PMCs play to remain operational is a demanding task that requires significant attention.

PMC employment is an enticing financial opportunity for skilled contractors. Despite recent wage reduction, PMC paychecks, especially at Wagner, are still substantially higher than typical provincial Russian wages.<sup>43</sup> The more complications and costs that the United States and its partners can impose on PMCs, the harder it could be to maintain skilled contractors.

**Opportunities and Options:** These compounding and sometimes conflicting financial factors create opportunities for the United States and its partners to enact economic sanctions. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has been especially active in this area. The approval of anti-money laundering legislation, such as the Corporate Transparency Act of 2019 and Anti-Money Laundry Act of 2020, have allowed the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) to close some gaps that PMCs have exploited.<sup>44</sup> This will continue to be a heavy lift for FinCEN, and the Treasury Department will need to bolster this effort if it wants the new legislation to be effective.<sup>45</sup>

One criticism of current sanctions efforts is that they are too focused on individuals and not on organizations. Imposing sanctions on PMCs and their facilitation networks casts a broader net to complicate and constrain PMC freedom of movement and operation. PMCs may attempt to create shell companies or rebrand

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themselves, making it important to collect and analyze intelligence on PMC activity. Finally, the United States should carefully coordinate and synchronize sanctions with international partners to maximize effectiveness. Multilateral efforts will not be easy, however, since some European countries—such as Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Portugal, and Spain—have been less enthusiastic about sanctioning Russia.<sup>46</sup>

The United States and its partners should complement these sanctions efforts by publicly highlighting the financial structures of Russian PMCs, including their shell and front companies. Legitimate companies that want to avoid legal entanglements will weigh the risk-reward calculus differently if they know there is potential for negative publicity or sanctions through association with a named PMC shell or front company.

### Target the Wagner Group

Wagner's unique status and relative monopoly over smaller PMCs is a final vulnerability that can be exploited.

**Vulnerabilities:** Single points of failure create high-risk environments for organizations that rely too heavily on one source for their success. The Wagner Group represents a potential point of failure for Russia.<sup>47</sup> Despite a few missteps, the Wagner Group has risen to prominence among other smaller PMCs. This could be due, in part, to Prigozhin's close relationship with Putin, other top Kremlin officials, and organizations such as the GRU.<sup>48</sup> Yet Moscow has likely overrelied on the Wagner Group to maintain Russian influence globally.<sup>49</sup> The Wagner Group currently operates in roughly a dozen countries, while most other PMCs operate in only one or two. The Wagner Group also works in areas where Russia has the greatest interest, such as Ukraine, Syria, and Libya.<sup>50</sup> In some cases, Wagner Group contractors have worked for different PMCs on non-Wagner Group contracts, suggesting it has reach into smaller PMCs.

**Opportunities and Options:** The Wagner Group's importance to Moscow represents a potential vulnerability—and an opportunity. The United States and its partners should prioritize actions against the Wagner Group in all of the areas previously discussed: increase public awareness of Wagner activity, including through OSINT; highlight the Wagner Group's ineffectiveness

and failures abroad; heighten legal challenges against the organization and its contractors overseas; and increase financial pressure.

The Wagner Group has been relatively successful at avoiding the full weight of U.S. and multilateral sanctions. To date, there has not been an effective multilateral campaign against the Wagner Group. The United States and its partners should target the Wagner Group—as well as its shell and front companies—using a more aggressive suite of financial authorities and tools. Recent U.S. sanctions against Russia in response to Moscow's interference in the 2020 U.S. presidential election is a step in the right direction.<sup>51</sup> But the United States should work to build multilateral support—including among European countries—to sanction the Wagner Group and organizations associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Information campaigns can also be helpful against the Wagner Group, which is now a household name. Once a badge of honor, association with the Wagner Group is now fraught with risk. Providing local populations with information about Prigozhin, the Wagner Group, and associated companies—including their corrupt and other illegal practices, involvement in human rights abuses, and ineffectiveness—could spur a public backlash in some countries and drive away current and future business.<sup>52</sup> These concerns have already occurred in some locations. In Libya, for example, some residents of Bani Walid protested the presence of the Wagner Group in their town. Their mayor stated that “Russian mercenaries are not welcome” and cited the Wagner Group participation in killing and wounding innocent civilians.<sup>53</sup> In short, a more aggressive and coordinated international campaign against the Wagner Group could undermine Russian PMCs more broadly and force Putin to scale back their activity.

## Concluding Thoughts

PMCs such as the Wagner Group represent an important component of Russia's irregular warfare campaign. But the United States and its partners have done too little to combat Russia's growing use of PMCs. Moving forward, the United States and its international partners should prioritize the use of diplomatic, information,



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and financial instruments of power. Information campaigns should focus on bringing transparency and global awareness of PMC illicit activity, human rights atrocities, corruption, and ties to Putin and the Russian government. Diplomatic efforts should focus on engaging local leaders in at-risk nations to seek better alternatives to harmful alliances with Russian PMCs. Economic sanctions should be broad and flexible enough to account for the elusiveness of PMCs and their shell and front companies.

Military and intelligence capabilities should be tailored to inform, enable, and support the primary role of diplomatic, financial, and informational tools. The military and intelligence community can play an important role in supporting and enabling efforts through security cooperation, operational preparation of the environment (OPE), irregular warfare tactics, reconnaissance, and surveillance to assist other agencies.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, U.S. military forces should understand the implications of PMC activity in countries and regions where they operate. U.S. forces should establish significant deconfliction measures in the early stages to deter malign PMC employment on the ground and heighten their security posture to account for potential cyber, intelligence, sabotage, subversion, and disinformation threats from PMCs operating in the area.<sup>55</sup> In Libya, for example, Russian PMCs operated MiG-29 and Sukhoi Su-24 fighter aircraft as well as Pantsir S-1 surface-to-air missile systems.<sup>56</sup>

U.S. forces should also have clear and standing rules of engagement and standard tactics, techniques, and procedures tailored to PMCs and specific to the countries and regions where they operate. U.S. military commanders at the tactical level must understand the legal authorities regarding the application of self-defense measures against a hostile PMC. As highlighted in Chapter 4, this scenario occurred in Syria when U.S. forces killed approximately 300 Wagner Group contractors.

Without a more effective campaign, Moscow will likely continue to utilize PMCs as one of several tools to increase Russian influence and undermine the United States and its partners.<sup>57</sup> The Russian government currently has little incentive to reduce its use of PMCs unless the United States and its partners increase the costs and risks.<sup>58</sup> Russia has turned to PMCs such as the

Wagner Group to expand its influence, build the capacity of its local partners, and increase financial interests. Consequently, U.S. goals should be straightforward: to raise the costs and risks of using PMCs so that Russia fails to significantly increase its influence, fails to strengthen local capacity, and fails to generate profits.

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## Executive Summary

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

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