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RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES

APRIL 2020



**THEIR USE AND
HOW TO CONSIDER
THEM IN OPERATIONS,
COMPETITION, AND
CONFLICT**



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Foreword

Fellow Professionals,

The Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) serves as the United States Army's global scouts. We leverage direct observations of the operational environment, emerging threat capabilities, and friendly gaps to advise the operational force. Our observations inform doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leader development, personnel, facilities, and policy solutions. Since our establishment in 2006, part of our mission has been anticipating asymmetric threats and "seeing over the next hilltop." One of the threats we see on the horizon is that posed by Private Military Companies (PMCs). PMCs are proliferating worldwide and play an increasingly important role in competition and conflict. Specifically, PMCs based in the Russian Federation have been active in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. They are of increasing concern to commanders worldwide, from the tactical to the strategic level.

After observing the growth of PMC activity, AWG requested the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory conduct an in-depth study into available open sources of information on PMCs, and analyze differences between PMCs and conventional armed forces. The resulting report complements AWG's work observing threats in the operational environment, and is also extremely valuable for others who may have to counter PMCs in the future. As this report demonstrates, PMCs pose unique dilemmas, but they also have unique vulnerabilities due to their informal nature and ambiguous status as illegal armed forces.

We are publicly releasing this report, which is based largely on academic and press sources, so that it is widely available to the force, our Allies, and our global partners. We hope this product proves valuable to you and broadens understanding of this important topic.

Think. Adapt. Anticipate.

Col. Scott A. Shaw

Commander, Asymmetric Warfare Group
Fort Meade, MD

Executive Summary

The Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) sponsored the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory (JHU/APL) to analyze the phenomenon of Russian private military companies (PMCs), the scenarios under which they would matter to U.S. Army maneuver commanders, and whether they constitute a unique threat to U.S. and partner forces.

The primary audience for this analysis is U.S. Army maneuver commanders and their staffs, but the findings and insights should also be useful for anyone in the U.S. national security and defense communities concerned with asymmetric operations of the Russian Federation around the world.

First, this analysis presents *key findings* from deep-dive research and analysis on Russian PMCs presented in the appendix. It addresses their uses, equipment, training, personnel, state involvement, legal issues, and other related topics. Second, these findings are used to inform an analytical model to explore the *operational challenges and considerations* Russian PMCs could present to U.S. Army maneuver commanders.

Key Findings

Bottom Line Up Front: 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. While Moscow continues to see the use of Russian PMCs as beneficial, their use also presents several vulnerabilities that present both operational and strategic risks to Russian Federation objectives.

Friendly Regime Support: Russian lawmakers view Russian PMCs as an instrument to prop up friendly regimes under threat of collapse or ouster. Russian PMCs operate:

- Alongside and embedded with friendly state militaries.
- With non-state armed groups in offensive combat operations.

Offensive Role: While also used for support tasks more typical of military and security contractors, Russian PMCs have had a pronounced role in offensive combat operations.

Shifting Control: The command and control (C2) of Russian PMCs is not consistent in all operational contexts.

- Sometimes Russian PMCs fall under the C2 of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) or Russian intelligence agencies.
- At other times, PMCs fall under the C2 of partner governments or aligned private interests.

Inconsistent Capabilities: The quality of personnel and materiel enabling Russian PMCs is inconsistent. Russian PMC capabilities in personnel, training, and equipment appear to be greater when a PMC is closely aligned with state support from the Russian MoD.

Informal by Design: Despite legislative efforts to legalize PMCs, Russian law continues to formally outlaw their creation and bars individuals from joining them under anti-mercenary laws. However, Russian leaders use this legal prohibition to strictly control some PMCs (e.g., the selective arrest of PMCs who might present domestic security or political risks), not to prevent PMCs from operating.

Vulnerabilities: The use of Russian PMCs presents new operational and strategic risks to Moscow. Morale in Russian PMC units in high-risk missions appears delicate. Although their use provides political protection from the optics of high Russian MoD casualties, both Russian PMC casualties and their return home create novel political and domestic security risks. Their use also complicates internal regime politics in Moscow, creating competition between the MoD and private equities that can jeopardize operations (see the appendix: Syria). Finally, the ambiguity of operational control and decision making over Russian PMCs opens Moscow up to the risk of being held responsible by the international community for actions taken by Russian PMCs under the command of other interests.

Operational Challenges and Considerations Presented by Russian PMCs

Bottom Line Up Front: Russian PMCs do not pose a unique tactical threat—other state and non-state actors are similarly capable. However:

- PMCs can operate across the conflict continuum and present the United States with dilemmas at all levels of war.
- Challenges Russian PMCs could pose in noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs) and peacekeeping operations (PKOs) deserve careful consideration.

Most Dangerous Scenario: The most dangerous scenario involving a Russian PMC is one where a U.S. Army brigade could encounter a state-supported, battalion tactical group (BTG)-like entity with advanced weapons, cutting-edge enabler technologies, and expertise:

- With a high level of Russian state support, a Russian PMC in Syria was able to function as a quasi-BTG; it conducted basic combined arms operations with infantry, armor, and artillery.
- With the aid of Russian support and forces, separatists in eastern Ukraine conducted combined arms operations and was highly proficient at enabling integration, particularly information operations (IO), electronic warfare (EW), and unmanned aerial systems (UAS).

Most Likely Scenarios: Russian state-supported PMC operations aimed at disrupting U.S. operations during *crisis response or limited contingency operations*. PMCs might execute the following:

- Occupy potential evacuation sites or other key terrain during a NEO.
- Ally with local actors in PKO to provide weapons and training to groups opposed to U.S. actions.
- Provide other forms of support, including intelligence and maintaining influence in a given area.

Other Potential Scenarios: Less severe scenarios exist where Russian PMCs could seek to compete with and undermine U.S. influence with local authorities and civilians.

Introduction

I believe that such companies are a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state... Yes, I think we could consider this option.¹

– President-elect Vladimir Putin, 2012

No private military companies exist in our country by law. Everyone is talking about some private military company, something called Wagner... [The President cannot] comment on what does not exist.²

– Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov, 2018

The increasingly assertive posture of the Russian Federation between 2007 and 2019 in Eastern Europe and beyond presented U.S. service members and maneuver commanders with unfamiliar challenges. After decades of training, equipping, and deploying to fight terrorism, the U.S. National Defense Strategy now presents “the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition... by revisionist powers*” as the leading challenge of the new strategic environment³ and such competition with China and Russia as “the principal priorities of the Department.”⁴ Russia’s revisionist strategy not only “aims to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners,”⁵ but also to erode and ultimately destroy the “*resilient, but weakening, post-WWII international order*.”⁶ In its place, Russia seeks to establish an international order in which it exercises “veto authority over nations on its periphery”⁷ across an exclusive sphere of influence, so that Moscow might reassert itself as a great power in the twenty-first century.⁸

One of the many instruments of power Russia leveraged to pursue this revisionist strategy has been increasing use of Russian private military companies (PMCs) in military operations and other areas of strategic competition and conflict. Since the invasion and prolonged conflict in Ukraine, and the Russian intervention on behalf of the Assad regime in Syria, the Russian PMC has been a fast growing subject of analysis and open-source reporting around Russian operations. There is significant study and a growing literature on questions around Russian PMCs: the motivations behind and nature of their use; their equipment, training, and personnel; their relationship and coordination with the Russian Federation or other adversaries; their vulnerabilities; their legal enablers or parameters; and whether or not their use affords Russia significant advantages. However, what remains unaddressed in the literature is *how these issues impact the work of U.S. Army maneuver commanders and service members*.

The goal of this analysis is to equip U.S. Army maneuver commanders and other service members pre-deployment with two things: First, a grounded understanding of Russian PMCs—what they are, how they tend to operate, how Russia has employed them—and second, clarity on how U.S. forces could encounter them across the continuum of conflict and range of military operations (ROMO).

One of the many reasons why Russia utilizes such groups is to undermine the ability of its adversaries to make clear and quick decisions through deception. In an interview with *The Inquiry* on BBC, Dr. Kimberly Martin—professor of Political Science at Columbia University—said Russian PMCs are:

an element in an information warfare campaign where... credible people can say ‘oh, it’s so confusing; it’s just a cloud; we can’t possibly make any determination about anything,’ and so we all just give up and go home... Putin’s goal is to try to confuse things and leave... his opponents, including the U.S. military, unsure about how to react to what’s going on because it’s just very unclear who is who.⁹

Clarity is important because U.S. Army maneuver commanders do not have the luxury of observing Russian PMCs from afar as a compelling subject of study. If such actors are present in their area of responsibility (AOR), they must be knowledgeable and ready to make quick and consequential decisions about how to proceed. While not prescriptive in terms of providing courses of action (COAs) for any given scenario, this analysis offers a grounded discussion of Russian PMCs in the context of U.S. doctrine and examines the operational implications Russian PMCs might present to a maneuver commander in their AOR.

The analysis presented here answers two questions: 1. How does Russia leverage Russian PMCs and 2. Does their use pose a unique threat to U.S. forces? To answer these questions, this analysis first explores the capabilities and operational impacts of Russian PMCs in contemporary areas of operation (AOs) (see the appendix) through a deep dive into how they were used, their equipment, training, personnel, coordination with the Russian Federation and other actors, vulnerabilities, and any legal enablers or parameters. Second, utilizing data in notional experiments—where Russian PMCs are encountered with varying degrees of both permissiveness of the environment and level of Russian state involvement—the analysis demonstrates how Russian PMCs could challenge the performance of U.S. Army brigade operations and whether any significant challenges emerge.

Definitional Note

The Russian Federation and its predecessors used a wide variety of privatized force to achieve national military or domestic security objectives, all of which inform the contemporary use of Russian PMCs. These include foreign mercenaries during the Tsarist era, Cossack associations, “volunteers,” and private security companies (PSCs),^a both at home and abroad. While this analysis exclusively concerns “Russian PMCs,” it recognizes that there is significant overlap between Russian PMCs and other forms of private forces used by the Russian Federation and will discuss these other elements as necessary to inform the discussion and analysis of Russian PMCs.

Defining Russian PMCs is an ongoing debate in the growing literature on these organizations. Russian law recognizes PSCs, which primarily perform domestic civilian security tasks, but not PMCs, which remain technically illegal in Russia. Although the law prohibiting Russian PMCs specifically concerns “mercenary activities,” simply referring to them as “mercenaries” is also less than ideal. International law provides a formal definition for mercenaries, and the role of nationalism in the motives of recruits and other factors around Russian PMCs complicates use of the label (see the section on Legal Enablers and Parameters). The debate is even further complicated by the already contested definitions of private military and security companies (PMSCs) writ large, and because Russian PMCs do not consistently fit within any of the existing categories, they operate in a markedly different manner than their Western counterparts.^b

Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) argued in 2018 that there is more clarity to be found in categorizing services “rather than the companies themselves.”¹⁰ Notably, this approach appears to reflect how such companies are discussed in Rus-

a PSCs are here considered to be those companies regulated under Russian law as such and participating in exclusively PSC-associated functions. There are some exceptions where groups formally recognized as PSCs participate in military services functions abroad or are involved in the formation and deployment of PMCs. For an example of this, see Early PMC Involvement – Moran’s ‘Slavonic Corps’ in the appendix, which describes the role of the Moran Security Group (a registered Russian PSC) in the creation and operation of Slavonic Corps—an ill-fated Russian PMC that briefly operated in Syria.

b For a thorough survey of the competing definitions from the wider literature on mercenaries and other forms of privatized force, and the complications in applying them to Russian PMCs, see Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, March 26, 2019, pp. 3-4. For a survey on how Russian PMCs significantly differ from Western PMCs, see Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, *Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies – the implications for European and Norwegian Security*, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, September 11, 2018, pp. 8-13.

sian sources. According to Russian expert Sergey Sukhankin, the Russian literature (leaning on observations of the West) distinguishes between four types of companies, defining each according to the services they typically provide:

Military provider companies... which offer their clients tactical support during military operations (including direct participation in hostilities);

Military consulting companies... which consult clients on questions related to strategic planning and the reform of military forces, directly help with training of military personnel, as well as provide guidance on working with new types of weaponry;

Military support companies... which provide auxiliary functions (including services in IT and military spheres);

Private security companies [PSCs]... which deal with crisis management, risk assessment, security consulting, de-mining, or training of local law enforcement.¹¹

Even then, the reality of these groups complicates clean definitions. Several companies defined as PSCs under Russian law have participated in PMC work, and Russian PMCs are not precluded from providing services typically associated with PSCs. Armed groups also exist that straddle the definition between Russian PMCs and nationalist militias in their functions and activities. For this reason, to avoid exclusion of relevant data, any definition of Russian PMCs will have to account for their informal nature.

For the purposes of this analysis, “Russian PMCs” refer to *companies operated by or composed primarily of Russian persons, the bulk of whose activities on behalf of clients (the Russian Federation, other governments, or private clients) consist of tactical support during military operations (including combat), the direct training of military personnel, and other military support services.*

Data Limitations, Gaps, and Scoping

Due to the nature of Russian PMCs as informal, deniable, and covert, as well as the fog of war and incomplete open-source coverage of their operations, available information on such organizations and their operations is limited, imperfect, and at times unreliable. It is important to caveat that some sources cited or quoted in the research informing this analysis may

confuse Russian PMCs with Russian PSCs or use the moniker “Wagner” (a specific organization) as shorthand for Russian PMCs more generally. While this is not an intelligence product, the research informing this analysis sought to ensure that information is presented transparently, completely, and with due consideration of uncertainty.

This report has been reviewed by the TRADOC G2 and is consistent with the Army’s Operational Environment assessments.

The scope of this analysis is the use of Russian PMCs by the Russian Federation to accomplish their strategic and operational goals and the scenarios in which Russian PMCs would matter or constitute a threat to U.S. and partner forces.

Russian PMCs: Their Origins and Use

I have some experience with these groups and specifically the Wagner Group from my time in Syria... I think they concern me greatly... They're a quasi-military and as we saw play out in Crimea and Ukraine, little green men running around, not necessarily following rules of behavior we would expect from proper armies. So I have a pretty significant concern for the use of these kinds of forces and the way that the Russians are using them on the continent... this is something I'll certainly be looking into in greater detail... they train right alongside Russian armed forces... It'll be an endeavor to try to figure out exactly what they're doing with them... They are using them to guard the head of state. They are using them to train some of the local armed forces. Some of that could be benign, some of that is probably less than benign.¹²

– Gen. Stephen J. Townsend

Any analysis of how Russian PMCs should be considered across the continuum of conflict and the ROMO must be informed by a clear picture of the role they play in Russian military operations and foreign policy. This section will first provide a brief background on the history of Russia's market for force and its use to achieve military objectives, leading up to the advent of Russian PMCs. Second, it will summarize the operational, strategic, and political uses of Russian PMCs. Third, it will review the varying quality and means of how Russian PMCs are equipped, trained, and staffed. Fourth, it will review how Russian PMCs coordinated and worked alongside elements of the Russian Federation and other actors. Fifth, it will summarize legal enablers and parameters on the operation and use of Russian PMCs. Finally, these assessments will inform a brief discussion of exposed Russian vulnerabilities through using Russian PMCs. Informing these assessments is in-depth research on recent cases of Russian PMC deployments, which can be found in the appendix.

Background and Origins

Private Security Companies

Russian PMCs emerged from a private market for force that existed in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the vast reduction in size of the post-Soviet Russian military after 1991, former soldiers found work with firms at home and abroad. PSCs were legitimized in 1992 to operate domestically when President Boris Yeltsin passed the Federal Law No 2487-I “On Private Detective and Security Activity in the Federation of Russia” and played an important role in protecting private businesses and individuals during the breakdown in the rule of law during the 1990s and early 2000s. As of this writing, PSCs, large and small, employ at least a million people in Russia.¹³

In spite of this legitimacy, the PSC market remained effectively ungoverned throughout the 1990s. As one analyst noted, “The market [for force] has been shaped by the lack of domestic regulation or state control in...Russia... [and the] privatization of security and law enforcement in the region was driven mostly by ad hoc initiatives and short-term political and other considerations.”¹⁴ The market for force in Russia was and remains characterized by its reliance on informal networks of military and intelligence contacts. While primarily focused at home, PSCs in different configurations acted as contractors abroad. Thousands of demobilized Soviet soldiers, primarily from newly independent Russian Federation and Ukraine, worked abroad as private contractors in Africa in the 1990s and 2000s, primarily in former Soviet client states, states under sanctions, and states with few relations with the West, including Angola, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan.¹⁵

Cossacks

Another set of non-state groups Russia used in PMC-like functions are the Cossack community and volunteer forces. Cossack paramilitary formations played an important role in Russian imperial expansion and consolidation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the Bolsheviks repressed the Cossack community through the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin adopted the “State Policy Concept regarding the Cossacks,” re-establishing the legal rights of the Cossack community. Because Cossacks had been repressed for over sixty years, the re-emerged

community was more heavily shaped and controlled by the state than its historic predecessors, known for their independence.¹⁶

President Putin introduced the law “On the State Service of the Russian Cossacks” in 2005. Since then, the primary role of Cossack formations has been the “patriotic and Orthodox education of young people” in Russia.¹⁷ However, their role as a domestic security auxiliary and paramilitary force also expanded. They engaged in everything from border security and firefighting to counterinsurgency operations in Chechnya. Excluding the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the Cossacks are primarily used outside of Russia for Russian soft-power influence, rather than in a PMC role, and almost exclusively in Slavic countries. Reorganized in 2014 to make them easier to control, the Cossacks participated in cultural and political events with Serbian nationalists in Republika Srpska, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro.¹⁸

Since the 2000s, the Cossacks also acted as auxiliaries for Russian military activity. The Cossacks participated in a 2004 special operation in the ethnically Georgian-settled Gali region of Abkhazia and then again in the Georgia-Russia war in 2008.¹⁹ During the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the volunteer forces of the Cossack National Guard of the Almighty Don Army, which formed specifically to support the Russian war against Ukraine in the Donbas, occupied several towns.²⁰

Volunteers

Volunteers are another type of non-state auxiliary force provider in Russia’s near abroad, referring to the former Soviet states bordering the country. The early-1990s disintegration of the USSR led to numerous ethnic and civil conflicts in the newly independent republics. Various forces (and sometimes forces on both sides) received direct or indirect support from the Russian military. In Russia’s near abroad, demobilized and still active duty Russian troops sometimes acted as mercenaries in emergent conflicts. For example, newly independent Armenia recruited recently demobilized Russian troops to drive tanks and engage in combat missions against Azerbaijan during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.²¹ Genuine volunteers, some for ideological and nationalist reasons, also traveled to and participated in local conflicts, such as Transnistria (Moldova) and Abkhazia (Georgia) in 1992 and 1993.

Along with individuals from other Orthodox countries, such as Greece, Ukraine, and Romania,²² hundreds of Russian volunteers participated in the conflict in Yugoslavia in support of the Serbian government of Slobodan Milosevic. Some arriving as early as September 1992, Russians were in at

least five different units of foreign volunteers, such as the “White Wolves.”²³ In 1999, Russian volunteers fought alongside the Milosevic government in Kosovo, participating in battles just weeks prior to the arrival of an official Russian military contingent for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Kosovo Force.²⁴ The volunteer trend continued during the conflict in eastern Ukraine. At least 3,000 Russian volunteers fought alongside separatist forces, playing an important role in providing manpower during an early phase of the conflict against the Ukrainian military.²⁵

While some see volunteers as a result of “Russia’s aim... to restore its influence throughout the region, on all sides, in every conflict,”²⁶ others noted it is difficult to discern “who is participating in the conflict because of genuine zeal and who is there on secret orders.”²⁷ However, as noted by Mark Galeotti, “These mercenaries, nationalists and adventurers are often of questionable military value but considerable enthusiasm, and also useful political-propaganda tools, demonstrating alleged popular support.”²⁸

Volunteers in Ukraine were not remunerated for their participation in the conflict, even if they were left with life-long grievous injuries. This is possibly for legal reasons, protecting them from Russia’s strict law on mercenaries. As one scholar noted, “If a person’s intent [when participating in a foreign conflict] to receive remuneration is absent, such actions are not criminal” under Russia’s mercenary laws.²⁹

Emergence of Russian PMCs

As Russian political stability improved, the private security sector became “less freewheeling and more regulated” throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s.³⁰ During this time, PSCs were legalized for use abroad and utilized to protect Russian state-owned infrastructure, perform anti-piracy missions, perform demining missions, and provide security services in Iraq.³¹

As Russian companies styled themselves after American and other Western contractors, it became a larger topic of discussion in Russian military circles, wary of ceding control over the use of force. The majority of discussion around PMCs in Russian military analysis communities focused on three aspects: 1) the threat posed to Russia by American PMCs and their alleged involvement in “color revolutions” in Syria, Libya, and Russia’s near abroad; 2) the money to be made if Russia was more competitive in the market; and 3) the use of PMCs as a means of furthering Russian national interests.

In 2012, a retired Russian military intelligence officer, Aleksandr Kanchukov, noted:

The main advantages of the PMCs appear to be their operational skill, responsibility, effectiveness, professionalism and undeniable financial advantage. PMCs are an alternative [for former soldiers] to the state and to crime; guarantees insurance in zones of instability; quick resolutions to problems; and effective administration of risks. It is far more profitable to sign a contract with a private company for a concrete task than to send the security company affiliated with a giant oil or gas company, or send troops and maintain a garrison. On the other hand, 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.³²

These views were later reiterated at higher levels. In 2012, member of parliament (MP) Aleksei Mitrofanov asked President Putin if he would support the creation and legalization of such companies: “Americans pay nearly 350 billion USD for these services. PMCs which protect foreign property and train foreign personnel, guard infrastructure, provide a huge quantity of services in Iraq and other countries. Doesn’t it seem to you that we should also be represented in this business?”³³ Putin replied, saying “I consider that [PMCs] certainly appear to be an instrument of realizations of national interests without direct participation of the state. We should think about and examine this topic.”³⁴ Russian PSCs profited greatly from security activities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. Nevertheless, despite Russian PMC proliferation, legalization efforts stalled despite numerous legislative attempts (see the section on Legal Enablers and Parameters).

Contemporary Russian PMCs

As of the completion of this report, there are a number of well-established Russian PSCs and PMCs operating abroad. Some PSCs continue to fulfill normal functions such as demining, close protection, and anti-piracy services. When working abroad, the host country usually contracts with them directly to provide services.³⁵ Conversely, Russian PMCs are playing a more direct goal in Russian geopolitical activity and the Russian state is the primary purchaser of their services.

Since approximately 2013, Russian PMCs focused on furthering Russian national interests and carrying out high-risk missions that, if performed by regular troops, could be politically unpopular. These include groups like the Moran Security Group and Wagner. These groups are involved more directly in combat operations in coordination and often with the support of the Russian military. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) itself even operates a company now, known as Patriot, which is reportedly mostly involved in close personal protection of very important persons.³⁶ According to a source in the Russian MoD speaking to the press, an unnamed Russian PMC protects the construction of a Russian military base in Burundi in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Federal Security Service (FSB).³⁷

Despite the lack of domestic legalization, Russian PMCs will continue to be used as tools of Russian foreign policy. Russian PMCs will be operating in widely dispersed AOs where low-cost options are needed, and U.S. forces are likely to encounter them in contested environments.

Uses

Russian PMCs are leveraged by the Russian Federation, its allies, and financial interests to perform a wide variety of functions—most notably offensive combat missions—to achieve objectives as a force multiplier while minimizing both political and military costs. As observed in Syria, the political costs inherent in the deployment of regular volunteer troops to missions and wars abroad are comparatively avoided in the use of PMCs. Likewise, the use of Russian PMCs in the most dangerous roles and missions on the battlefield minimize official military casualty numbers.³⁸ Allowing the Russian MoD to publish low official casualty counts and prevent headlines about service deaths appears to insulate the Kremlin politically,³⁹ (e.g., popular Russian enthusiasm for official, “boots on the ground” support to the Assad regime in Syria was at only 19% as early as October 2015).⁴⁰

Table 1. The Uses of Russian PMCs

Overall: Achieve objectives for the Russian Federation, its allies, and financial interests as a force multiplier while minimizing both political and military costs		
Strategic:	In Combat:	Outside of Combat: <i>Includes uses typical of PSCs</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political Insulation • Regime Stability/Protection • Deterrence • Control Grey Zones • Zones of Artificial Stability • Keep Russia Involved in Conflict w/Low Commitment • Deception 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infantry (incl. Mechanized) • Forward Advisers • Sappers • Coord. Fire and Movement • Forward Air Controllers • Reconnaissance in Force • Mine Clearance • Armored Troops • Artillery Units • Information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Security Advisers • Armed Security • Transport Convoys • Training (of military, law enf.) • Personal Protection • <i>Targeted Assassination*</i> • <i>Kidnapping*</i> • <i>Sabotage*</i> • <i>Subversion*</i> • <i>Blackmail*</i>

* Specific to Ukraine; more difficult to verify.

Strategically, Russian PMCs have and can serve several purposes for the Russian Federation. They can be utilized as an instrument to stabilize friendly regimes seen as under threat of collapse or ouster. This purpose is apparent in their deployments (see the appendix: Syria, Sudan, and Venezuela), as well as in the public comments of Russian lawmakers.⁴¹ In 2014, Duma deputy Gennady Nosovko argued for legalizing Russian PMCs by referring to recent events in Ukraine, saying “there would not have been this present situation in Ukraine if there in Russia had been relevant PMSCs for hire at the time of the crisis for the Yanukovich government.”⁴² Deterrence of adversary intervention is another strategic use (see on the appendix: Venezuela). Russian PMCs can also be used as a means of deception, including as a potential cover for Russian special forces.⁴³ Typically used in the earlier, non-kinetic stages of low-intensity conflict,⁴⁴ Russian PMCs played early roles in protecting significant state-owned enterprises abroad (Gazprom, Rosatom, Rosneft, Russian Railways).⁴⁵

Overall, while it did not pass, legislation proposed to legalize Russian PMCs (see the section on Legal Enablers and Parameters) contained a list

of services the groups would have been authorized to provide under the law. According to Interfax, the list included:

participation in peacekeeping operations, personnel training, military consulting, maintenance and service of military hardware and weaponry, the delivery of military equipment, demining, military construction, military translation, the protection of a foreign country's territory... the restoration of constitutional order on its territory... [and] security guard services of various types.⁴⁶

The uses described in the proposed legislation reflect the conclusions of U.S. Department of State (DOS) senior Russian political analyst Nathaniel Reynolds, who argues that Moscow could use Russian PMCs like Wagner “to launch a limited-objective incursion into a neighboring country, to train proxy forces to destabilize a pro-Western government, or to hide a secret Russian military presence.”⁴⁷

In combat situations, Russian PMCs are used for offensive operations. While uncommon for Western military contractors, most of the Russian military literature around Russian PMCs views their use in offensive military operations as a typical and assumed function.⁴⁸ In both Ukraine and Syria, forward offensive use of Russian PMCs was in an embedded context with non-Russian forces (separatist militias, Syrian troops, Iran-backed militias), although this did not preclude an official Russian MoD presence or role with the unit. Known—though not consistent—Russian PMC roles in offensive combat operations include infantry, mechanized infantry, forward advisers, sappers,⁴⁹ coordination of fire and movement, forward air controllers, reconnaissance in force, mine clearance, armored troops, and artillery units (see the appendix: Syria, Ukraine, and Libya). Russian PMCs playing any or all of these roles alongside Russia-allied forces can also serve a propaganda function to bolster the perceived strength and efficacy of forces friendly to Russia. Another information role of Russian PMCs is the potential obfuscation of Russian Federation efforts and forces behind what first appear to be private business interests and companies. Russian authors also noted how this obfuscation is seen as beneficial for both Russia and the United States—Russia can deny actions, and the United States can choose to ignore and move on without losing face.⁵⁰

Outside of combat operations, Russian PMC uses can include many services typically associated with PSCs, like security advisers, armed security for various infrastructure, construction security, transport convoys, training of military and law enforcement personnel, personal protection, anti-piracy ship protection, hostage rescue, and cargo retrieval. Russian PMCs

also appear to be deployed in conjunction with international arms sales to train partner armed forces in the use of Russian-made equipment (see the appendix: Sudan and Central African Republic). There is also evidence to suggest that Russian PMCs are at times leveraged for use in subversive activities, including targeted assassinations (see the appendix: Ukraine), as well as “sabotage, blackmail, subversive activities, terrorism, kidnapping” and others.⁵¹

Finally, an unusual role played by some Russian PMCs or related groups has been their use in IO. This includes the promotion of Russian nationalism at home and in the “near abroad” through paramilitary youth camps and other activities. While typically carried out by front political organizations in partnership with local nationalist groups, a 2018 case in the Balkans highlighted the role of pseudo-Russian PMC organizations in the practice, which provoked bans on contact with such groups by the Latvian government.⁵² While the group in this case (E.N.O.T. Corp) appears to straddle the categories of political paramilitary group and Russian PMC,⁵³ the participation of Russian PMCs in the promotion of nationalism through youth programs is not new. As far back as 2006, the early Russian PMC Anti-terror-Orel (founded in 2003) included “military patriotic upbringing and training of the young people for the service in the armed forces” in the list of services offered by the group.⁵⁴ The Russian PMC role in IO also included personnel associated with Wagner leading tactical training courses for civilians in western Europe. Open-source reporting released by Ukrainian security services shows Wagner personnel providing such courses in Hungary, Italy, Germany, and Greece in 2018 through the Volk (Wolf) International Special Training Center. It is unclear if this work was conducted on a freelance basis or through coordination with Wagner or the Russian government.⁵⁵

Equipment, Training, and Personnel

Russian PMCs operating abroad have been inconsistently equipped. While some patterns are discernible, planners cannot consider Russian PMCs as a set unit of materiel and capability and should instead consider them on a case-by-case basis. When participating in Russian MoD-supported offensive operations in highly permissive environments, Russian PMCs were well equipped. However, the quality of equipment provided to Russian PMCs appears to be tied to the identity of the actor or actors that are their patrons at any given time (see the appendix: Syria). When the Slavonic Corps flew to Syria in 2013 to operate at the behest of local Syrian sponsors, their kit was outdated, dysfunctional, and ad hoc. In fall 2015, when the Russian Federation directly intervened in the Syrian Civil War to support the Assad regime, Russian PMC Wagner received both high qualities and quantities of

light arms, ammunition, heavy weapons, and armor. Wagner operatives in Syria were also photographed in close proximity to Russian MoD helicopters and airplanes,⁵⁶ though there is no indication that they were equipped with air capabilities. However, despite continued Russian MoD involvement in Syria, when Wagner sponsorship and C2 in the region appeared to shift from the Russian MoD to Syrian clientele, the quality equipment provided to the Russian PMC experienced a marked decline. In Nigeria, contractors from the former Soviet Union hired to perform offensive operations against Boko Haram were described by a diplomat observer as “an incoherent mix of people, helicopters and random kit from all sorts of different sources.”⁵⁷ In CAR, there are indications that Russian PMCs in the country may have been armed using weapons donated by the Russian Federation to the government of CAR in cooperation with the United Nations (UN) Security Council (see the appendix: Central African Republic).

Recruits into Russian PMCs tend to be male Russian citizens from across the country with a military or security background, but they also recruit from among fighters participating in ongoing conflicts in their “near abroad” (e.g., separatist militias in Donetsk, Ukraine).⁵⁸ Accounts told by recruits to the press describe the use of both active reserve and former intelligence officers as recruiters. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) publicly reports that Wagner membership also includes people from Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Serbia, and elsewhere.⁵⁹ Another Russian PMC called Redut-Antiterror allegedly specializes in recruiting former soldiers and ex-officers of both the GRU and the FSB special unit Vypmel.⁶⁰ At times, Russian PMCs impose high recruitment standards—when preparing to deploy to Syria, Wagner required potential hires to have combat experience, pass physical fitness tests, demonstrate weapons handling skills, and pass other hurdles according to press reports. However, this is not universal. When recruitment efforts are expanded, at least some Russian PMCs (including Wagner) appear willing to widen their recruitment pool by lowering requirements, meaning the military experience of Russian PMC members is wide and inconsistent.⁶¹

Training of Russian PMC recruits before or during deployment does not appear to be consistent. Wagner appears to benefit from either support from or cooperation with the GRU, including the use of training grounds on or adjacent to the home base for the GRU’s 10th Special Mission Brigade in Molkino, Russia—presumably an advantage over other Russian PMCs.⁶² One way this training was demonstrated was in the organization of Wagner during their operations in Syria, for the most part mirroring a battalion battlegroup.⁶³ Wagner’s command structure has been described by analysts and the Ukrainian SBU as a commander-in-chief and managing director at

the top, followed by a mid-level command consisting of an administrative group, general staff, and control group. Coordination of military aspects of the group are allegedly managed by Wagner's Department of Military Preparation, which is then composed of several functional subunits (tank and vehicle crews, tactical training, firearm training, engineer training, artillery, and anti-air defense).⁶⁴

Coordination with the Russian Federation and Others

Russian PMCs appear to often operate in close coordination with elements of Russian intelligence and the military. In Syria, Wagner is described by sources speaking to the press as coordinated, tasked, and supervised by the FSB, GRU, and allegedly at times even officers from the General Staff's Chief Administration.⁶⁵ Russian state-owned press outlets also reported that Wagner was under GRU supervision,⁶⁶ and Wagner commanders who operated in Syria described their units in combat operations as accompanied by "an officer of the Russian military command," who would coordinate air cover during the operation.⁶⁷ However, operations in Syria in 2017 and 2018 suggest the Russian MoD may not have maintained C2 over Wagner forces in the country, but rather transitioned control to the Assad regime (see the appendix: Syria).

Evidence tying Wagner to the Russian MoD and even GRU has also been presented in the form of openly published intelligence on the C2 relationship and support provided to the Russian PMC. These include a phone call between the head of Wagner and a GRU staff officer (see the appendix: Ukraine), passports issued to Wagner personnel from what appears to be the desk used for GRU officers (see the appendix: Central African Republic), the use of allegedly GRU-exclusive materiel, transportation to AOs on Russian flagged naval cruisers, and the presentation of military honors to Wagner personnel (see the appendix: Syria). Russian expert Alexander Khranchikhin went so far as to describe Wagner as a "pseudo-private" military company that takes direction from the Russian army.⁶⁸ Russian academic and military writing on the subject discuss Russian PMCs as entities essentially owned by, and used in service to, the Russian state and its interests.⁶⁹

Russian PMCs also coordinated with a host of other actors in their operations abroad. When supporting a host government, Russian PMCs will typically have a close working relationship with the host nation's regular military. As observed in Syria, Wagner jointly participated in combat operations alongside state forces, or even within state units. According to public

reporting, the relationship between the Assad government and Wagner included at times near exclusive funding of the PMC, as well as C2. Outside of active war zones, Russian PMCs will also participate in regular joint non-combat operations with friendly host forces—as observed in CAR—including training, patrols, checkpoints, transportation of materials, security, and stability deployments.

Militias and other armed non-state groups also enjoyed close cooperation and coordinated operations with Russian PMCs, particularly in offensive operations in Ukraine and Syria. Wagner forces played an active offensive role in coordination with separatist militias against Ukrainian troops in the 2015 Battle of Debaltseve, resulting in a separatist victory (see the appendix: Ukraine). Likewise in Syria, Wagner participated in hostilities alongside numerous other groups, including (but not necessarily limited to) the Afghan Shia Liwa al-Fatimiyou, Iraqi Shia militias, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Liwa al-Baqir (see the appendix: Syria).

Beyond state cooperation, Russian PMCs also take on private contracts and investors in pursuit of economic interests, according to press reports. These include private firms with equity in the securing of oil facilities in Syria, gold and mining interests in CAR, and others. In several theaters, Russian PMCs reportedly take on a mix of state-sponsored and privately sponsored tasks. Finally, Russian analysts also speculated that Russian PMCs could enter partnerships with other PMCs abroad. Russian military analyst Vladimir Neyelov specifically mentions Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection International (STTEP)—a South African PMC as potential future partners for Russian PMCs.⁷⁰

Legal Enablers and Parameters

Unlike Russian PSCs that are registered and regulated by the Russian Federation, Russian PMCs are formally outlawed under Article 359 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation as mercenary activities, carrying a prison sentence of 3 to 7 years.^{c 71} As of this writing, legislative efforts to legalize PMCs in Russia have all failed to pass. However, similar to earlier laws around Russian PSCs,⁷² debates around legalization in Russia concern internal political power struggles more than any operational restrictions.

c Identified into Article 359 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, mercenary activities are defined as “((a) recruitment, training, financing or any other material provision of a mercenary, and also the use of a mercenary in an armed conflict or hostilities; (b) the same acts, committed by a person through his official position or with relation to a minor; (c) participation by a mercenary in an armed conflict or hostilities” (Signe Zaharova, 2012, pp. 475-476; Criminal Code of the Russian Federation).

In fact, rather than restricting the use of Russian PMCs, the illicit status of such groups appears to serve as an enabler, allowing the state to maintain control over the creation and proliferation of Russian PMCs, as well as individual members after they return to Russia.

The first effort to legalize Russian PMCs began in response to comments made by then president-elect Vladimir Putin and then Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin in 2012, both appearing to support the proposition. In response to a question by a Duma deputy on whether PMCs might be utilized as instruments of influence abroad, Putin said “I believe that such companies are a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state... Yes, I think we could consider this option.”⁷³ Likewise, Rogozin (who oversaw the Russian defense industry at the time) was quoted saying “We will study the usefulness of creating such companies in Russia, and we’ll make a step in that direction.”⁷⁴

Draft proposals failed to proceed past the defense committee in both November and December 2014. The committee described the measure as “inarticulate,” “useless,” and “irrelevant,” and both the MoD and FSB expressed concerns that such a measure could eventually see “tens of thousands of uncontrollable Rambos turning their weapons against the government.”⁷⁵ On the other hand, Ivan Konovalov (director of a Russian think-tank and consultant to pro-legalization lawmakers) described the issue as “a question of honor; Russians hate the concept of a mercenary because if you pick up a weapon you do it to defend the motherland,” and that “The idea of doing it for money lies counter to everything we’re taught.”⁷⁶

Spurred by the release of a video online by ISIS of two members of a Russian PMC they captured in Syria, another legislative effort to legalize Russian PMCs and provide them greater protections was proposed in early 2018. The effort was introduced in January 2018 by two opposition MPs: Sergei Mironov and Mikhail Yemelyanov.⁷⁷ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed support for the effort.⁷⁸ Speaking of the incident, Lavrov appeared to bless legalization, saying “a solid law base should be created to protect these people within a legal framework.”⁷⁹ The measure even appeared to gain support from leadership in Putin’s own United Russia party, as well as several Senate committee heads, and was expected to pass by a source in the MoD who spoke to the Russian press at the time.⁸⁰ The proposed legislation provided for Russian PMCs to be registered and licensed under the MoD restricted incumbent public servants from leading PMCs and laid out formal definitions and guidance for how their business would be conducted, including allowances for opening branches and subsidiaries abroad.⁸¹

Nevertheless, despite progressing past committee, the legalization effort failed when it was presented to the government for review—this time earning rejections from not just the MoD and FSB, but also the foreign, justice, and finance ministries, National Guard, Federal Protective Service, Foreign Intelligence, and Prosecutor General’s Office—saying the provision was not supported and would violate the Russian Constitution.⁸² Senator Franz Klintsevich, Deputy Head of the Defense and Security Committee and proponent of legalizing Russian PMCs, described the impasse, saying “we have been unable to pass the necessary laws because of a conflict between the Defense Ministry and the Federal Security Service over who would control such military groups. They have heavy serious weapons... so there is a security issue with their regulation.”⁸³

Close observers of Russian PMCs and both efforts to legalize them later noted that the status quo was actually more beneficial for both the government and groups like Wagner. A new law would likely see both the number and activities of Russian PMCs grow well outside the state’s control, as well as limit their utility in subversive operations (see the section on Uses and the appendix: Ukraine).⁸⁴ Additionally, as seen in the cases of the Slavonic Corps and E.N.O.T. Corp. (see the appendix: Syria), maintaining the illegality of Russian PMCs provides a means to control such groups and their members under the constant threat of arrest and imprisonment. Since the failed 2018 effort, Russian lawmakers referenced continued activity on the question, including third-party legislation drafting and policy roundtables but describe any formal discussions of PMC legalization too early.⁸⁵ There has also been discussion of leveraging the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as an alternative legal foundation for Russian PMCs.⁸⁶ Despite these policy discussions happening in parallel, the Kremlin continued to deny the existence of Russian PMCs.⁸⁷

Another recent domestic legal change related to PMCs occurred in September 2018, when President Putin signed an order on changes to the law on state secrets. The order classified information about individuals who cooperate with Russian foreign intelligence services, but are not members of those structures, as state secrets. One former security services member told the Russian newspaper Vedomosti that this move was most likely to protect Wagner or other PMCs who cooperate with Russian military intelligence because foreigners or other recruited agents are already covered under current state secrecy laws.⁸⁸ This new law will likely reduce the amount of publicly available information on Russian PMCs after years of Russian investigative journalism, and at least one Russian researcher on PMCs, Vladimir Neelov, has been arrested under this new statute.⁸⁹

International Law and Russian PMCs

International humanitarian law (IHL) covers private military companies and their employees and staffs; it is not a new or novel case to which the law has not been applied. However, how IHL will cover a particular PMC is context dependent. The status of PMCs under IHL will vary case by case, depending on their activities and level of incorporation into the parties of the conflict. The primary question is whether PMC staff are combatants or civilians. If the PMC staff are incorporated into the armed forces of one of the parties, then they are combatants. To be considered integrated in that way requires that they be commanded by a person responsible for subordinates, have a fixed distinctive emblem recognizable at a distance, carry arms openly, and conduct their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.⁹⁰ If the PMC is accompanying the armed forces of a party and providing logistical and welfare support Article 4(4) of the Third Geneva Convention would provide that they should be prisoners of war if they are captured by the enemy. If the PMC staff are not part of one of the parties, then they remain civilians and cannot be targeted or engaged. This protection will be removed, however, if the PMC staff engage in the direct participation in hostilities.⁹¹ In that case, PMC staff are targetable during that participation, and if captured they can be tried for that participation.⁹² Examples of direct participation of hostilities that PMCs commonly perform include, guarding military bases from attacks, gathering tactical military intelligence, and operating weapons during combat.⁹³

A common question regarding PMCs is whether they are simply mercenaries. International law has a specific and onerous definition of mercenaries in Article 47(2) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions. It contains six elements: (1) specially recruited locally or abroad to fight in an armed conflict; (2) takes part in the hostilities; (3) is motivated by the desire for private gain and its promised material compensation by or on behalf of a party to the conflict substantially in excess of that promised or paid to the armed forces of that party; (4) is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict; (5) is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict; and (6) has not been sent by a state which is not a party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces. All six elements of the definition must be satisfied to meet the definition. Accordingly, this provision only appears to apply in rare cases. Additional Protocol I Article 47(1) also provides that mercenaries do not receive combatant or prisoner of war status, and this has become a customary rule of international law, meaning it applies to everyone regardless of whether they signed Additional Protocol I. Mercenaries have a right to a fair trial if captured and are also targetable.⁹⁴

In regard to international law, PMCs do not stress or challenge the rules of engagement, and military legal advisors will have the answers for service members about whether and when PMCs can be targeted or engaged.

Analytical Model

The previous section summarized the deep-dive research of Russian PMCs. This section introduces an analytical model in which to examine the relevance of Russian PMCs to U.S. Army maneuver commanders and staffs, mainly at the brigade level and below.

Limitations: The model used here must contend with several principle limitations. First, there has been little interaction between Russian PMCs and the U.S. military—too little to establish broad historical trends. Second, the pronounced use of Russian PMCs is a recent development. These entities existed long enough to attract the attention of the U.S. defense establishment but are sufficiently new that some key questions remain unanswered. This relates directly to the third limitation—data. Available open-source information is scant, and much of it is of questionable veracity. Finally, Russian PMCs lack uniformity. There is variation in terms of missions/activities, organization, leadership, etc.

Model: To provide a practical model for engagement, the authors created a three-step model to study PMC operations in various operational environments:

Step One - Describe the Type of Operation: The model contains four thought experiments, each of which samples a type of operation from across the conflict continuum. Although the model does not examine every type of operation in which a U.S. brigade might encounter a Russian PMC, the sampling spans the entire spectrum from cooperation to competition to conflict and addresses each category within the ROMO.

Step Two - Evaluate Using Matrix: Using the deep-dive research from the previous section and the appendix, as well as doctrinal publications, the model evaluates potential PMC operations to account for variations in (1) the permissiveness of the OE and (2) levels of Russian state support.

Step Three - Identify Insights: Each experiment produces insights that, in aggregate, inform this study's conclusions. In addition, each experiment contains a most dangerous scenario, which is the product of two factors. The first is a PMC operating at peak performance based on known capabilities and limitations. The second is an OE most challenging to U.S. forces. Taken together, these two inputs comprise a most dangerous scenario.

The experiments, however, do not contain most likely scenarios. Due to the extreme variation in potential missions, locations, time, and other factors, there is no way to determine which would be most likely. For instance, the U.S. occasionally conducts Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEOs) to rescue Americans from crises in foreign countries. Such operations are irregular and usually arise with little warning—each NEO is very different depending on local factors. As such, there is no sound method to identify a most likely scenario. The same is true for the other three operation types used in these experiments.

The remainder of this section explains this model’s components in greater detail and concludes with an abbreviated example of how the model works.

The Conflict Continuum and ROMO

Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, “Joint Operations,” states that the U.S. military must be “able to respond to a wide variety of challenges along a **conflict continuum** that spans from peace to war.”⁹⁵ Spanning this continuum is the ROMO—a fundamental construct that helps relate military activities situationally and operations in scope and purpose.⁹⁶ It consists of three categories:

- Military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence;
- Crisis response and limited contingency operations; and
- Large-scale combat operations.⁹⁷

The conflict continuum, depicted in Figure 1,⁹⁸ illustrates the relationship between the continuum and ROMO. A great deal of military activity occurs for the purpose of bolstering allies (cooperation) and deterring potential adversaries (competition). Operation Atlantic Resolve, for example, is one such operation. U.S. forces deploy and train with NATO allies in seven Central and Eastern European nations. This mission is intended both to reassure U.S. allies and to deter Russian aggression.⁹⁹ In the midrange of the continuum are crises and limited contingencies “that require military operations in response to natural disasters, terrorists, subversives, or other contingencies and crises as directed by appropriate authority. The level of complexity, duration, and resources depends on the circumstances.”¹⁰⁰ Finally, there are large-scale combat operations. These are complex and typically consist of multiple campaigns, each of which a “series of related major operations aimed at achieving strategic and objectives within a given time and space.”¹⁰¹

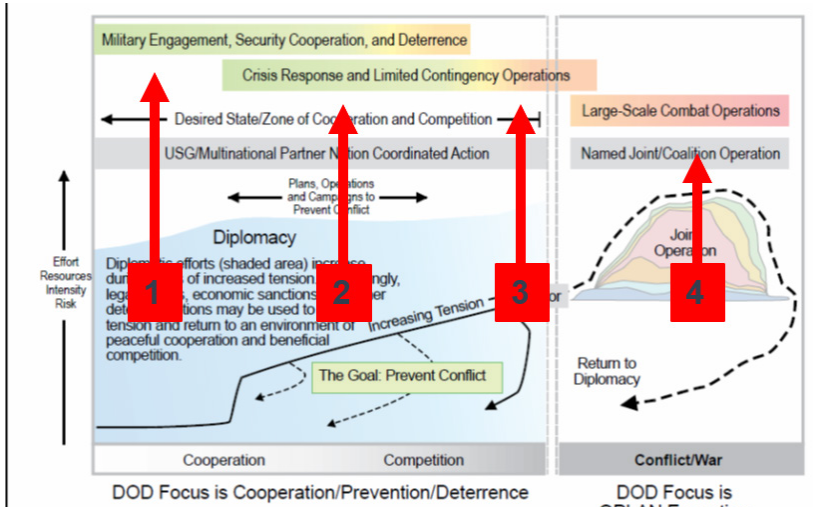


Figure 1. The Conflict Continuum

Four Thought Experiments

The red arrows and numbering in Figure 1 identify the types of operations used as experiments in this model (explained in greater detail later). The first step of each experiment is a brief review of doctrine for the corresponding type of operation, focusing on common tasks and other criteria for each operation.

1. **Security Force Assistance (SFA):** SFA is a set of Department of Defense (DoD) security cooperation activities that contribute to unified action by the U.S. government to support the development of the capacity and capabilities of foreign security forces (FSF) and their supporting institutions, whether of a partner nation (PN) or an international organization (e.g., regional security organization), in support of U.S. objectives.¹⁰²
2. **Noncombatant Evacuation Operation (NEO):** NEOs are operations directed by the DOS or other appropriate authority, in conjunction with the DoD, whereby noncombatants are evacuated from locations within foreign countries to safe havens designated by the DOS when their lives are endangered by war, civil unrest, or natural disaster.¹⁰³
3. **Peacekeeping Operations (PKO):** “PKOs consist of military support to diplomatic, informational, and economic efforts to establish or maintain peace in areas of potential or actual conflict.”¹⁰⁴ JP 3-0 further elaborates that “They are multi-agency and multi-national

operations involving all instruments of national power—including international humanitarian and reconstruction efforts and military missions—to contain conflict, restore peace, and shape the environment to support reconciliation and rebuilding and facilitate the transition to legitimate governance. For the Armed Forces of the United States, [Peace Operations] encompass PKO, predominantly military [Peace Enforcement Operations], predominantly diplomatic [Peace Building] actions, [Peacemaking] processes, and conflict prevention.”¹⁰⁵

4. **Large-Scale Combat Operations:** These are complex, joint operations typically consisting of multiple campaigns. This study makes use of the notional phasing concept, which allows commanders and staffs to “visualize, plan, and execute the entire operation and define requirements in terms of forces, resources, time, space, and purpose.”¹⁰⁶ JP 3-0 continues, saying “Actual phases of an operation will vary (e.g., compressed, expanded, or omitted entirely) according to the nature of the operation and the [Joint Force Commander’s] decisions. Phases may be conducted or happen sequentially, but some activities from a phase may begin in a previous phase and continue into subsequent phases.”¹⁰⁷

Permissiveness/State Involvement Matrix

The second step of each experiment was to evaluate potential operations using a matrix specially designed for this model (see Figure 2). This matrix allows each experiment to account for two key variables:

- **Permissiveness of OE:** A U.S. brigade might conduct these four types of operations in many OEs, ranging from hostile to permissive. *Of note, permissiveness refers to the U.S. brigade, not that of the PMC or any other actor.*
- **Russian State Involvement:** The quality and resourcing of PMC operations varies depending mostly on degrees of Russian state support.

The y-axis measures permissiveness of the environment (i.e., how freely a U.S. brigade could operate in a given OE). For example, NATO allies would be very high on this scale because these countries have strong rule of law and cooperative security forces. Syria, on the other hand, would represent low permissiveness.

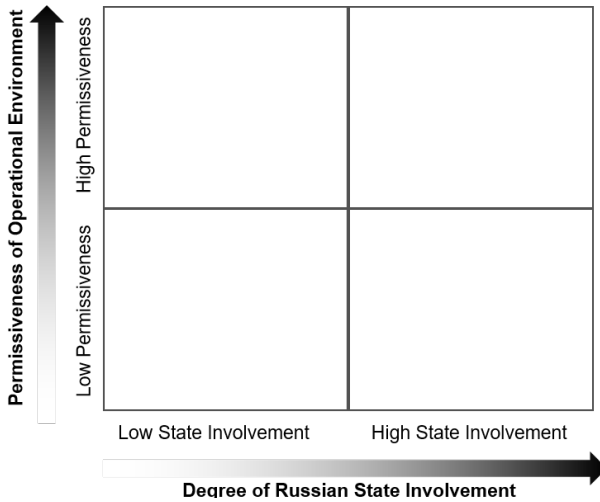


Figure 2. Sample Permissiveness/State Involvement Matrix

The African nation, Mali, might represent some middle tier of permissiveness. Definitions of permissiveness are derived from JP 3-0 *and are from the U.S. perspective*:

- **Permissive environment:** OE in which host-nation military and law enforcement agencies have control, as well as the intent and capability to assist U.S. operations that a unit intends to conduct.
- **Uncertain environment:** OE in which host government forces, whether opposed to or receptive to U.S. operations that a unit intends to conduct, do not have totally effective control of the territory and population in the intended operational area.
- **Hostile environment:** OE in which host government forces, whether opposed to or receptive to U.S. operations that a unit intends to conduct, do not have control of the territory and population in the intended operational area.¹⁰⁸

The x-axis measures degrees of Russian state involvement in PMC operations. Definitions include:

- **Low:** Little/no Russian state support for PMC operations. PMC members receive the same basic consular support Russia provides all citizens. Alternatively, the Russian government opposes PMC activity outright (i.e., participants face arrest upon return to the country).

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- **Medium:** PMC pursues goals generally consistent with those of the Russian regime. It receives intermittent support from the state but cannot rely solely on the state for sustainment.
- **High:** PMC operates as a *de facto* Russian state element, regardless of official proclamations. It possibly co-locates with official forces and receives both sustainment and direction from the regime.

The second step of each experiment concluded with a completed matrix containing four permutations for each type of operation: low permissiveness/low state involvement (LP/LSI); high permissiveness/low state involvement (HP/LSI); low permissiveness/high state involvement (LP/HSI); and high permissiveness/high state involvement (HP/HSI). The last step of the experiment was to derive characterizations of PMC operations using the matrices and the deep-dive findings. These insights focus on matters relevant to a U.S. Army brigade but also include items pertinent to higher echelons. Figure 3 illustrates the model's process.

Abbreviated Example of Method

(Using Peacekeeping Operations)

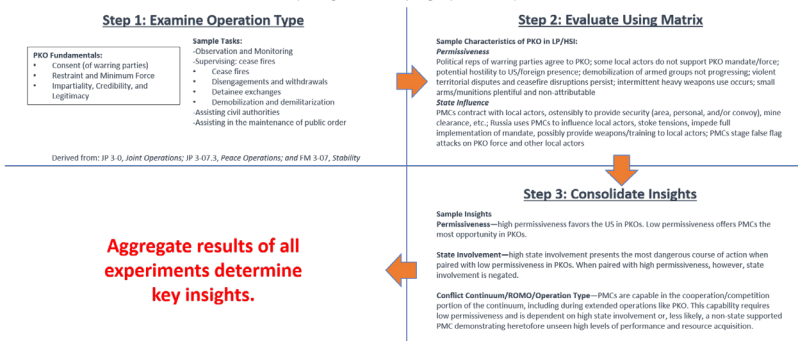


Figure 3. Abbreviated Example of Model

Experiment 1: Security Force Assistance

Step One: Describe Type of Operation

Many day-to-day SFA activities occur at the lowest echelons in FSF garrisons and training areas around the globe. Nonetheless, SFA has implications at all levels of operations and support broader national goals that Russia would likely seek to contest, possibly with PMCs. According to joint doctrine:

- “Military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence **help assure operational access for crisis response and contingency operations despite changing US overseas defense posture and the growth of A2/AD capabilities around the globe.** The more a [geographic combatant command, or] GCC can promote favorable access conditions in advance across the AOR and in potential OAs, the better.”¹⁰⁹
- “**Security cooperation is a key element of global and theater shaping activities and critical aspect of communication synchronization.** GCCs shape their AORs through security cooperation and stability activities by continually employing military forces to complement and support other instruments of national power that typically provide development assistance or humanitarian assistance to PNs... Ideally, **security cooperation activities mitigate the causes of a potential crisis before a situation deteriorates and requires US military intervention. Security assistance and security force assistance (SFA) normally provide some of the means for security cooperation activities.**”¹¹⁰
- “SFA is DOD’s contribution to unified action by the USG to support the development of the capacity and capability of foreign security forces (FSF) and their supporting institutions, to achieve objectives shared by the USG. **SFA is conducted with and through FSF.**”¹¹¹

Security cooperation, including SFA, can occur elsewhere across the conflict continuum.¹¹² For example, “advising in a hostile environment and other activities geared toward assisting a partner nation engaged in conflict—are performed...using resources and authorities specially provided to DOD for employment in support of combat operations.”¹¹³ However, this

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experiment intends to measure the left side of the conflict continuum—cooperation and competition. As such, it focuses on SFA that does not take place during limited contingencies, crises responses, or major operations.

Field Manual (FM) 3-22 specifies goals and tasks for SFA, listed in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2: SFA Goals¹¹⁴

U.S. forces strive to develop foreign security forces that are—	
Competent	<p>Across all levels from ministerial to the individual soldier or police officer.</p> <p>Across all warfighting functions.</p>
Capable and sustainable	<p>Appropriately sized and effective enough to accomplish missions.</p> <p>Sustainable over time.</p> <p>Resourced within partner-nation capabilities.</p>
Committed	<p>To security of all the people and survival of the state.</p> <p>To preservation of the liberties and human rights of the citizens.</p> <p>To peaceful transition of power</p>
Confident	<p>In themselves to secure the country</p> <p>Trusted by the citizens, that their security force will provide security and be professional.</p> <p>Trusted by the partner-nation government, which is confident it has the correct security force.</p> <p>Trusted by the international community, which believes the nation's security force is a force for good.</p>

Table 3: SFA Tasks ¹¹⁵

General developmental tasks are organize, train, equip, rebuild and build, advise and assist, and assess (known as OTERA-A)	
Organize	All activities taken to create, improve, and integrate doctrinal principles, organizational structures, capability constructs, and personnel management. This may include doctrine development, unit and organization design, command and staff processes, and recruiting and manning.
Train	All activities taken to create, improve, and integrate training, leader development, and education at the individual, leader, collective, and staff levels. This may include the development and execution of programs of instruction, training events, and leader development activities.
Equip	All activities to create, improve, and integrate materiel and equipment, procurement, fielding, accountability, and maintenance through life cycle management. This may include new equipment fielding, operational readiness processes, repair, and recapitalization.
Rebuild	All activities to create, improve, and integrate facilities. This may include physical infrastructures such as bases and stations, lines of communication, ranges and training complexes, and administrative structures.
Advise	All activities to provide subject matter expertise, mentorship, guidance, advice, and counsel to FSF while carrying out the missions assigned to the unit or organization. Advising occurs under combat or administrative conditions, at tactical through strategic levels, and in support of individuals or groups.
Assess	All activities for determining progress toward accomplishing a task, creating an effect, or achieving an objective using measures of effectiveness and measures of performance to evaluate foreign security force capability. Once an objective is achieved, the focus should shift to sustaining it.

Step Two: Evaluate Using Matrix

Table 4 uses the deep-dive research from the first section of this report to describe potential PMC operations in four SFA-related scenarios.

Table 4: SFA Permissiveness/State Involvement Matrix Analysis

High Permissiveness/Low State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country military and law enforcement agencies have control as well as the intent and capability to support U.S. SFA • No resistance to U.S. assistance or presence is expected; operation would require no assembly of combat forces in country • U.S. element focuses on train-advise-equip mission with minimal effort and resources devoted to force protection
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia takes no substantive actions to influence SFA using PMCs • Strong rule of law and host nation security services (1) prevent PMC operations outright or (2) restrict them to roles non-intrusive to SFA (demining, private security, etc.) • Quality of PMC personnel/equipment vary by individual company, but possibly low due to lack of state support
High Permissiveness/High State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country military and law enforcement agencies have control as well as the intent and capability to support U.S. SFA • No resistance to U.S. assistance or presence is expected; operation would require no assembly of combat forces in country • U.S. element focuses on train-advise-equip mission with minimal effort and resources devoted to force protection
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia wishes to disrupt/influence SFA, but strong rule of law and host nation security services prevent PMC operations outright or restrict them to roles nonintrusive to NEO (demining, private security, etc.) • Russia pursues other avenues of influence (diplomacy, propaganda, etc.)

Low Permissiveness/Low State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country military and law enforcement agencies lack control of all territory • Host country military and law enforcement possibly engaged in suppression of opposition groups • Host country engages in SFA with other nations, perhaps U.S. competitors and adversaries • Elements of host country security establishment may not support cooperation with United States • Host country government factional (e.g., MoD supports United States but Ministry of Interior supports Russia)
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia takes no substantive actions to influence SFA using PMCs • Non-state supported PMC operations possible across range of PMC capabilities (support, training, logistics, combat, etc.) • Quality of PMC personnel/equipment vary by individual company, but possibly low due to lack of state support

Low Permissiveness/High State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country military and law enforcement agencies lack control of all territory • Host country military and law enforcement possibly engaged in suppression of opposition groups • Host country engages in SFA with other nations, perhaps U.S. competitors and adversaries • Elements of host country security establishment may not support cooperation with United States • Host country government factional (e.g., MoD supports United States but Ministry of Interior supports Russia)
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia wishes to disrupt/influence Western-led SFA using PMCs to limit official involvement, risk to state forces, etc. • PMCs contract with host nation forces and/or local actors across the range of PMC capabilities (support, training, logistics, combat, etc.) • Russia uses PMCs to influence local actors, stoke tensions, impede SFA, possibly provide weapons/ training to local actors; stage false flag attacks on SFA force and other local actors • Quality of PMC personnel/equipment high due to strong state support • PMCs collect intelligence on U.S. forces for Russia • Russia provides advanced capabilities not yet observed in its history of support for PMCs (advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, EW/cyber, UAS, etc.)

Step Three: Identify Insights

Permissiveness: High permissiveness favors the United States in SFA. Low permissiveness offers PMCs the most opportunity in SFA:

- PMC occupation of key terrain is a considerable threat to SFA. For example, PMC personnel could occupy training areas and block lines of communications, precluding or disrupting train-equip-advise activities.

Russian State Involvement: High state involvement presents the most dangerous course of action when paired with low permissiveness in SFA. When paired with high permissiveness, however, state involvement is negated.

- Successful PMC relationships with partner nation forces or figures could undermine U.S. influence. Similarly, PMC-caused disruptions to U.S. SFA operations could undermine U.S. influence.

Conflict Continuum/ROMO/Operation Type: PMCs are capable in the cooperation/competition portion of the continuum, including during security cooperation. This capability requires low permissiveness and is dependent on high state involvement or, less likely, a non-state supported PMC demonstrating heretofore unseen levels of performance and resource.

- In such operations, the United States is largely dependent on partner nations for sustainment, force protection, intelligence, and other fundamental needs. The ability of the partner nation to provide for such needs, as well as the partner's threat perception—especially concerning Russia—varies greatly. As such, deployed forces may have insufficient means to detect, defend, and deter threats such as intelligence collection, IO, and EW.

Rules of Engagement

ROE may be such that commanders should be prepared to protect personnel (military and evacuees) from a variety of threats without the authority to conduct offensive military operations or preempt hostile actions by proactive military measures. ROE should provide maximum flexibility so as not to unduly restrain the use of force. The JFC is provided tailored ROE from the GCC to ensure the successful accomplishment of the mission. ROE must ensure that the military commander has the authority to protect civilians while demonstrating restraint and, when appropriate, using force proportional to the threat. The JFC should establish ROE well ahead of any NEO in order to work through the process of obtaining supplemental measures to the standing ROE. The JFC never abrogates the right of self-defense.

(1) Dissemination and use of clearly defined ROE are critical. Although the objectives (diplomatic and military) are not to destroy enemy forces and armed conflict should be avoided whenever possible, an appropriate and proportional use of force may become necessary. ROE must be as precise as practical while never denying the use of appropriate self-defense measures.

(2) The JFC will discuss the ROE with the COM as early and as frequently as required. Modifications to the ROE will be made and approved by the appropriate authorities via the supported GCC.

—JP 3-68, “Noncombatant Evacuation Operations,” I-3 to I-4.

Experiment 2: Noncombatant Evacuation Operation

Step One: Describe Type of Operation

This experiment is one of two that examines crisis response and limited contingency operations. Such missions are “typically focused in scope and scale and conducted to achieve a very specific strategic or operational-level objective in an OA.”¹¹⁶ Crisis response and limited contingency operations often require close, ongoing coordination with non-military entities, governmental and otherwise. Two characteristics require special attention.

First, understanding the U.S. or coalition’s strategic objective helps avoid actions that may have adverse diplomatic or political effects. It is not uncommon in some operations, such as peacekeeping, for junior leaders to make decisions that have significant strategic implications. Second, commanders should remain aware of changes not only in the operational situation but also in strategic objectives that may warrant a change in military operations.¹¹⁷

These are often economy of force operations. The complexity of the strategic environment is such that U.S. forces must be prepared to execute multiple simultaneous operations. As such, any single operation might fall to “small elements like [special operation forces (SOF)] in coordination with allied nations or PNs. Initially, SOF may take the lead of these operations as an economy of force measure to enable major operations and campaigns with conventional focus to progress more effectively.”¹¹⁸

This experiment focuses specifically on noncombatant evacuation operations. JP 3-68, “Noncombatant Evacuation Operations,” describes such operations thusly:

An operation whereby noncombatant evacuees are evacuated from a threatened area abroad, which includes areas facing actual or potential danger from natural or manmade disaster, civil unrest, imminent or actual terrorist activities, hostilities, and similar circumstances, that is carried out with the assistance of the Department of Defense.

NEOs are conducted by the [DoD] to assist in evacuating US citizens and nationals, [DoD] civilian personnel, and designated persons (host nation... and third country

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nationals...) whose lives are in danger from locations in a foreign nation to an appropriate safe haven, when directed by the [DOS].¹¹⁹

Unlike most other military operations, NEOs have a unique C2 structure in which neither the geographic combatant commander or the subordinate joint force commander (JFC) is the senior U.S. government authority. Instead, this responsibility belongs to the Chief of Mission (COM):

The personal representative of the president to the government of the foreign country or to the IGO to which he or she is accredited and, as such, recommends and implements national policy regarding the foreign country or IGO and oversees the activities of USG employees in the mission. If assigned, the U.S. ambassador will always be the COM.¹²⁰

The decision to order a NEO rests with the COM. The timing of such an order may not be based on the tactical situation or other considerations paramount to a military commander. Instead, the order “may be delayed until the last possible moment to avoid actions that may be viewed as a tacit admission of diplomatic and/or political failure or lack of [U.S. Government] confidence in the [Host Nation] government.”¹²¹

The primary guiding document for any individual NEO is an emergency action plan (EAP), which has a section on military evacuation. The appropriate geographic combatant commander reviews and comments on this section. EAP contents include:

- Possible courses of action for different threat environments
- Location of evacuation sites (landing zones, ports, beaches)
- Anticipated number of evacuees (total number by area) categorized by medical status:
 - Persons not requiring medical assistance
 - Persons requiring medical assistance prior to evacuation
 - Persons requiring medical assistance prior to and during evacuation
- Persons requiring emergency medical evacuation
- Location of assembly areas and major supply routes
- Location of command posts

- Key personnel (name, location, and desired means of contacting them)
- Description of the embassy communications system, transportation fleet, and warden system
- Quantity of class I (subsistence) supplies on hand at the embassy
- Quantity of class III (fuel)
- Availability of class VIII (medical supplies)
- Standard map products of the local area, with annotations identifying critical landmarks¹²²

Another important consideration for this experiment is DOS readiness, especially given the unique C2 relationship of NEOs and the fact that contingency forces would have little or no on-the-ground experience prior to an emergency. A 2017 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found “gaps in its crisis and evacuation preparedness for overseas posts.”¹²³ Such gaps included failure to complete annual EAP updates on time; incomplete EAPs; a view that EAPs are “lengthy and cumbersome documents that are not readily usable in emergency situations;” failure to complete required EAP drills, including at “posts rated high or critical in political violence or terrorism;” and the complete failure to “transmit an after-action report listing lessons learned to State headquarters following evacuations.”¹²⁴ GAO concluded, “the gaps in State’s crisis and evacuation preparedness increase the risk that post staff are not sufficiently prepared to handle crisis and emergency situations.”¹²⁵

Step Two: Evaluate Using Matrix

Table 5 uses the deep-dive research from the first section of this report to describe potential PMC operations in four NEO-related scenarios.

Table 5: NEO Permissiveness/State Involvement Matrix Analysis

High Permissiveness/Low State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country military and law enforcement agencies have control as well as the intent and capability to assist operations that a unit intends to conduct¹²⁶ • No resistance to evacuation operations is expected; operation would require little or no assembly of combat forces in country¹²⁷ • Evacuees may or may not have been processed and assembled at designated assembly areas, evacuation points, and sites¹²⁸ • Joint Task Force (JTF) can expect host nation concurrence and possible support¹²⁹ • JTF's primary concerns may be logistic functions involving emergency medical treatment, transportation, administrative processing, and coordination with DOS and other agencies involved in the evacuation¹³⁰
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia takes no substantive actions to influence NEO using PMCs • Strong rule of law and host nation security services (1) prevent PMC operations outright or (2) restrict them to roles nonintrusive to NEO (demining, private security, etc.) • Quality of PMC personnel/equipment varies by individual company, but possibly low due to lack of state support

High Permissiveness/High State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host country military and law enforcement agencies have control as well as the intent and capability to assist operations that a unit intends to conduct¹³¹ • No resistance to evacuation operations is expected; operation would require little or no assembly of combat forces in country¹³² • Evacuees may or may not have been processed and assembled at designated assembly areas, evacuation points, and sites¹³³ • JTF can expect host nation concurrence and possible support¹³⁴ • JTF's primary concerns may be logistic functions involving emergency medical treatment, transportation, administrative processing, and coordination with DOS and other agencies involved in the evacuation¹³⁵
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia wishes to influence NEO, but strong rule of law and host nation security services (1) prevent PMC operations outright or (2) restrict them to roles nonintrusive to NEO (demining, private security, etc.) • Russia pursues other avenues of influence (diplomacy, propaganda, etc.)

Low Permissiveness/Low State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noncombatant evacuees and civilians may be evacuated under conditions ranging from civil disorder, to terrorist action, to full-scale combat¹³⁶ • JTF must be prepared for a wide range of contingencies¹³⁷ • JFC may elect to deploy a sizable security element with the evacuation force or position a large reaction force, either with the evacuation force or at an intermediate staging base¹³⁸ • In addition to normal functions associated with noncombatant evacuations (embarkation, transportation, medical, and services), the JTF may be required to conduct a forcible entry operation, establish defensive perimeters, escort convoys, participate in public relations operations, and perform the screening of evacuees normally accomplished by DOS officials¹³⁹
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia takes no substantive actions to influence NEO using PMCs • Non-state supported PMC operations possible across range of PMC capabilities (support, training, logistics, combat, etc.) • Quality of PMC personnel/equipment varies by individual company, but possibly low due to lack of state support

Low Permissiveness/High State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noncombatant evacuees and civilians may be evacuated under conditions ranging from civil disorder, to terrorist action, to full-scale combat¹⁴⁰ • JTF must be prepared for a wide range of contingencies¹⁴¹ • JFC may elect to deploy a sizable security element with the evacuation force or position a large reaction force, either with the evacuation force or at an intermediate staging base¹⁴² • In addition to normal functions associated with noncombatant evacuations (embarkation, transportation, medical, and services), the JTF may be required to conduct a forcible entry operation, establish defensive perimeters, escort convoys, participate in public relations operations, and perform the screening of evacuees normally accomplished by DOS officials¹⁴³
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia wishes to disrupt/influence NEO using PMCs to limit official involvement, risk to state forces, etc. • Russia supports deployment of PMC with high quality personnel, equipment, and training; possibly allows PMC to use state infrastructure • Russia uses PMCs to influence local actors, stoke tensions, impede evacuation, possibly provide weapons/training to local actors; stage false flag attacks on NEO force and other local actors • PMCs occupy key terrain (e.g., evacuation sites) prior to arrival of U.S. forces; United States unable to seize terrain necessary for evacuation; ROE prevent engaging PMC • PMCs collect intelligence on U.S. forces for Russia • Russia provides advanced capabilities not yet observed in its history of support for PMCs (advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, EW/cyber, UAS, etc.)

Step Three: Identify Insights

Permissiveness: High permissiveness favors the United States in NEOs. Low permissiveness offers PMCs the most opportunity in NEOs.

- PMC occupation of key terrain is a considerable threat to NEOs. Evacuation sites are critical for gathering, processing, and

transporting detainees. Potential evacuation sites are identifiable by key characteristics. For instance, PMCs could occupy stadiums and other areas suitable for crowds and landing aircraft. PMCs need not fire on U.S. forces. Depending on the ROE, U.S. forces might not be able to forcibly remove the PMC.

Russian State Involvement: High state involvement presents the most dangerous course of action when paired with low permissiveness in NEOs. When paired with high permissiveness, however, state involvement is negated.

- With a high level of state support, a Russian PMC in Syria was able to function as a BTG. That is, the PMC conducted basic combined arms operations with infantry, armor, and artillery. However, details in open-source reporting are insufficient to determine how well the PMC integrated different combat arms. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on current information—a U.S. Army brigade might encounter state-supported, BTG-like entity.*
- Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine conduct combined arms operations and are highly proficient, by any standard, at enabling integration, particularly IO, EW, and UAS. Though open-source reporting has not found the same capabilities present among PMCs, Russia could supply such capabilities should it choose to do so. Similarly, Russia could provide advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, and other weapons systems. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on a plausible change in the scope of state support—a U.S. Army brigade might encounter a state-supported, BTG-like entity with advanced weapons and cutting-edge enabler technologies and expertise.*

Conflict Continuum/ROMO/Operation Type: PMCs are capable in the cooperation/competition portion of the continuum, including during brief operations like NEOs. This capability requires low permissiveness and is dependent on high state involvement or, less likely, a non-state supported PMC demonstrating heretofore unseen levels of performance and resource.

Experiment 3: Peace Operations

Step One: Describe Type of Operation

This experiment is the second that examines crisis response and limited contingency operations. Peace operations fall into this category within the ROMO. Peacetime operations include five types of operations. This experiment focuses on one: PKO.

PKO take place following diplomatic negotiation and agreement among the parties to a dispute, the sponsoring organization, and potential force contributing nations. Before PKO begin, a credible truce or cease fire is in effect, and the parties to the dispute must consent to the operation. **A main function of the PKO force is to establish a presence that inhibits hostile actions by the disputing parties and bolsters confidence in the peace process.** Agreements often specify which nations' forces are acceptable, as well as the size and type of forces each will contribute.¹⁴⁴

PKOs have three fundamental characteristics:

- **Consent.** PKOs require an invitation, or at a minimum, consent of all the major parties to the conflict.
- **Restraint and Minimum Force.** In PKOs, minimum force imposed by the peacetime operations force along with its inherent right to self-defense, govern the non-threatening nature of the actions taken.
- **Impartiality, Credibility, and Legitimacy.** A peacetime operations force conducting PKOs does not act in support of a government or any party to a dispute; it is entirely impartial. Demonstrated impartiality is essential to establish and maintain the legitimacy of the PKO.¹⁴⁵

JP 3-07.3, "Peace Operations," lists the following as PKO ground force support capabilities:

- Observing, monitory, and reporting
- Maintaining public order and protecting civilians and public officials

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- Support to elections
- Delivery and protection of humanitarian assistance efforts
- Manning of checkpoints and patrolling
- Force protection
- Health service support
- Limited construction of critical infrastructure
- Supervising truces and cease fires
- Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
- Crowd control
- Negotiation and mediation
- Interposition between parties to the conflict
- Demobilization and disarmament
- Personnel recovery
- Inspection of facilities
- Training ¹⁴⁶

Step Two: Evaluate Using Matrix

Table 6 uses the deep-dive research from the first section of this report to describe potential PMC operations in four PKO-related scenarios.

Table 6: PKO Permissiveness/State Involvement Matrix Analysis

High Permissiveness/Low State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political representatives of warring parties agree to PKO Local actors support PKO mandate/force No substantial anti-U.S. or anti-Western sentiment Demobilization of armed groups ongoing Ceasefires hold Responsible parties control all heavy weapons; small arms/munitions plentiful but buy-back/turn-in programs ongoing
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia takes no substantive actions to influence PKO or its associated conflict using PMCs Non-state supported PMC operations nonexistent due to political/local actor support for PKO mandate/force Alternatively, independent PMC operations occur with effective PKO oversight, limited to actual demining, transportation, logistics Quality of PMC personnel/equipment varies by individual company, but possibly low due to lack of state support

High Permissiveness/High State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political representatives of warring parties agree to PKO • Local actors support PKO mandate/force • No substantial anti-U.S. or anti-Western sentiment • Demobilization of armed groups ongoing • Ceasefires hold • Responsible parties control all heavy weapons; small arms/munitions plentiful but buy-back/turn-in programs ongoing
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia wishes to disrupt/influence Western-led PKO, but political and local actor support for PKO mandate/force is strong, resulting in no opportunity for PMC operations • Russia pursues other avenues of influence (diplomacy, propaganda, etc.)
Low Permissiveness/Low State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political representatives of warring parties agree to PKO • Some local actors do not support PKO mandate/force • Potential hostility to U.S./foreign presence • Demobilization of armed groups not progressing • Violent territorial disputes and ceasefire disruptions persist • Intermittent heavy weapons use occurs; small arms/munitions plentiful and non-attributable
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia takes no substantive actions to influence PKO or its associated conflict using PMCs • Non-state supported PMC operations possible across range of PMC capabilities (support, training, logistics, combat, etc.) • Quality of PMC personnel/equipment vary by individual company, but possibly low due to lack of state support

Low Permissiveness/High State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political representatives of warring parties agree to PKO Some local actors do not support PKO mandate/force Potential hostility to U.S./foreign presence Demobilization of armed groups not progressing Violent territorial disputes and ceasefire disruptions persist Intermittent heavy weapons use occurs; small arms/ munitions plentiful and non-attributable
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia wishes to disrupt/influence Western-led PKO using PMCs to limit official involvement, risk to state forces, etc. PMCs contract with local actors, ostensibly to provide security (area, personal, and/or convoy), mine clearance, etc. Russia uses PMCs to influence local actors, stoke tensions, impede full implementation of mandate, possibly provide weapons/training to local actors; stage false flag attacks on PKO force and other local actors Quality of PMC personnel/equipment high due to strong state support PMCs collect intelligence on U.S. forces for Russia Russia provides advanced capabilities not yet observed in its history of support for PMCs (advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, EW/cyber, UAS, etc.)

Step Three: Identify Insights

Permissiveness: High permissiveness favors the United States in PKOs. Low permissiveness offers PMCs the most opportunity in PKOs.

- PMC occupation of key terrain is a considerable threat to PKOs, particularly if the PMC is fulfilling a contractual obligation to provide security (area, personal, or convoy).

Russian State Involvement: High state involvement presents the most dangerous course of action when paired with low permissiveness in PKOs. When paired with high permissiveness, however, state involvement is negated.

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- With a high level of state support, a Russian PMC in Syria was able to function as a BTG. That is, the PMC conducted basic combined arms operations with infantry, armor, and artillery. However, details in open-source reporting are insufficient to determine how well the PMC integrated different combat arms. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on current information—a U.S. Army brigade might encounter state-supported, BTG-like entity.*
- Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine conduct combined arms operations and are highly proficient, by any standard, at enabling integration, particularly IO, EW, and UAS. Though open-source reporting has not found the same capabilities present among PMCs, Russia could supply such capabilities should it choose to do so. Similarly, Russia could provide advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, and other weapons systems. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on a plausible change in the scope of state support—a U.S. brigade might encounter a state-supported, BTG-like entity with advanced weapons and cutting-edge enabler technologies and expertise.*

Conflict Continuum/ROMO/Operation Type: PMCs are capable in the co-operation/competition portion of the continuum, including during extended operations like PKOs. This capability requires low permissiveness and is dependent on high state involvement or, less likely, a non-state supported PMC demonstrating heretofore unseen high levels of performance and resource.

- Russia has a history of perpetuating so-called frozen conflicts (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, Transnistria in Moldova, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the Republic of Georgia, and the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.) Such behavior enables Russia to maintain influence and presence, as well as use the conflict as a bargaining chip in other matters. PMCs would be well suited to promote Russian interests in such situations.

Experiment 4: Large-Scale Combat Operations

Step One: Describe Type of Operation

Large-scale combat operations typically occur in two forms:

- Major action: a “series of tactical actions (battles, engagements, strikes) conducted by combat forces of a single or several Services, coordinated in time and place, to achieve strategic or operational objectives in an OA.”¹⁴⁷
- Campaign: “a series of related major operations aimed at achieving strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space.”¹⁴⁸

The Army supports large-scale combat operations through the application of land power, specifically “maneuver, fires, special operations, cyberspace operations, EW, space operations, sustainment, and area security.” As such, an operation could require a brigade to execute a wide range of tasks—too many to address coherently here. Instead, this experiment uses the notional phasing concept as a model (see Figure 4¹⁴⁹).^d

Each phase is briefly explained:

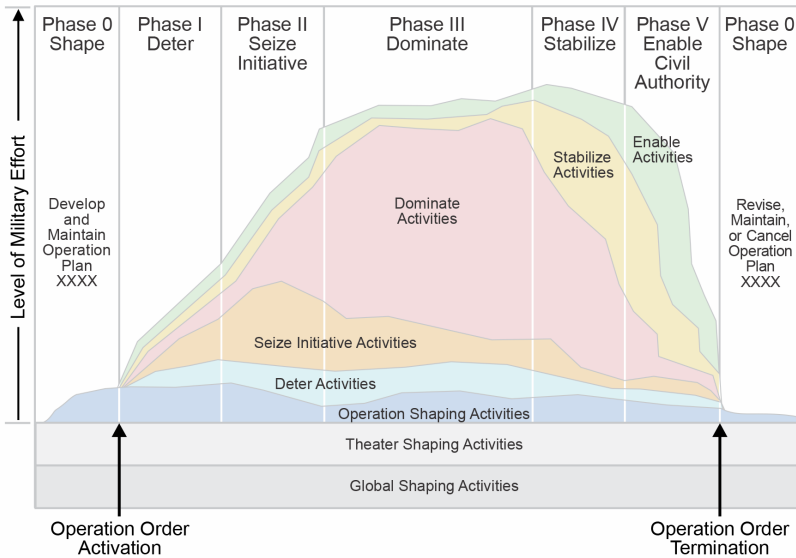
Phase 0 Shape: “In general, shaping activities help set conditions for successful theater operations. Shaping activities include long-term persistent and preventive military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence actions to assure friends, build partner capacity and capability, and promote regional stability. They help identify, deter, counter, and/or mitigate competitor and adversary actions that challenge country and regional stability.”¹⁵⁰

Phase 1 Deter: “Once a crisis is defined, these actions may include mobilization, tailoring of forces, and other predeployment activities; initial deployment into a theater; employment of intelligence collection assets; and development of mission-tailored C2, intelligence, force protection, and logistic requirements to support the JFC’s CONOPS.”¹⁵¹

Phase 2 Seize Initiative: “In combat, this involves both defensive and offensive operations at the earliest possible time, forcing the

d JP 5-0, “Joint Planning,” eliminated the six-phase model but retained the use of phases as a planning tool (“Joint Publication 5-0,” 2017).

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- The six general groups of activities provide a basis for thinking about a joint operation in notional phases.
- Phasing can be used in any joint operation regardless of size.
- Phasing helps joint force commanders and staffs visualize, plan, and execute the entire operation and define requirements in terms of forces, resources, time, space, and purpose to achieve objectives.

Figure 4. Phasing an Operation Based on Predominantly Military Activities

enemy to culminate offensively and setting the conditions for decisive operations.”¹⁵²

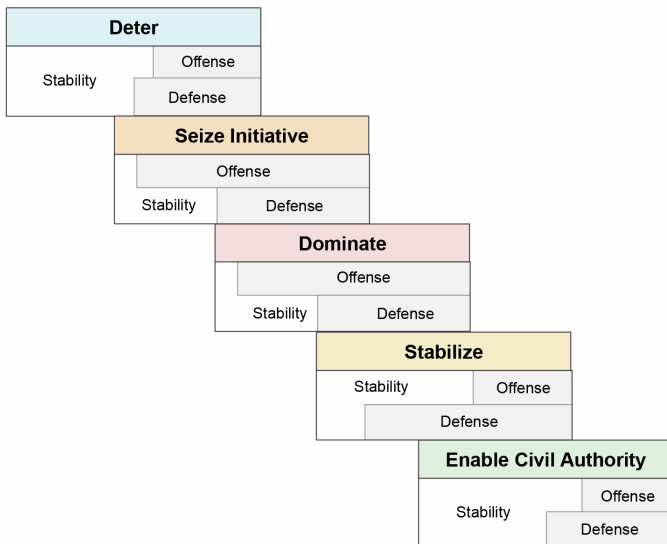
Phase 3 Dominate: “These actions focus on breaking the enemy’s will to resist or, in noncombat situations, to control the OE. Successful domination depends on overmatching enemy capabilities at critical times and places. Joint force options include attacking weaknesses at the leading edge of the enemy’s defensive perimeter to roll enemy forces back and striking in depth to threaten the integrity of the enemy’s A2/AD, offensive weapons and force projection capabilities, and defensive systems.”¹⁵³

Phase 4 Stabilize: “These actions and activities are typically characterized by a shift in focus from sustained combat operations to stability activities. These operations help reestablish a safe and secure environment and provide essential government

services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.”¹⁵⁴

Phase 5 Enable Civil Authority: “The purpose is to help the civil authority regain its ability to govern and administer the services and other needs of the population. The military end state is typically reached during this phase, signaling the end of the joint operation.”¹⁵⁵

Each phase consists of a balance of offense, defense, and stability activities. Figure 5¹⁵⁶ depicts this notional balance in each phase. FM 3-0, “Operations,” describes responsibilities at the brigade level and below as “performing offensive and defensive tasks and necessary tactical enabling tasks. During large-scale combat operations they perform only those minimal essential stability tasks necessary to comply with the laws of land warfare.”¹⁵⁷



NOTES:

The figure reflects a single operation.

Stability activities are conducted outside the United States. Department of Defense provides similar support to US civil authorities for homeland defense and other operations in the US through **defense support of civil authorities** operations.

Figure 5. Notional Balance of Offense, Defense, and Stability Activities

Step Two: Evaluate Using Matrix

Table 7 uses the deep-dive research from the first section of this report to describe potential PMC operations in four large-scale combat operations-related scenarios.

Table 7: Large-Scale Combat Operations Permissiveness/State Involvement Matrix Analysis

High Permissiveness/Low State Involvement		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not applicable—large-scale combat operations necessarily occur in environments not permissive to U.S. forces. 		
High Permissiveness/High State Involvement		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not applicable—large-scale combat operations necessarily occur in environments not permissive to U.S. forces. 		
Low Permissiveness/Low State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host nation possibly opposes U.S. operation or is U.S. adversary in operation Territory can fall under control of host nation entirely, be divided among various groups, and/or have no discernible authority Threats to U.S. forces can be manifold, including state and non-state actors U.S. might operate as part of a coalition or act alone Other nations, possibly not allied with the United States, might operate in the area or be allied with U.S. adversary
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia takes no substantive actions to influence U.S. operations using PMCs Non-state supported PMC operations possible across range of PMC capabilities (support, training, logistics, combat, etc.) Quality of PMC personnel/equipment varies by individual company, but possibly low due to lack of state support

Low Permissiveness/High State Involvement	Permissiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host nation possibly opposes U.S. operation or is U.S. adversary in operation • Territory can fall under control of host nation entirely, be divided among various groups, and/or have no discernible authority • Threats to U.S. forces can be manifold, including state and non-state actors • United States might operate as part of a coalition or act alone • Other nations, possibly not allied with the United States, might operate in the area or be allied with U.S. adversary
	Russian State Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia wishes to disrupt/influence U.S. operation using PMCs to limit official involvement, risk to state forces, etc. Alternatively, Russian state forces are committed to the conflict and PMCs fight alongside them • Russia supports deployment of PMC with high quality personnel, equipment, and training; possibly allows PMC to use state infrastructure • During earlier/latter phases, Russia uses PMCs to influence local actors, stoke tensions, possibly provide weapons/training to local actors; stage false flag attacks on U.S. force and other local actors • PMCs collect intelligence on U.S. forces for Russia • Russia provides advanced capabilities not yet observed in its history of support for PMCs (advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, EW/cyber, UAS, etc.)

Step Three: Identify Insights

Permissiveness: Such operations necessarily occur in environments hostile to U.S. forces.

Russian State Involvement: High state involvement presents the most dangerous course of action:

- With a high level of state support, a Russian PMC in Syria was able to function as a BTG. That is, the PMC conducted basic combined arms operations with infantry, armor, and artillery.

However, details in open-source reporting are insufficient to determine how well the PMC integrated different combat arms. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on current information—a U.S. Army brigade might encounter state-supported, BTG-like entity.*

- Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine conduct combined arms operations and are highly proficient, by any standard, at enabling integration, particularly IO, EW, and UAS. Though open-source reporting has not found the same capabilities present among PMCs, Russia could supply such capabilities should it choose to do so. Similarly, Russia could provide advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, and other weapons systems. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on a plausible change in the scope of state support—a U.S. Army brigade might encounter a state-supported, BTG-like entity with advanced weapons and cutting-edge enabler technologies and expertise.*

Conflict Continuum/ROMO/Operation Type: PMCs are capable in the conflict portion of the continuum, including during large-scale combat operations. However, a U.S. Army brigade would have relative advantages across all warfighting functions. As such, PMCs likely would have negligible impact during the middle phases (2-3). PMCs could play an impactful role in earlier phases (0-1), as well as latter phase (4-5).

Conclusions

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. While Moscow continues to see the use of Russian PMCs as beneficial, their use also presents several vulnerabilities that yield both operational and strategic risks to Russian Federation objectives. While they can operate across the conflict continuum and present the United States with dilemmas at all levels of war, Russian PMCs do not pose a unique tactical threat.

The Vulnerabilities of Russian PMCs

The swift proliferation and wide use of Russian PMCs abroad also revealed many of the vulnerabilities that such groups have, as well as the risks taken on by the Russian Federation when it chooses to use such groups to achieve political and military objectives abroad. Russian PMCs appear to present both typical and unique vulnerabilities that U.S. commanders and agencies should consider and constitute a promising field for future analyses.

Morale/Desertion: The pronounced use of Russian PMCs in particularly high-risk combat creates the risk of extremely low morale and even desertion of the assigned mission. Wagner commanders who operated in Syria described their high-casualty operations as a “meat grinder” and even speculated that the Russian Federation was purposefully disposing of them.¹⁵⁸ However, the risk of desertion is partially mitigated by the ability to selectively prosecute individuals in Russian PMCs for illegal mercenary activity, as happened to two leaders of the Slavonic Corps (see the appendix: Syria).

Not Self-Equipped: When without MoD support, PMCs only appear to be equipped with what their host or sponsor can provide in country. Given that Russian PMC client states appear to include many that often have scant military resources, or even fall under sanctions or embargos (see the appendix: Syria, Central African Republic, and Sudan), a lack of direct Russian state support can lead to a significant drop in quality materiel, training, and efficacy.

Political Pressure at Home: The lack of support or benefits for members of Russian PMCs who return home, even wounded, carries the potential to create domestic political complications. In the Russian press, one Wagner fighter injured in Syria described how he could not claim any more help or rehabilitation support from the government, fearing he might be jailed for

mercenary activities if he pushed the issue. Russian veterans' groups also brought such complaints to the global stage by petitioning the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Russia's use of PMCs, calling for protections and benefits.¹⁵⁹ Another political pressure group is the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, which was among the earliest groups to openly report the deaths of contract soldiers in Ukraine, raise awareness around the death toll of both private and regular forces abroad, and protest the lack of benefits available to members of Russian PMCs upon their return home.¹⁶⁰

Domestic Security: The risks associated with war-hardened, potentially hyper-nationalist, and radicalized Russian PMCs returning home is an issue of which Russian authorities are already aware. When rejecting the prospect of domestically legalizing PMCs, the Russian MoD and FSB pointed to concerns of “Rambos,” an assessment informed by the chaotic history of Russian PSCs of the post-Soviet 1990s.¹⁶¹ These fears were put into action in November 2018, when Russian law enforcement and the FSB moved to arrest several members of the pseudo-PMC E.N.O.T. Corp.—paramilitary nationalists who allegedly supported Russian interests in Syria and Ukraine.¹⁶² The ubiquitous nature of such concerns led Wagner commanders and Russian analysts to speculate that the use of Russian PMCs in high-risk offensive operations is intended to dispose of individuals who would otherwise return home to become domestic security risks.¹⁶³

Interagency Politics: The dramatic decline in materiel and training available to Wagner in Syria suggests that the efficacy and performance of Russian PMCs are susceptible to disagreements with the Russian MoD (see the appendix: Syria). Because Russian PMCs appear dependent on state support, the impact of such interruptions or transitions from a well-equipped sponsor to a poor one can be significant.

Unforeseen Costs: Both observers and Russian decision makers noted the risks associated with Russian PMCs taking on independent contracts, specifically in regard to the potential deviation of those private interests away from the national interest.¹⁶⁴ However, a potential vulnerability in the status quo—where the relationship between Russian PMCs and the Russian Federation remains blurred—is that Russia could incur diplomatic penalties and other political repercussions based on actions taken by Russian PMCs on their own behalf or that of a third party.

U.S. Air Superiority: As demonstrated in the February 2018 U.S. action against Wagner personnel in Syria (see the appendix: Syria), Russian PMCs are vulnerable when not provided with support against U.S. air capabilities.

Mixed Strategic Messaging and Unintended Escalation: In a situation where Russian PMCs are involved, but the level of Russian state involvement or commitment is opaque, misinterpretation by other actors can lead to unintended escalation and interstate conflict.¹⁶⁵ The presence of Russian PMCs performing private contracts could be misinterpreted as aggressive, state-sponsored action. Likewise, the perception of Russian PMCs as serving other clients could lead national actors to underestimate Russia's national interests on the ground and unintentionally enter hostilities against what are effectively Russian forces. Finally, as noted by observers after the February 2018 U.S. action against Wagner personnel in Syria (see the appendix: Syria), Russian inaction can result in domestic political pressure not to appear weak,¹⁶⁶ likewise presenting escalation risks.

The Relevance of Russian PMCs to U.S. Forces and Missions

Russian PMCs do not pose a unique tactical threat—other actors, state and non-state, are similarly capable. This is not to say Russian PMCs are unproblematic for U.S. forces. PMCs can operate across the conflict continuum and present the U.S. Army with dilemmas at all levels of war.

Most Dangerous Scenarios: With a high level of state support, a Russian PMC in Syria was able to function—more or less—as a BTG. That is, the PMC conducted basic combined arms operations with infantry, armor, and artillery. However, details in open-source reporting are insufficient to determine how well the PMC integrated different combat arms. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on current information—a U.S. Army brigade might encounter state-supported, BTG-like entity.*

Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine conduct combined arms operations and are highly proficient, by any standard, at enabling integration, particularly IO, EW, and UAS. Though open-source reporting has not found the same capabilities present among PMCs, Russia could supply such capabilities should it choose to do so. Similarly, Russia could provide advanced MANPADS, ATGMs, and other weapons systems. *This is the most dangerous scenario based on a plausible change in the scope of state support—a U.S. Army brigade might encounter a state-supported, BTG-like entity with advanced weapons and cutting-edge enabler technologies and expertise.*

Either scenario would be highly problematic were the United States to encounter it during crisis response or limited contingency operations, such as NEOs and PKOs. The U.S. element might lack the sort of joint force necessary to defeat such a threat. An encounter of this sort during large-scale

combat operations likely would favor the United States, though the more advanced threat described in the second scenario could prove highly problematic.

Most Likely Scenarios: These scenarios involve smaller-scale PMC operations with more modest goals than the outright defeat of a U.S. formation. These scenarios take place during *crisis response and limited contingency operations in operational environments the United States would deem hostile or uncertain*. Success would likely require a high level of Russian state support, given the history of poor performance among PMCs without state support. Examples include:

- **Occupation of key terrain:** PMCs need not attack U.S. formations to disrupt U.S. operations. During a NEO, PMCs could identify and occupy potential evacuation sites, such as stadiums, schools, and airports. This could complicate, and possibly curtail, U.S. efforts to gather, process, and transport evacuees out of the affected area. This would be especially problematic in an area with limited infrastructure suitable to support evacuation. Restrictive ROEs and political considerations might preclude the forcible removal of the PMC. In such a scenario, a PMC could be extraordinarily effective without firing a single shot.
- **Foment unrest:** During a PKO, PMCs could ally with local actors to provide weapons, training, and other forms of support, including intelligence information on peace negotiations. This is particularly true in locations where Russia holds some cultural affinity with locals. Russia has long perpetuated so-called frozen conflicts to maintain presence and influence in a given area. PMCs are well suited for this purpose.

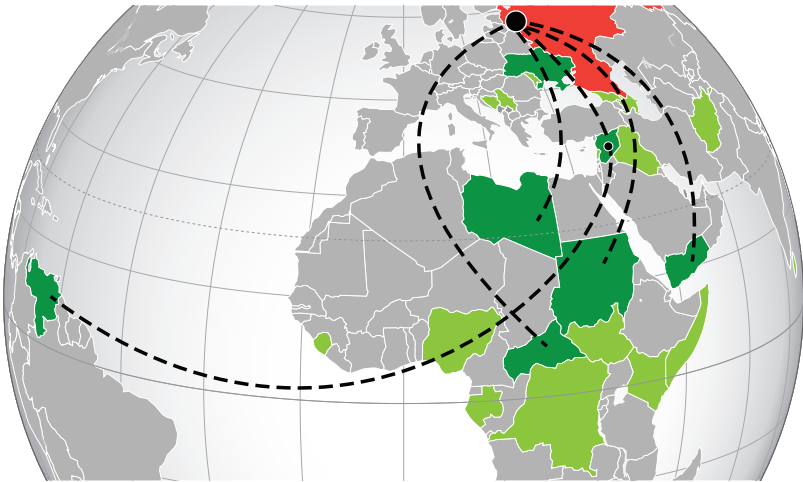
Other Potential Scenarios: Lastly, there are less severe scenarios in which PMCs seek to compete with or undermine U.S. influence (during security cooperation, for example.) PMCs face limited opportunities in OEs deemed permissive for U.S. operations, regardless of the degree of Russian state support. Host nation governments welcome U.S. support. However, PMCs have much greater opportunity in OEs the United States considers hostile or uncertain.

Appendix: Contemporary Cases of Russian PMC Use

Mercenary captains are either excellent men of arms or not: if they are, you cannot trust them because they always aspire to their own greatness, either by oppressing you, who are their patron, or by oppressing others contrary to your intention; but if the captain is not virtuous, he ruins you in the ordinary way.¹⁶⁷

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Russian PMCs are known, alleged, and suspected of being present and operating in numerous countries across eastern and central Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. This appendix details available information concerning Russian PMC activities in known or suspected AOs to inform the analysis contained in the body of this report.



Syria, Ukraine, the CAR, and Sudan are discussed in depth, detailing the uses and other attributes of Russian PMCs in each AO. Other AOs discussed at length are Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, and Venezuela. Other countries where Russian PMCs are alleged to have operated are also mentioned and briefly discussed.



Syria

While the number of actors and competing interests in the Syrian Civil War only grew since it began in 2011, the primary goals of the Russian Federation remained fairly consistent. First, maintain and defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad from removal and against both terrorist (e.g., Islamic State, or IS) and opposition forces. Second, Russia argued that fighting jihadist forces abroad in Syria serves a domestic security concern—Russian estimates in 2014 and 2015 indicated that between 1,500 and 2,500 Russian citizens from the Caucasus and elsewhere were fighting for IS in Syria and Iraq, as well as 7,000 nationals from other countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).¹⁶⁸ “There is a threat of their return to us,” President Putin said in a September 28, 2015 interview, “So instead of waiting for their return, we are better off helping Assad fight them on Syrian territory.”¹⁶⁹ Third, intervention allowed for the solidification of military basing for power projection in the region, including the 2017 expansion of the naval facility in Tartus,¹⁷⁰ the operation of Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia, as well as use of Shayrat Air Base in Homs. However, despite these guiding interests, Russian intervention in Syria and the Middle East appears to be improvised and responsive to shifting international and domestic factors.¹⁷¹

Early PMC Involvement – Moran’s Slavonic Corps

Involvement by Russian PMCs in Syria predated the formal involvement of the Russian Federation in 2015. The ill-fated deployment of the Slavonic Corps to Syria in 2013 is often cited as among the earliest examples of Russia’s contemporary use of PMCs.¹⁷² Press reports of the group’s involvement in Syria emerged when jihadists claimed to have killed Russians near Homs, publishing photographs of documents identifying the Russian and tying the Slavonic Corps (established in Hong Kong, but run out of St. Petersburg) to the Moran Security Group (a Russian PSC that provides teams for cargo retrieval, hostage rescue,¹⁷³ convoy security, anti-piracy ship security, transportation of equipment, and other services¹⁷⁴). While the Slavonic Corps fighter ISIS claimed to kill was alive and home in Russia, he confirmed to independent Russian journalists with *Fontanka* that the documents were genuine. The fighter claimed that the Slavonic Corps did not take part in any fighting, saying their job was to provide “defense of economic facilities of the Syrian Republic... to free the sub-divisions of the Syrian army from these duties, so that they could take part in the battle against the bandits.”¹⁷⁵

Uses

Detailed interviews with other members of the Slavonic Corps painted a different picture of the group's role. Recruits were flown to Lebanon and traveled by land to Syria under the impression that they would be serving a passive and legal security function, contracted by the Syrian government to protect "energy facilities," and that the Russian Federation and FSB "were on board and involved in the project."¹⁷⁶ Instead, upon arriving in Damascus, Slavonic Corps recruits discovered they were working for different, unnamed Syrian nationals, and that they had to reach, seize, and hold an oil industry site more than 500 km away in Deir ez-Zor, where they would encounter resistance and even incur casualties.¹⁷⁷

Equipment, Training, and Personnel

The Slavonic Corps has been described in press reports as poorly equipped and led.¹⁷⁸ Members described the force as numbering 267 in total. One former member claimed it was divided into two companies—the "Cossack," and "Slavic," (but it is unclear if these names reflected the make-up of the companies). Some of the former members interviewed had military backgrounds and were initially recruited for anti-piracy missions based on their military experience. Additionally, with universal conscription, most able-bodied Russian men have some basic military and small arms training. Slavonic Corps bosses allegedly claimed they expected the force to grow to as many as 2,000 men. There is no indication that Slavonic Corps members received any training prior to their deployment, and they were only equipped upon arrival in Syria via land crossings from Lebanon. Beyond small arms, they were provided with a variety of heavy weapons and equipment of fledgling quality: 1939-model anti-aircraft guns, mortars from 1943, four T-72 tanks (later taken by Syrians and replaced with T-62s that were in poor condition and abandoned), BMP infantry vehicles, and JMC jeeps and Hyundai buses with homemade armoring.¹⁷⁹

Coordination with Russia and Others

Members from St. Petersburg—former soldiers, riot police, and interior officers—were allegedly recruited by the head of the Moran Security Group and FSB reserve lieutenant colonel Vyacheslav Kalashnikov, after which another recruiter facilitated their paperwork for Syria and ordered passports. One fighter identified this process directly with the FSB when describing his desire to speak anonymously ("the FSB took our signatures.").¹⁸⁰ There is suspicion that the FSB was involved in the creation of the Slavonic Corps,¹⁸¹ but both the FSB and Moran Security Group denied knowledge or affiliation

with the group.¹⁸² One anonymous press source noted that the ambiguity about state involvement with the Slavonic Corps was likely intentional: “It’s often hard to tell with military contractors where private interests end and government ones begin... That’s kind of the point.”¹⁸³ Denis Korotkov—a Russian journalist covering Russian PMCs—argued that Slavonic Corps “could not exist without serious support from high-ranking government officials,” a perspective affirmed by RSB Group leader Oleg Krinitsyn.¹⁸⁴

The only coordination with actors other than Russia suggested by the testimony of Slavonic Corps members involves Syrian loyalist and potentially government elements. The Slavonic Corps was co-stationed with Syrian military recruits in Latakia. Unnamed Syrians exerted control over how the Corps was equipped (see below). The last combat operation of the Slavonic Corps occurred when they were allegedly sent to assist a loyalist Syrian militia in the neighboring village of Sukhnah, during which they received fire support from a Syrian government self-propelled gun and aircraft. The two Slavonic Corps units fled after the opposing militant forces began to surround them, leading to a shouting match between their leadership and Syrian “employer” afterward—the Corps soon after disarmed and left Syria.¹⁸⁵

Legal Enablers and Parameters

Upon the arrival of their chartered planes to Moscow in October, the members of the Slavonic Corps returning from Syria were detained by officers of the FSB. Digital media, passports, non-disclosure forms, and tickets were confiscated. While most Slavonic Corps members were released, their manager Vadim Gusev (deputy director of Moran) and Evgeny Sidorov (human resources) were arrested and charged by the FSB for carrying out mercenary activities.¹⁸⁶ It is not clear why they were arrested upon return. However, despite this failure, it did not end the PMC careers of all involved. According to press reports, one of the commanders of the Slavonic Corps was Dmitry Utkin¹⁸⁷—a lieutenant colonel in the GRU (2nd Independent Brigade, 700th Independent Spetsnaz Detachment) until he became a reservist in 2013 to work with Moran—who would go on to found Wagner (a.k.a. ChVK Wagner,^e Wagner).¹⁸⁸ A separate group of Russians continued working in Syria guarding key locations, albeit signed to a different company (Zeitpplus Consultancy Services, Ltd of Cyprus), but their contracts suggested avoiding participation in warfare unless they obtain Syrian citizenship—which would avoid violating Russian laws against mercenary activity.¹⁸⁹

e “ChVK” is an abbreviation of “Chastnye Voennye Kompanii,” which is Russian for PMC and sometimes used in publications and commentary instead of the English acronym.

Overt Intervention in Syria

The advent of the Russian Federation’s formal military involvement in September 2015 initiated significant growth in the offensive use of Russian PMCs in Syria and shined a brighter light on the operations of Wagner, which served a role in Ukraine up until that point that was harder for observers to distinguish from other actors in the conflict. Russian PMCs were active in Syria well before Russia’s formal intervention—Wagner since fall 2014 or earlier,¹⁹⁰ and the Slavonic Corps in 2013. However, the formal use of force brought an influx of Russian PMC personnel and initiated a period punctuated by several battles where Russian PMCs played a significant role—primarily Wagner, at times going by the name “OSM” according to some press reports.¹⁹¹ Cossack units also allegedly operated in Syria,¹⁹² though individual Cossack fighters were identified as participating within Russian PMCs in the region.¹⁹³ While press reporting seems to indicate only Wagner participated in combat operations,¹⁹⁴ other Russian PMCs are suspected by observers to have participated in the Syrian Civil War.¹⁹⁵ It is possible that some open-source reporting on the participation of other Russian PMCs misidentified them as Wagner (see Introduction, Data Limitations and Gaps). Press reports on whether or not the Russian PSC RSB Group provided any PMC services in Syria are inconsistent, but they most likely did not.¹⁹⁶ Erroneous press reports claimed that a Russian PMC called Turan—an alleged “Muslims battalion” composed of fighters from Central Asia and the North Caucasus—fought alongside Wagner in Syria,¹⁹⁷ but subsequent investigative journalistic reports revealed the group to be a fabrication.¹⁹⁸

Open-source reporting and data provide significant detail on the participation of Russian PMCs in at least four major engagements in Syria: 1. The liberation of Palmyra from ISIS forces by Russian, Syrian, and other pro-Assad forces over March 13-27, 2016; 2. The second liberation of Palmyra in spring 2017, after the city



was recaptured by ISIS in December 2016;¹⁹⁹ 3. The fall 2017 offensive to capture the oil-rich province of Deir el-Zour ahead of and alongside Syrian counterparts and with Russian MoD support;²⁰⁰ and 4. The February 2018 Battle of Khasham in Deir el-Zour, where a mix of Syrian, pro-Assad, and

Russian PMC forces advanced on a U.S. and coalition held position, only to be defeated with the support of overwhelming U.S. air and artillery strikes.

Uses

Russian PMCs in Syria played prominent roles in offensive operations. Speaking to the press, Wagner members claimed to perform the most perilous and arduous tasks on the front lines,²⁰¹ “often moving out in the first wave of an attack and storming population centers and enemy positions.”²⁰² One member referred to Wagner’s role in a battle as “cannon fodder.”²⁰³ Russia likely leverages Russian PMCs extensively to fill high-risk roles as an element of Russia’s consistent policy to minimize, downplay, and under-report the deaths of official Russian soldiers in Syria²⁰⁴—a policy motivated by political sensitivity at home.²⁰⁵ Roles and functions performed by Wagner in combat operations included forward advisers, coordination of fire and movement, forward air controllers,²⁰⁶ and shock troops,²⁰⁷ or elite infantry.²⁰⁸

Russian PMCs also allegedly served as trainers for Syrian and loyalist forces²⁰⁹ and even augmented Syrian units established and trained by Russian commanders (e.g., Syria’s 5th Volunteer Assault Corps).²¹⁰ They would also take on protection functions around Syrian infrastructure (hydrocarbon extraction, transmission)—though they were allegedly tasked with liberating such sites as well.²¹¹ Russian PMCs also appear to be leveraged for propaganda purposes as a means to bolster local partners. Speaking to *Republic.ru* about the March 2016 recapture of Palmyra, a “contractor complained... that in the end, official propaganda attributed all of the PMC’s achievements to the Syrian military.”²¹² This is reinforced by the fact that in 2018—referencing the Battle of Khasham—former Donetsk separatist commander Igor Girkin (or “Strelkov”) cited a source close to the group when he described Wagner forces during the engagement as “posing as Syrians.”²¹³

As of late March 2019, there appeared to be a newer Russian PMC operating in Syria with pro-government forces called Vegacy Strategic Services LTD (a.k.a. Vegacy, Vega). Vegacy has had a pronounced public profile in Syria, performing more traditional military contracting work (training, facility security) and does not appear to perform frontline combat operations. Some open-source analysis describes Vegacy personnel as composed of both Russians and Ukrainians. The Ukrainian SBU denies this, however, and alleges that those personnel identified as Ukrainians left in 2014 to cooperate with Russian security services and that Vegacy is a front for Wagner.²¹⁴ However, other observers of Russian PMCs have noted the pronounced coverage Vegacy has received from pro-Kremlin press and sug-

gest that the group is little more than an information operation to discredit Western coverage of Wagner and other Russian PMCs.²¹⁵

As of summer 2019, at least one Russian PMC, known as Schit (Shield), was identified providing protection services for an oil field north of Palmyra owned by the Russian company Stroitransgaz. This came to light in July 2019 when three Russians were reported killed in Arabic language media but not reported by the Russian military at Hmemima. Schit reportedly operates under the support of 45th Guards Brigade of the Russian Airborne based out of Kubinka. The leadership of Schit reportedly is made up of former Airborne veterans. The Russian newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, reported one leader may be 45th Brigade veteran, Evgenii Sidorov, who was arrested in 2014 for his activities with Moran Security Group in Syria (described earlier). Schit reportedly provides security for five sites in Syria, and has 25-30 people at each site for rotations of 3 months, paying around 120,000 rubles a month.²¹⁶

At least two of the Schit PMC fighters killed in July 2019 previously fought in the separatist Luhansk People's Republic in 2014-2015, but in separate militia battalions (one in Amur and the other in Vityaz). One had also previously been a member of Wagner, starting in September 2015 and switching to Schit in fall 2018. The families of two of the dead received death certificates signed by Russian military doctors based in Syria. Unlike Wagner, Schit was not able to obtain tanks, artillery, or self-propelled rocket systems. In fall 2018, Schit was recruiting for 82mm Vasilek mortar operators, but it is unclear if they successfully found candidates.²¹⁷

Equipment, Training, and Personnel

In the 2015-2016 timeframe, Wagner appeared well trained and well equipped, according to open-source reporting. Selection and training for Wagner employees before travel to Syria occurred at (or adjacent to) a Russian military base in Molkino, Krasnodar—home of the GRU 10th Special Purpose Brigade.²¹⁸ Press reports indicate Wagner fighters would receive up to 2 months of comprehensive training before deploying.²¹⁹ When in Syria at that time, Wagner received effectively unlimited amounts of training ammunition and were issued an assortment of heavy weapons: T-72 tanks,^f ²²⁰ BM-21 Grad launchers, and 122 mm D-30 howitzers.²²¹ Wagner person-

^f Two separate press reports both described members of Wagner as equipped with T-90 tanks. (Thomas Grove, 2015; Sergei Khazov-Cassia and Robert Coalson, 2018) However, these could be cases of mistaken identity. Later commentary by Russia watchers noted how variants of the T-72 can resemble T-90s in battlefield footage. (Michael Kofman, 2018; Oriana Pawlyk, 2018)

nel were photographed next to Russian MoD helicopters and airplanes, and allegedly equipped with purportedly GRU-exclusive kit.^{g 222}

Early numbers from Russian officials close to the MoD numbered the group at about 1,000 by December 2015.²²³ However, in mid-2017 and with the benefit of hindsight, Wagner members described the organization in Syria 2015-2016 as numbering from 1,500 to 2,000 at any given time (over 2,300 total), and composed of “four reconnaissance and assault companies, a group command, a tank company, a combined artillery group, reconnaissance and support units.”²²⁴ Three Wagner commanders interviewed by the press also estimated their numbers in Syria as somewhere around 2,000 as of 2018.²²⁵ The number of Russian civilians flying to Syria grew exponentially during Russia’s intervention, also corresponding with the patterns of Russian PMC involvement in the conflict.^{h 226} Open-source estimates of overall Wagner numbers in Syria range widely—likely due to their ability to quickly recruit and field personnel, and their episodic employment for specific offensives—but consistently grew over time,^{i 227} mirroring accounts that the group was aggressively recruiting.²²⁸ Accounting for rotation of forces, the total number of Russian fighters engaged in Syria under Wagner likely amounted to between 3,600 and 6,000 (with between 1,000 and 2,500 active at any given time).²²⁹ Whatever the real number, it is important to note that the proportion of Wagner fighters operating in Syria at any given time to regular Russian troops and airmen on the ground at the height of the official intervention (4,000) is considerably high—between one-fourth and almost two-thirds.²³⁰

g Multi-function engineering explosive –Mine-grenade Vkladysh.

h The number of Russian citizens flying to Syria in 2013 and 2014 reflected a baseline of about 1,800 each year. This rate remained steady until it multiplied by five in the second half of 2015, and doubled again to stabilize at a new high-water mark: almost 22,000 departures in 2016, over 25,000 in 2017, and remaining steady with 17,000 departures in the first half of 2018. (Maria Tsetkova, 2018)

i A MoD officer and source close to Wagner estimated the size of the group leading up to the liberation of Palmyra (March 2016) as “about 2,500 personnel, including as many as 1,600 permanently deployed in the zone of combat.” (Ilya Rozhdestvensky, 2018) Researchers with the *Conflict Intelligence Team* (CIT) estimated a total of 3,000 Wagner employees rotated to Syria between 2015 and 2017. (Owen Matthews, 2018) Documentation obtained by *Republic.ru* from a subdivision of the group allegedly listing the dog tag numbers of some Wagner employees (issued in ascending order, beginning at 0001) seemed to confirm that as of February 2018, Wagner employed at least 3,602 men. (Ilya Rozhdestvensky, 2018) In 2018, an investigative journalist in Russia estimated the total number of Wagner fighters having rotated through Syria at 6,000, with about 1,500 active at any given time—an estimate that an open source report on Russian PMCs out of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) assessed “does not seem unreasonable.” (Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, 2018)

However, soon after the successful liberation of Palmyra in March 2016 and a brief decline in operations through the latter half of 2016, the quality of recruits, equipment, training, and support all declined. Upon return to theater in January 2017 and since then, Russian PMCs in Syria “were no longer provided air or artillery support, supplies declined [and] they began to be equipped with obsolete weapons instead of modern ones.”²³¹ Other open-source reports²³² and press interviews with members of Wagner confirm this decline, as well as the loss of consistent training. There was now an “inadequate amount of time devoted to preparation for missions in Syria,”²³³ and with the decline in quantity of munitions provided to the group, “regular shooting practice was abandoned.”²³⁴ A Wagner commander described this time, saying “They took away the tanks and the weapons... They took back everything they had given earlier. Now the Wagner forces fight with Syrian weapons.”²³⁵ In the early 2017 effort to retake Palmyra, Wagner personnel were allegedly equipped with outmoded and far inferior equipment than the last engagement: lower quality small arms, machine guns, and limited ammunition;^j several SVD rifles and at most two AGS-17s were provided, but arrived late; T-62 tanks (four or five); and M-30 howitzers from 1938 (about 12).²³⁶

There are press reports that suggest this decline in quality and loss of significant Russian MoD support was the political fallout of a mid-2016 argument between Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu (see *Coordination with Russia and Others* below).²³⁷ Another potential cause might be the shift of the financial burden for sustaining Wagner from Russia to sponsors in Syria (the Syrian authorities, other private interests, or both²³⁸), leading to pay discrepancies,^k delayed or unreliable funding, lower quality recruits, less time for training, and poor equipment.²⁴⁰ The lower quality of recruits was accompanied by broader sourcing internationally.²⁴¹

Coordination with Russia and Others

Wagner and other Russian PMCs in Syria consistently coordinated with other actors aligned with the Assad regime. While Russian Federation and

j “Upon arrival in Syria at the beginning of 2017, according to the stories of the returnees, 20 rounds of ammunition were dispatched to the submachine gun, and four magazines and 120 cartridges were used as ammunition. Armament consisted of AK-47 automatic weapons of North Korean production, received from the Syrian side and several Kalashnikov machine guns PC and PKK. The second company received company machine guns of the 1946 model RP-46. In the Soviet Army, these weapons in the army were replaced by the PC and the PKK back in the 60s of the last century.” (*Fontanka*, 2017)

k Information on the salaries of Russian PMC employees in Syria is generally inconsistent and contradictory.

Russian MoD support and coordination appeared significant for a time, the nature and extent of coordination with Russian PMCs operating in Syria later became blurred, potentially suggesting a shift in C2 away from the Russian MoD to the Assad regime. This obscuring or potential change in the relationship between Wagner and the MoD seems to have taken place between the March 2016 recapture of Palmyra and January 2017—when Wagner employees returned to Syria to find a decline in support and materiel (see Equipment, Training, and Personnel above).

Russian PMCs in Syria were allegedly coordinated, tasked, and supervised by the FSB, GRU,²⁴² and in some cases the General Staff's Chief Administration²⁴³ in the 2016 timeframe, according to press reports citing sources with knowledge of their operations. A state-owned Russian news outlet reported that, according to individuals in the FSB and MoD, "the Wagner group is supervised by the GRU."²⁴⁴ Wagner commanders interviewed by the press in 2018 described the PMC as operating under Syrian command, but nevertheless closely coordinating with the Russian MoD. One commander described how this worked in battle, saying:

Every company has a connection to [Wagner] headquarters and there is an officer of the Russian military command there... He coordinates the air cover where an operation is under way. In general, the coordination is very precise. Sometimes it is a thing of beauty to see how perfectly the aviation and artillery support works out.²⁴⁵

Wagner took part in the March 2016 battle at Palmyra alongside Russian Special Operations Forces and the Syrian Army, with the support of an aggressive air campaign²⁴⁶—opening with 41 sorties against 146 targets over 24 hours.²⁴⁷ Participating Russian MoD forces included infantry, TOS-1 and BM-30 'Smerch' heavy multiple rocket launchers, and Mi-24 'Hind' helicopter gunships. Other Assad-aligned forces that participated in the battle include the Afghan Shia Liwa al-Fatimioun, Iraqi Shia militias, and Lebanese Hezbollah.²⁴⁸ Although ISIS would later recapture the city in December 2016,²⁴⁹ necessitating a second offensive early the next year (again with Russian PMC participation),²⁵⁰ the recapture of Palmyra was a significant victory for Russia at the time—an event celebrated with an official state concert in an ancient amphitheater in the city, complete with a celebrity conductor and televised address by President Vladimir Putin (see the figure on the opposite page).²⁵¹ Although Wagner's role in the battle was obscured in official propaganda,²⁵² members of the PMC received official military honors for their role that year.²⁵³



The close operational relationship between Wagner and the MoD changed in January 2017, when support from the MOD all but disappeared. According to Russian journalists interviewing direct sources, Wagner was left without air or artillery support, evacuation of the wounded, or supplies from the MoD.²⁵⁴ These developments coincided with a shift in Wagner's mission set and clientele. Russian firm Euro Polis (or Evro Polis; allegedly owned by Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin as a front for Wagner), with the help of Russian Energy Minister Aleksandr Novak, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Syria's state-owned General Petroleum Corp., agreeing to take back Islamic State-controlled oil and gas installations and guard them in exchange for a quarter of their output.²⁵⁵ According to Novak, the MOU was signed in December 2016,²⁵⁶ and an unauthenticated draft of the contract was published by the *Associated Press* in December 2017.²⁵⁷ In this vein, Russian officials were quoted in 2018 by Russian press saying that Wagner was operating for several unnamed "private investors," and that the PMC was funded by the Assad regime since 2017.²⁵⁸ No definitive explanation for the breakdown of MoD support for Wagner has been made public, but informed speculations have included a personal fallout between Prigozhin and Sergei Shoigu,²⁵⁹ Russian PMCs attracting too much public attention, lack of MoD confidence in the quality of Wagner's services,²⁶⁰ an institutional MoD resentment for Wagner's role in the Syrian conflict outside their C2, or efforts by military commanders to force Prigozhin to give them a cut of his earnings.²⁶¹

Regardless of the cause, while this shift in relationship away from the Russian MoD is reflected in a wide range of sources concerning the decline in funding, materiel, and support for Wagner in Syria, the loss of MoD coordination and support does not appear to have been complete or permanent. According to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), out of eight areas in eastern Syria where “Russian Proxies” were present—as of March 8, 2019—they were co-located with “Russian Forces” in five (incl. Arima, Mayadeen, and Palmyra).²⁶² The Russian military base in Molkino where Wagner was trained underwent significant expansions and improvements between 2013 and 2017, suggesting a significant investment and coordination of state resources.²⁶³ According to open source reporting, as of February 2018, Molkino remained a focal point for the assembly and training for Wagner, but resources available to them have declined.²⁶⁴

The partial shift in coordination is also apparent in the transportation of Russian PMC recruits into theater. A former Russian sailor detained and questioned by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) testified that, during his service on the Russian cruiser Varyag in 2015 until 2017, he witnessed the vessel carry Wagner contractors, heavy weapons, and ammunition to port in Tartus, Syria. This is denied by the Russian MoD,²⁶⁵ but an earlier press report cited a Wagner commander who described a similar scene unloading crates of munitions at the port of Tartus.²⁶⁶ Nevertheless, by January 2017 and into 2018, Wagner employees were travelling to Syria by chartered flights out of Rostov to Latakia and Damascus on A320s operated by Syrian airline Cham Wings. However, one member of Wagner speaking to *Reuters* noted that they would also occasionally travel on Russian military aircraft when the contractors do not all fit in the chartered jets.²⁶⁷

Wagner participation in the September-November 2017 battle for Deir ez-Zor—framed as a strategic, nearly final victory over ISIS, but also against Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the area²⁶⁸—is the clearest evidence that the loss of MoD support in early 2017 did not mean a complete end of PMC-MoD cooperation in Syria. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Russian MoD had C2 over Wagner in the course of operations; it is possible that this cooperation only occurred in the context of the Russian MoD supporting the ground offensive of Syrian forces, which operated with support from Wagner. Other than the Syrian army, ground forces also included Hezbollah and other aligned Shia militias. The support provided by the Russian MoD was primarily through strategic bombing (over 150 attack sorties per day according to Russian press reports²⁶⁹) and cruise missile attacks against ISIS targets.²⁷⁰ Another form of support was Russian sappers brought into Syria via An-124 transport jets to install a 210 meter floating bridge (PP-2005) across the Euphrates River. This support also presum-

ably involved Russian ground forces, as two commanders were among the casualties.^{1 271} Up to 100 Wagner fighters died in the operations, and when extended lines of communication through the desert were harassed by ISIS, two Russians were captured and executed.²⁷² One press report quoted sources with direct knowledge of the battle who described the effectiveness of the Russians on the ground as “not that impressive... not many professionals in the team and too much blood.”²⁷³

However, the most apparently significant and dramatic breakdown in Wagner-MoD coordination occurred in February, 2018, when pro-Assad forces supported by Wagner fighters were soundly defeated by U.S. air power. At a press briefing soon after the engagement, Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White described the event:

Syrian pro-regime forces moved in a battalion-sized unit formation, supported by artillery, tanks, multiple-launch rocket systems and mortars. After 20 to 30 artillery and tank rounds landed within 500 meters of the SDF headquarters location, Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by the coalition, targeted the aggressors with a combination of air and artillery strikes. Coalition advisors were with the SDF, and this action was taken in self-defense. Pro-regime vehicles and personnel, who were turned around and headed back west, were not targeted. The coalition observed a slow buildup of pro-regime forces over the past week. Coalition officials alerted Russian officials of the SDF presence via the deconfliction line in advance of the attack. The deconfliction line -- the deconfliction process served its purpose. Coalition officials were in regular communication with Russian counterparts before, during and after the attack. Russian officials assured coalition officials they would not engage coalition forces in the vicinity. One SDF soldier was wounded, and there were no coalition casualties. Our forces have the inherent right to self-defense.²⁷⁴

Later press accounts revealed more details about the engagement. While holding the Conoco plant with SDF and Kurdish forces in support of a separate offensive against ISIS in the region, the U.S. team of about 30 soldiers watched the forces assemble along the Euphrates River—and monitored transmissions showed some of them were speaking Russian. The position

1 Lieutenant General Valery Asapov of the 5th Army in the Eastern Military District and Colonel Valery Fedyanin, commander of the 61st Marines Brigade of the Northern Fleet. (Felgenhauer, 2019)

was first bombarded with howitzer artillery fire before the assembled forces advanced with supporting mortar fire. The attacking forces—300-500 with 27 vehicles (incl. both T-55 and T-72 main battle tanks, as well as APCs)—included Wagner (“5th and 2nd sections”²⁷⁵), Syrian government soldiers, and militias (allegedly Lebanese Hezbollah²⁷⁶ and detachments from both Liwa al-Baqir and Afghan Fatemeyoun²⁷⁷). After calls by U.S. defense officials to Russian counterparts failed to stop the attack, a U.S. reaction team, Marine artillery, and air strikes defeated the attacking force in about four hours.²⁷⁸ However, this account is contradicted by one press report that alleges Russian PMC forces were stationed in the area, but not part of either formation advancing on the coalition-held position.²⁷⁹ Official accounts by the Russian and Syrian governments also deviate significantly from that in official DoD statements and U.S.-sourced press reports.

U.S. accounts to the press insist that they were in contact with Russia through deconfliction lines during, before, and after the attack.²⁸⁰ Moscow, however, claims the U.S. only communicated with them after the coalition strikes, despite also maintaining that the pro-Assad forces involved had not coordinated with the Russian command.²⁸¹ Nevertheless, Russia’s ambassador to the UN made public that the incident would be brought up during closed door consultations at the UN Security Council.²⁸² Then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis described the battle as “a perplexing situation,” that he had “no idea why they would attack,” and that “you can’t expect somebody to deconflict something they can’t control.”²⁸³ A Russian press report on the battle bluntly stated “They do not report to the Defense Ministry. Therefore, the Defense Ministry bears no responsibility for them.”²⁸⁴ This alleged lack of C2 over Wagner and associated pro-Assad forces calls back the question of the shift in Wagner’s relationship away from the Russian MoD to local Syrian authorities through the Energy Ministry-negotiated contract with Euro Polis (see above). Wagner members interviewed by the press expressed suspicions that the MoD had promised air support, but then abandoned the Russian PMC in order to embarrass Prigozhin.²⁸⁵ However, other press reports alleged the MoD provided for the evacuation of injured Wagner fighters to military hospitals in Russia (contrary to earlier accounts to the press that this support was lost to Wagner in early 2017).²⁸⁶ Casualty estimates ranged from the Russian MoD official statement of 25 wounded pro-Syrian volunteers²⁸⁷ (allegedly only 5 Russian citizens dead), to over 300 dead or wounded.²⁸⁸

A Kremlin spokesperson denied any knowledge of “other Russians [outside the Russian armed forces] who might be in Syria,”²⁸⁹ and anonymous members of the Russian MoD confirmed to journalists the operation was not approved by the Russian command in Syria, instead characterizing the

assault as a local fight over oil.²⁹⁰ However, there is reason to doubt the claims that the Russian Federation did not approve the attack or could not have acted to stop it. Press reports suggest that Yevgeny Prigozhin was in touch with the Kremlin and Syrian officials both shortly before and after the attack, allegedly communicating to senior members of the Assad government that he received approval for the operation from an unnamed Russian minister.²⁹¹ Prigozhin also allegedly had to assure aides at the Kremlin that such a mistake would never happen again.²⁹² According to one open source assessment, “Russia both supported the attack and simultaneously gave the impression of genuine efforts to prevent the attack in order to confuse senior U.S. decision makers.”²⁹³ After the battle, a Russian press report described the decision on Wagner’s continued presence in the region as forthcoming, but quoted a source close to MoD as saying “there is no question of disbanding the PMC.”²⁹⁴

As time has passed, the conflict ebbed, and numerous press reported made Wagner widely known, the Russian government has been more open about PMCs in Syria. In June 2019, during his annual question and answer call in show, President Putin finally admitted the presence of PMCs in Syria but denied they had any connection to the Russian government. In response to a question about the deaths of PMCs, he said, “There seems to be private companies, specifically private security companies, under the auspices of which the [killed Russians] are acting [in Syria]. This is not the Russian state and they are not participants in hostilities, unfortunately or fortunately.” He went on further to describe how they were risking their lives and contributing to the fight against terrorism as part of their duties in solving “national economic problems” associated with “oil production and the development of fields.” However, he underlined, “This is not the Russian state, nor the Russian Army, so we are not commenting any further.” This description keeps them well outside Russian laws on mercenary activity. This followed the themes of a December 2018 press conference where Putin was asked about the legality of Wagner and stated, “regarding their activities abroad, if, I repeat again, they do not violate Russian law, they have the right to work and push their business interests anywhere in the world.”²⁹⁵

Legal Enablers and Parameters

The friendliness of the Assad regime in Syria and their need for military assistance provides the Russian Federation with a highly permissive environment for the use of Russian PMCs in the country.



Ukraine

In late 2013, Ukraine was expected to sign an association agreement with the European Union (EU). However, this would have precluded the country from membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), so Moscow imposed escalating economic reprisals and threats on Kyiv, to the point that Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich announced a surprise reversal. The announcement sparked the Euromaidan movement—a long series of pro-Western, anti-Russian protests and clashes from late 2013 to early 2014 in Kyiv and across western Ukraine—which, despite efforts by Moscow, removed Yanukovich from office. Russia responded with military operations to invade and annex the Crimean Peninsula and support separatist forces in eastern Ukraine.

Alleged Use on the Crimean Peninsula

In late February 2014, Russian special forces personnel in unmarked uniforms appeared in Crimea and took control of certain government, airport, and other facilities. Euphemistically referred to as “polite people” or “little green men,” these officially unattributed forces operated alongside other military formations to immobilize Ukrainian forces and eventually take full control of the peninsula.²⁹⁶ Several open source reports allege that Russian PMCs participated in the operations leading to the annexation of Crimea (specifically an early iteration of Wagner that was at the time an informal grouping of Slavonic Corps remnants with locals and others).²⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the extent or veracity of a Russian PMC role in the invasion of Crimea is not confirmed, and there appears to be no direct evidence available to verify these claims.²⁹⁸ Russian Cossack units, however, played an overt role in the occupation as fighting forces, guards at checkpoints, and street enforcement to suppress protests.²⁹⁹

Eastern Ukraine (Donbas)

Soon after Russia had annexed the Crimean Peninsula, pro-Russian separatist demonstrations in the Donbas region of southeast Ukraine escalated to a military conflict waged by two separatist bodies, one for each oblast in Donbas: the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR). The forces supporting the DPR and LPR are a mix of their own militias, Russian Cossacks, Serbian volunteers, Chechens, the Russian MoD, and Russian PMCs.³⁰⁰ Wagner fought in Ukraine,³⁰¹ and was

specifically sanctioned by the United States for their role in the conflict,³⁰² but there are also unconfirmed open source reports that even more Russian PMCs participated in the conflict.³⁰³ However, the operational role of Russian PMCs was not overly prominent. At least one other study on the war in Ukraine assessed the role of Russian PMCs to be limited, to the point that the authors omitted them from their analysis.³⁰⁴

While Wagner did participate in the conflict in Donbas, it appears that it did so in an early stage in the PMC's development. In interviews with journalists, Wagner commanders described 2014 saying the separatists were "fighting around Slovyansk and a lot of people wanted to go and help."³⁰⁵ This soon coalesced into groups of fighters—roughly 250 per group—crossing the border from Russia into Ukraine in June 2014. A Wagner commander described the group at the time as less formalized, saying "They were basically company-sized tactical groups... There were no private military contractors then, but people were paid on time."³⁰⁶ Wagner left Ukraine in late 2015 before being sent into Syria.³⁰⁷

Uses

Russian PMCs played an actively offensive role in the conflict, participating in offensives against Ukrainian government forces, including a strategic victory in the Battle of Debaltseve in January and February 2015.³⁰⁸ Alongside separatist militias, Wagner directed artillery barrages and infantry maneuvers that forced Ukrainian forces to fall back. According to the Ukrainian SBU, Wagner also conducted anti-air strikes, including the shooting down of an Il-76 aircraft at Luhansk International Airport that killed 40 Ukrainian paratroopers.³⁰⁹ Sources speaking to the press also described Wagner as "protecting factories and pro-Russian rebel leaders."³¹⁰ As they would later be used in Syria, Wagner in Ukraine participated in high-risk operations—advancing in the first waves of attacks and storming enemy positions and population centers—all of which brought the group high casualties.³¹¹ Overall, Wagner in Ukraine was described as ruthless, effective,³¹² and exhibiting a high level of competency that allowed them to perform missions requiring significant military proficiency.³¹³

Unique to the conflict in Donbas is the use of Russian PMCs against proxies who moved too far outside Moscow's control. Open source reports indicate that such actions included the assassinations and apprehension of separatist warlords, disarming of separatist units, and enforcement against Russian Cossacks who became independent-minded after efforts to connect occupied Crimea with the Donbas region (making 'Novorossiya' or 'New Russia') stalled.³¹⁴

Equipment, Training, and Personnel

Russian proxy forces in Donbas (presumably including the Russian PMCs) were significantly dependent on the Russian Armed Forces for support. After Wagner's known participation in the conflict, in February 2017 the former defense minister of the DNR Igor Girkin spoke of separatist forces as being more "mercenary than militia," and that they would implode within 48 hours of losing Russian support.³¹⁵

Significant open source reporting exists on the weapons and other materiel used by separatist forces in Donbas, but whether or not there is a clear distinction between equipment used by Russian PMCs and that used by other proxies is not clear. Early analysis of separatist arms and equipment published during Wagner's presence in Donbas concluded that, while the illicit provision of weapons by external parties was very likely (including armor, heavy weapons systems, guided light weapons, light weapons, and small arms), the most significant source of materiel for separatist forces were domestic.³¹⁶ However, more recent open source reporting provides some level of granularity on vehicles and armor. Footage purported to depict Wagner participating in the early 2015 Battle of Debaltseve shows the PMC operating several armored and military vehicles during the operation, including: Ural trucks (6), tanks (5, at least 2 of which were T-72s), MT-LB vehicles (2 with anti-air guns), UAZ pickup trucks (2), a KamAZ truck, a BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicle (IFV), and BPM-97 Vystral mine-resistant, ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles. Other local separatist proxies in Donbas also received BPM-97 Vystral MRAPs, reinforcing the difficulty in differentiating between equipment used by Russian PMCs in Ukraine and equipment used by Russian proxies generally.³¹⁷ Materiel support from Russia into Donbas entered Ukraine through the southwestern Russian Oblast of Rostov (also an allegedly significant logistical node for Russian PMCs entering Syria; see above).³¹⁸

The composition of separatist units used by the LPR and DPR to fight against the Ukrainian government in Donbas have included Russian PMCs (Wagner), Russian intelligence and military personnel, local recruits, Russian political groups (nationalists, communists, Cossacks, and others), defectors from Ukrainian forces, as well as other civilian and criminal organizations (sports hooligans, biker gangs).³¹⁹ Early recruitment for Russian PMC participation in Donbas were ex-Russian servicemen sourced primarily from the North Caucasus, according to press reports.³²⁰ While open-source data on the pay received by recruits vary widely, it was less than what similar recruits would later be able to receive in Syria.³²¹ Beyond Russian PMCs, other groups used to recruit proxies and volunteers for the

fight in Donbas included nationalist and other extreme political groups, as well as public and Internet recruiting campaigns.³²² Since their time in Donbas, Wagner recruited from separatist militias and volunteers in eastern Ukraine to fight elsewhere, according to the account of a Donetsk fighter recruited to fight in Syria.³²³

Coordination with Russia and Others

The Russian PMC presence in the varied composition of separatist units (see above), alongside coordinated operations against Ukrainian forces, indicate a significant level of cooperation with other proxies in the region. Beyond coordination with elements of the Russian Federation, a source in separatist circles claimed that Wagner in Donbas was “integrated into the GRU, but also open for private customers on the side.”³²⁴

Open source analysis performed and published by Bellingcat on the role of the Russian Federation in Donbas—supported by public interviews given by separatist leaders, intelligence published by the Ukrainian SBU, and other open-source data—has produced the clearest public demonstration of Russian GRU command and control over Russian PMC forces operating abroad. GRU staff officer Col. Oleg Ivannikov (aliases Andrey Ivanovich and Orion) was deployed to Ukraine in 2014 and early 2015, allegedly handling the LPR political leadership, advising on security matters, supervising the procurement and transfer of arms across the Russian border into Ukraine, as well as coordinating and supervising the military operations of both separatist and Wagner forces. Referring to him by his alias, a former separatist commander identified Ivannikov as directly supervising Wagner commander Dmitry Utkin, providing funding, protection, and instructions to the PMC.³²⁵ Additionally, the audio of a phone call intercepted and published by the Ukrainian SBU—allegedly between Col. Ivannikov and Utkin—suggests that the Wagner leader reported to, and took orders from, Col. Ivannikov.³²⁶

Legal Enablers and Parameters

Although they were operating in country against the Ukrainian government, the effective control of the LPR and DPR over Luhansk and Donetsk meant eastern Ukraine amounted to a permissive environment for Russian PMCs. The location of these oblasts along the Russian border also facilitated ease of access to the operational environment. However, there is at least one press report that indicates there were some legal obstacles to some Russian PMCs operating in Ukraine. Both Moran Security and RSB Group allegedly refrained from participating in the conflict for legal reasons and to protect

preexisting foreign contracts.³²⁷ Whether or not the legal reasons include Moran's involvement with the ill-fated Slavonic Corps in Syria is not clear.



Central African Republic

Dissatisfied with the support his government received from France, Central African Republic (CAR) President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2017 met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Sochi and appealed for assistance in rebuilding the CAR army and loosening the UN arms embargo that had been in effect since 2013. According to a Kremlin press release, Russia would, in exchange, explore “the possibilities of the mutually beneficial development of Central African natural resources.”³²⁸ A Western diplomat would later describe the situation in CAR, saying “The Russians are smart... With France’s withdrawal in recent years, Russia saw their chance to make some money and took it. And CAR’s placement in the heart of Africa makes the country a gate to the north, south, east and west on the rest of the continent.”³²⁹

Open source reporting that Russian PMCs would begin working in the CAR emerged in January 2018—a month after Moscow had successfully secured an arms embargo exemption from the UN Security Council to send shipments of Russian-made weapons (see below). Russia also sought approval to train CAR troops in their use. Early assessments attributed the move to economic ventures and a means to build political good will with the CAR in the UN.³³⁰ Such favor is part of a broader effort by Russia. After being sanctioned by the West for their actions in Ukraine, the Russian Federation signed at least 19 military cooperation deals with countries in Africa—the largest voting bloc in the UN General Assembly with 54 members, who rotate through three seats on the Security Council.³³¹ Later that year, rumors that many of the Russians present there were military contractors linked to Wagner became ubiquitous among diplomats and other international officials working in CAR.³³² CAR also became consistently mentioned by Russian veterans groups as an area where Russian PMCs operate,³³³ and subsequent Russian requests to the UN for more arms embargo exemptions were blocked.³³⁴

Uses

The uses of Russian PMCs in CAR are various. A CAR presidential spokesman declined to comment to journalists about what activities Russians present in the country were engaged in.³³⁵ Most apparent is their use as “civilian instructors”³³⁶ to train CAR government forces in combat operations and the use of Russian-made weapons (see above).³³⁷ Press reports indicate that at least some of the contractors arrived by plane with the arms themselves.³³⁸ The Russian instructors appear to take an active role alongside CAR forces filling a security function. As documented in the final report of the UN panel of experts on developments in CAR for the UN Security Council, the CAR minister of defense was cited as saying that Russian instructors are deployed alongside CAR forces “to ensure that weapons are handled properly and that the skills acquired during the training are applied correctly once deployed.”³³⁹ Russian instructors also participated in transporting construction materials from the Sudan into the territory of CAR, convoys within CAR, and provided security to hospitals and hospital personnel.³⁴⁰ Russian instructors have also provided training for CAR law enforcement officers and gendarmes.³⁴¹ Russian PMCs in CAR are also serving as military advisers,³⁴² and associated figures are providing senior national security advice to the Touadéra government.

Russians have also been seen and photographed providing personal security for CAR President Touadéra—first civilian instructors, followed by Russians wearing patches indicating they work for Sewa Security Services. According to a media report, Sewa is a part of a subsidiary of what appears to be a CAR company, Lobaye Invest (described later).³⁴³ The UN panel of experts cites representatives of the Russian Embassy as indicating the presence of Russian instructors with the Presidential Guard “was part of a training exercise,” but in April 2018 they were replaced by six Russian nationals hired by Sewa—armed with exempted weapons by CAR Ministry of Defence request, according to the Russian Embassy.³⁴⁴ The Russian PSC Moran Security (involved in the creation of the Russian PMC Slavonic Corps) mentions operations in CAR on their company website.³⁴⁵

Another use of Russian PMCs present in CAR is the provision of security services for mining projects (diamonds, precious minerals),³⁴⁶ including in rebel-held



areas.³⁴⁷ It was the presence of such forces outside government controlled territories that three independent Russian journalists were investigating when they were infamously murdered in July 2018 (Russia aggressively denies involvement).³⁴⁸ The company Lobaye Invest—a subsidiary of larger Russian business interests founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin (Wagner financier and close associate of President Putin)—received renewable 3-year exploration rights in six areas of Yawa, Boda Prefecture in southwestern CAR for gold and diamonds (June 2018).³⁴⁹ However, control of mineral deposits in CAR is contested by armed groups across the country, likely making reliable access to such sites contingent upon an end to the civil war (see below). Regional observers have described Russia’s use of PMCs in CAR to the press as a cost-saving means to pursue both security and economic objectives, but that without the necessary peace to ensure consistent access to precious minerals, there might not be a return on the investment.³⁵⁰

Coordination with Russia and Others

Beyond the facilitation of civilian instructors in CAR by the Russian Federation, several other factors suggest close coordination between Russian PMC forces in the country and the Russian government. First, Valery Zakharov—former member of Russian intelligence, and associate alleged Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin according to press reports³⁵¹—serves as a security adviser to CAR President Touadéra and also lives at the headquarters of Lobaye Invest.³⁵² The Russian MoD has also described plans to embed a five-person team with their counterparts in CAR.³⁵³ However, Zakharov’s role among Touadéra’s other advisers is vague and detached, according to press reports citing security sources in the country.³⁵⁴

The arms donation and presence of Russian PMCs appear to have been an avenue for the Russian Federation to expand economic and diplomatic activities in CAR,³⁵⁵ where Zakharov has played a visible and active role. While avoiding details, Zakharov has spoken enthusiastically about possibilities for natural resource extraction in CAR. When asked where he sees CAR in 30 years, he replied: “The goal is to create something like the United Arab Emirates here. There are many resources. If they are exploited to the benefit of this country, it will change everything.”³⁵⁶

Diplomatically, Russia and Zakharov—along with Sudan and with CAR endorsement—have facilitated meetings between several armed groups in the region to discuss disarmament and natural resource revenue distribution.³⁵⁷ Both meetings occurred in Khartoum (July and August, 2018), resulting in the signing of a general declaration of understanding with the possibility of more meetings.³⁵⁸ The meetings were also cited by the UN panel of experts

as involving the violation of travel bans against individuals involved in the negotiations,³⁵⁹ and sparked concerns that Russia was attempting to establish a parallel and competing venue for peace negotiations in CAR.³⁶⁰ Russia has also spearheaded a sizeable cultural diplomacy campaign in the country—including a beauty contest, radio station, and youth soccer tournament. Funding for many of these efforts came, not from the Russian Foreign Ministry, but from Lobaye Invest (see above). Most notably, the Lobaye-funded beauty contest was attended by both Zakharov and Russian Ambassador to CAR Sergei Lobanov—but it was Zakharov who took precedence at the event, handing the prize to the winner, causing observers to wonder whether the Russian Embassy or private Russian interests were in the lead.³⁶¹ In January 2019, Ambassador Lobanov was dismissed by presidential decree and replaced by Vladimir Titorenko, who previously served as ambassador to Iraq, Algeria, and Qatar.³⁶²

Evidence alleging direct Russian Federation support and coordination with Russian PMCs in CAR (as well as Sudan and other African and Middle East destinations) was published by the Ukrainian Security Agency (SBU) and investigated by open source analysts at *Bellingcat*. The SBU claimed to intercept passenger manifests for planes chartered by the Russian MoD in late 2018, which they allege show that Wagner employees on those flights were issued passports in sequential sets by a single passport desk located in Moscow—allegedly the same desk that issued passports with cover identities to GRU officers.^m “[I]f proven true,” observed the *Bellingcat* Investigation Team, “they would implicate the Russian government in not simply tolerating Wagner’s overseas military operations... but in being actively involved in the facilitation.”³⁶³ Leveraging leaked travel records to analyze and validate the data published by the SBU, *Bellingcat* was able to conclude that the persons listed were associated with the Russian PMC Wagner, and that some of their passports were issued by Unit 770001—whether that alone proved a direct GRU association, rather than the Russian MoD generally, was less clear. “However,” they concluded, “the rest of the available evidence... strongly supports the hypothesis that PMC Wagner is indeed a proxy and serves at the command of the Ministry of Defense, and in particular the GRU.”³⁶⁴

m Separately reported by *Bellingcat* in 2018, this desk is referred to as “Central Migration Office Unit 770-001 (‘Unit 770001’),” and was allegedly used for both the two GRU officers accused in the 2018 poisoning of Russian defectors in Salisbury, England, as well as two different GRU undercover officers indicted in the alleged 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro. Unit 770001 was also allegedly used to issue passports to Russian civilians linked to the Russian MoD by employment or family, as well as very important foreign persons given Russian citizenship. (*Bellingcat* Investigation Team, 2019; *Bellingcat* Investigation Team, 2018)

As regards with coordination with actors other than the Russian Federation, as was already noted, Russian PMCs in CAR have allegedly worked with mining company Lobaye Invest to guard diamond and gold sites in the country (see above). At least one analyst out of Russia has also alleged that Russian PMCs in CAR and elsewhere have secured “standalone contracts.”³⁶⁵

Russian PMCs have also been witnessed by UN observers in close coordination with host nation forces in numerous operations.ⁿ Such operations include joint patrols, jointly manned checkpoints, transportation of construction materials from the Sudan into the territory of CAR, convoys within CAR, provision of security to hospitals and hospital personnel, and deployments to numerous regions of CAR to assert State authority and establish a garrison-based army across the country.^o According to the UN panel of experts, the Committee “stressed the importance of coordination... regarding the training of the Central African Republic security forces,” in response to which Russian Federation “confirmed that the activities of the... instructors would focus solely on assistance to the security forces of the Central African Republic in the context of security sector reform”³⁶⁶

Equipment, Training, and Personnel

Evidence indicates that at least some Russian PMCs operating in CAR are equipped with the embargo-exempted arms and munitions donated to CAR by the Russian Federation.^{p 367} The UN panel of experts noted that, according to the Russian Embassy, Russians with Sewa Security Services operating with the CAR Presidential Guard were armed with exempted weapons by CAR Ministry of Defence request.³⁶⁸ On top of this, the documentation of serial numbers from donated weapons was flawed. Detailed inspection of the weapons was delayed until after a majority of the weapons had already been distributed to CAR forces, so many weapons could only be confirmed through weapons distribution lists. Several weapons listed in the documentation provided to the UN Sanctions Committee could not be located at all, and several inspected weapons bore serial numbers not on the original list.³⁶⁹ These could be honest errors, but could also suggest deliberate obfus-

n This assumes that “Russian instructors” described by the UN panel of experts can properly be described as Russian PMCs. (Romain Esmenjaud et al, 2018)

o CAR deployments alongside Russian instructors include “Bambari, Bangassou, Bangui, Berengo, Bouar, Dekoa, Paoua and Sibut.” (Romain Esmenjaud et al, 2018) Russian PMCs were not alleged to have been active in any combat operations in CAR as of this writing.

p The shipments were enough to equip two battalions—a total of 1,300 men. The shipments included 900 pistols (Makarov), 5,200 assault rifles (AKM), 140 sniper rifles, 840 Kalashnikov machine guns, 270 rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and 20 anti-aircraft guns. (AFP, 2017; MEMRI, 2018)

cation in order to arm Russian PMCs with weapons shipped into the country with UN Security Council blessing.

Russian PMC personnel are providing training to CAR forces, so Russian participation in training can likely be assumed. However, this does not mean that Russian PMC employees surreptitiously present in CAR for non-training purposes are receiving sufficient training.

The Russian Federation and Valery Zakharov have publicly commented on and provided the UN with official numbers of Russian personnel and instructors in CAR (at times describing them as “reservists” from the Russian Ministry of Defense³⁷⁰), but independent estimates vary widely and press reports cite Western diplomats as suspecting the numbers are higher than officially acknowledged. The openly acknowledged and official numbers consist of an initial deployment of 175 instructors (170 civilian and 5 military), followed by a second of 60 more.³⁷¹ Estimates quoted by Zakharov to the press have been between 250³⁷² and 255, but press reports indicate that these numbers do not include an undisclosed increase in military instructors.³⁷³ A Cossack source associated with Russian PMCs estimated in late 2018 that there could be 1,000 such personnel in CAR.³⁷⁴

Legal Enablers and Parameters

The UN mission in CAR and UN Security Council process appears to have provided significant means to legitimize and facilitate Russian Federation activities in the country with and through Russian PMCs. As was the case in Syria, the invitation and friendly reception of the host country provides a highly permissive environment for the use of Russian PMCs for the pursuit of Russian government and private sector interests. In January 2019, the CAR Ministry of Defence expressed openness to the establishment of a permanent Russian military base in CAR.³⁷⁵ According to press reports, Russian trainers are currently based out of the Palais de Berengo, former home of Emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa, approximately 80 km from Bangui.³⁷⁶



Sudan

A country persistently ravaged by civil wars and ethnic violence, Sudan under President Omar al-Bashir—the first sitting head of state ever indicted by the ICC—enjoyed close relations with Russia for some time before the

arrival of Russian PMCs. While sanctioned by Western powers, Bashir's government secured an approximately \$1 billion deal in 2017 to purchase 4th generation Russian SU-24 fighter jets (plus equipment upgrades and training), as well as guarantees to buy 1 million metric tons of Russian grain in 2018.³⁷⁷ In November 2017, President Bashir—in defiance of an ICC travel ban—traveled to Sochi for a meeting with President Vladimir Putin. During the meeting, President Bashir expressed his government's "need of protection from the aggressive acts of the United States," going on to say "We are currently launching a programme to modernise our armed forces and we agreed with the defence minister that Russia will contribute to this."³⁷⁸ Bashir also invited Russia to build a naval base on the Red Sea.³⁷⁹ Bashir had a July 2018 meeting with Putin in Moscow that expressed shared commitment to military development, and a tentative military agreement with Russia was drafted in January 2019.³⁸⁰

During the writing of this report, President Bashir was removed and arrested in a coup d'état, and a military council took control of Sudan.³⁸¹ Russian lawmakers criticized the coup, drawing comparisons with Ukraine, Syria, and Venezuela. Chairman of the Duma's International Affairs Committee Leonid Slutsky insisted that the Russian partnership with Sudan would continue: "No matter how the new government is configured, there is no doubt that they will seek cooperation with Russia in the near future."³⁸² Analysts have pointed to the removal of Bashir as highlighting weaknesses in Russia's efforts in Africa,³⁸³ and as undermining their claims to provide security for friendly national leaders from overthrow.³⁸⁴

Uses

Russian PMCs (allegedly Wagner) were used to train Sudanese military personnel, and allegedly special operations forces of Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS).³⁸⁵ What were said to be Russian PMC personnel were also observed in the streets near NISS operations suppressing anti-Bashir protests in Khartoum in late December 2018, but accounts that they played an active role in the suppression of protesters are conflicted³⁸⁶ and denied by the Kremlin.³⁸⁷ Russian PMCs have also allegedly acted as military advisers in Sudan.³⁸⁸ Armed Russian personnel guard mining sites (gold, uranium, and diamond³⁸⁹) for Russian companies with extraction rights in Sudan.³⁹⁰ Finally, some witness accounts indicate that Russians helped with military construction activities (specifically a sandy area for the reception of helicopters in South Darfur³⁹¹).

Russians with military experience acting as trainers has a long history in Sudan, as evidenced by the 2008 death of a Russian MIG-29 pilot in

Darfur.³⁹² Russian-speaking individuals were first reported to be performing training tasks in Sudan by open source analysts in December 2017,³⁹³ while other press reports estimated the arrival of Russian PMCs in early January 2018.³⁹⁴ President Bashir later confirmed the presence of “Russian specialists... preparing Sudanese military personnel” during a meeting with Putin on July 14, 2018.³⁹⁵ Finally, in response to allegations that Russian PMC personnel were involved in the suppression of protests, a Kremlin spokesperson confirmed their presence, but denied they participated in any suppression of protests, and claimed they had no relationship with the Russian government.³⁹⁶

Equipment, Training, and Personnel

There is little information on how Russian PMCs in Sudan were equipped. One of several Russian guards outside a mining site was described as “a sniper” by a protester,³⁹⁷ and Russian-speaking personnel in Khartoum were photographed in an apparently up-armored Ural-4320 utility truck.³⁹⁸

Estimates of the number of Russian PMC personnel in Sudan in 2018 have ranged between “about 150 operatives”³⁹⁹ to “about 500” witnessed alongside Sudanese forces in South Darfur.⁴⁰⁰ The Ukrainian SBU allegedly exposed the identities of 149 Russian PMC (specifically Wagner) personnel operating in Sudan, alleging they “directly partook in suppressing democratic protests.”⁴⁰¹ SBU Chief of Staff Ihor Huskov also publicly claimed that his agency detected that Wagner was recruiting fighters sent to Sudan from occupied Crimea.⁴⁰² Observers have also speculated that the Russians training soldiers in Sudan may not be Russian PMCs, but either GRU personnel or dual-hatted depending on the circumstance or operation.⁴⁰³

Coordination with Russia and Others

While confirming the presence of “private security companies” in Sudan to dispute claims that Russians participated in the suppression of protests, a Kremlin spokesperson said “Their task... is limited to training staff for the military and law enforcement agencies of the Republic of Sudan,” but also insisted that they “have nothing to do with Russian state bodies.”⁴⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Russian PMCs in Sudan appear to have closely coordinated relationships with then-Sudanese authorities, Russian mining companies in the country, and the Russian Federation.

Open source reports on the December 2017 meeting with Presidents Bashir and Putin suggest the facilitation of a deal where a company owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin (M Invest LLC) was given gold mining concessions—

and the same company allegedly arranged for the deployment of Russian PMC personnel. Vladimir Neyelov described this and other similar deals as leveraging Russian PMCs in:

political agreements about ensuring the security and physical protection of the central government and state authorities, training by the Russian experts of the African military personnel (a kind of personnel reserve), and all this in exchange for exclusive rights in concessions and extraction of mineral resources, as well as other preferences for the work of Russian business.⁴⁰⁵

The Ukrainian SBU alleges that, although Wagner personnel were flown to Sudan on Tu-154Ms with tickets bought by M Invest, the flights themselves were conducted by the 223rd Flight Squad of the Russian MoD.⁴⁰⁶ Documentation and passport details published by the SBU also claim to show that the passports issued to Wagner personnel flying to Sudan were facilitated by the GRU, or at the very least the Russian MoD (see the appendix: Central African Republic).⁴⁰⁷

Coordination with Sudanese armed forces and law enforcement included training⁴⁰⁸, military construction⁴⁰⁹, and allegedly response to protests—in either a passive or active role—in Khartoum⁴¹⁰ as well as at mining sites operated by Russian companies (a protester at the scene described “The Russian guards... [as] supported by Sudanese police”).⁴¹¹

Legal Enablers and Parameters

The friendliness of the Bashir regime in Sudan and their need for security and economic assistance provided the Russian Federation with a highly permissive environment for the use of Russian PMCs in the country. However, the overthrow of Bashir in a coup d’état on April 11, 2019 make the future of Russian PMC operations in Sudan uncertain as of this writing.

Information concerning the alleged involvement of Russian PMCs in the



Libya

Libyan Civil War is limited, but the geopolitical contexts and indicators are similar to other cases where Russian PMCs intervened, and observers have noted it as a country of particular interest.⁴¹² Libya’s place in Russia’s efforts

to contain extremism abroad is similar to Sudan and Syria,⁴¹³ and Libyan National Army (LNA) Field Marshal Khalif Haftar attended a November 2018 meeting in Moscow with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin's presence at the meeting was only revealed due to a video released by the LNA.⁴¹⁴ Despite this meeting and allegations of military assistance to Haftar, Moscow maintained relations with the widely recognized "government of national accord" in Tripoli.⁴¹⁵

Russian PMCs and PSCs have attested to limited roles in Libya prior to 2018. The RSB-Group PSC has engaged in "mine clearance in Libya" according to their website,⁴¹⁶ and the founder of MAR attested in 2015 that his PMC "has been engaged in the evacuation of wounded personnel from Libya."⁴¹⁷ However, observers and analysts have noted that Wagner "appears to have fought at the request of the Russian government" in Libya,⁴¹⁸ even "possibly" regular Army special forces as of the latter half of 2018 in support of Haftar.⁴¹⁹ Libya was cited as an area of Russian PMC operations by Russian veterans' organizations, both speaking to journalists⁴²⁰ and in an appeal to the ICC to investigate Russia's use of PMCs.⁴²¹ Libya is also one of several countries where Russian PMCs have allegedly taken on contracts to protect "hydrocarbon extraction sites and transmission infrastructure."⁴²²

In October 2018, British intelligence sources were cited in the press as saying Russian PMCs (specifically Wagner) were operating in Libya to support Haftar, that "dozens" of GRU and Spetznaz personnel were active in eastern Libya at bases in Benghazi and Tobruk as trainers and liaisons, and even that Russian Kalibr anti-ship missiles and S-300 air defense systems were believed to be in Libya.⁴²³ The press report was directly denied by the Russian government. While particulars of that report were not publicly corroborated (i.e., bases, missiles, and air defense), a second press report alleges that sources close to the Russian MoD confirmed the presence of Russian troops and special forces in eastern Libya, and that a local Libyan government source confirmed "recent military activity" by Russia in the region.⁴²⁴

In March 2019, a British newspaper cited sources in the British government as saying that there were 300 Wagner personnel in Benghazi, and that they had supplied the Libyan National Army with tanks, artillery, ammunition, and drones.⁴²⁵ A separate source close to the Libyan Russian Oil & Gas Joint Company is quoted as saying "lots of Wagner fighters went," that Wagner contractors are "almost interchangeable with the GRU," and that they were present in Libya in order "to secure the deep-water ports of Tobruk and Derna for the Russian fleet" and potentially "control the flow of oil to southern Europe."⁴²⁶ In early 2019, a former Russian diplomat called the idea that Moscow was sending Russian PMCs to Libya "impossible" and

“disinformation,” saying that “there are no secrets in Libya” and if Russian PMCs were actually there “we would already know.”⁴²⁷ If Russian PMCs are operating in Libya, they have likely been able to do so because Libya is a largely ungoverned space, and due to the blessing of friendly forces controlling territory.

Nigeria fits a profile relative to Russia similar to other countries where



Nigeria

Russian PMCs have been dispatched as an apparent instrument of Russian foreign policy. It is one of several African countries where Russia has significant oil and gas interests,⁴²⁸ and with which Russia has signed both military-to-military agreements and energy contracts.⁴²⁹ Nevertheless, the presence of contractors from the former Soviet Union in the country has, as of this writing, remained more characteristic of typical markets for private force on the African continent.

The Russian PSC Moran (who also performed PMC work in Syria through the Slavonic Corps; see Syria) has publicly attested to performing past missions in Nigeria.⁴³⁰ Most conspicuously was the October 2012 arrest of nine Moran maritime personnel in the port of Lagos on illegal weapons charges (the men were in possession of 14 AK-47 rifles w/3,643 rounds of ammunition and 22 Benelli MR1 rifles w/4,955 rounds of ammunition). The men were released in February 2013 and charges were dropped in an agreement reached by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the case appears consistent with the role of Russian PSCs performing anti-piracy activities on behalf of Russian state-owned oil transportation interests.⁴³¹ A now-defunct Russian PSC called RusCorp Group offering security services also maintained an office in Nigeria (as well as Iraq, the United States, the UK, and elsewhere) as of 2010.⁴³²

The most significant involvement of private military forces in Nigeria occurred in early 2015 when Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan hired contractors to perform offensive operations supporting counterinsurgency efforts against Boko Haram (coinciding with the lead up to an election), which may have included Russian PMCs. Between March and May 2015, men purportedly from Ukraine, Russia, and Israel were sighted working as military trainers in Nigeria. The South African firm STTEP was among the companies contracted for the effort. One diplomat in the capital referred to STTEP, saying the South Africans were backed by “an incoherent mix

of people, helicopters and random kit from all sorts of different sources,” including the former Soviet Union, numbering in the “low hundreds” and paid approximately \$400 per day in cash.⁴³³ While the potential role of Russian PMCs in this effort is not clear, Russian analysts have noted STTEP’s effective performance fighting Boko Haram in Nigeria, and identified them as potential partners in the region.⁴³⁴

Open source analysis and Russian press reports have alleged that members



Yemen

of a Russian PMC were deployed to Yemen in September, 2018.⁴³⁵ The country was also cited as an area of Russian PMC operations by Russian veterans’ organizations, both when speaking to journalists⁴³⁶ and in an appeal to the ICC to investigate Russia’s use of PMCs.⁴³⁷ Kirill Semenov—a Russian government-affiliated expert on the Middle East—said it’s possible, but that he doubts Russian PMCs are operating in Yemen, as it is allegedly not a strategic interest of the Kremlin. Instead such involvement would be “an example of securing some business interests such as infrastructural projects on Socotra Island, humanitarian missions related to food deliveries, or some oil-related initiatives.”⁴³⁸

Data on how Russian PMCs are allegedly being used in Yemen is scarce. Non-Russian PMCs were already a large part of the civil war in Yemen well before 2018, including the participation of contractors from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and Colombia.⁴³⁹ However, what sets Russian PMC involvement apart from other military contractors in the country is that Houthi leader and President of the Supreme Political Council of Yemen—Mahdi al-Mashat—appealed to Putin for aid in July 2018, saying he should “use Russia’s influence and political weight to stop the civil war in Yemen,” a request that the Russian Federation did not officially agree to fulfill.⁴⁴⁰ It is possible that the provision of a Russian PMC as support to the embattled regime is a means to provide unofficial—if not wholly deniable—military aid.



Venezuela

As opposition to the Chavista regime of President Nicolas Maduro escalated in late January 2019, a press report alleged that hundreds of Russian PMC personnel were sent to Venezuela in order “to protect Maduro from any attempt by opposition sympathizers in his own security forces to detain him” during the crisis, according to a source speaking to the press.⁴⁴¹ Alleging association with Wagner, the report described the arrival of Russian PMC personnel to Venezuela in two waves—first before the election in May 2018, and then in late January days before the beginning of opposition protests, totaling up to 400 personnel. The report alleges that the Russian PMCs were flown to Venezuela via third countries; including two chartered flights to Cuba, followed by commercial flights from Cuba to Venezuela. The press outlet claims to have independently corroborated the story using public flight data, which indicate Russian government-owned aircraft performed flights matching those described in the reporting.^{q 442}

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, as March 2019 saw the notably overt arrival of official Russian military planes^r to Caracas—after a stop in Syria—carrying military personnel and equipment. Official Russian and diplomatic sources claimed these men and materiel were pursuant to longstanding military and technical cooperation agreements.⁴⁴³ Press reports in April 2019 indicated that the Russian Federation attempted to fly the same two aircraft from Syria to Venezuela a second time.⁴⁴⁴

As of this writing, the Maduro regime remained in power despite prolonged instability and recognition from several regional and Western countries of Juan Guaido as the interim president of Venezuela.

q An Ilyushin-96 “owned by a division of the Russian presidential administration” that flew to Cuba—as well as a Russian Air Force Antonov-124 heavy cargo aircraft and two separate Russian Air Force Ilyushin-76 transport aircraft, all three of which flew between Russia and Caracas between December 10-21, 2018. (Maria Tsvetkova, 2019)

r An Ilyushin-Il-62M passenger plane and an AN-124 Condor heavy transport plane. (Joseph Trevithick, 2019)



Other Countries

There are several other countries where Russian PMCs are purported to be present and operating in some capacity. However, information concerning their uses, objectives, and other details is scarce. Additionally, differentiating whether such companies are operating as PSCs in the open market for force, or if they are fulfilling any Russian Federation foreign policy or security objectives, is unclear.

PMCs have been active in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), according to open source reporting. The death of a Georgian contractor in the January 2017 DRC Air Force helicopter crash revealed that foreign pilots are active in the country as trainers, in this case in the use of a Russian-made Mi-24 combat helicopter. While private Russian and Ukrainian pilots have had an outsized role in the DRC since the early 1990s, the presence of military contractors in the DRC appears to have escalated in 2014—potentially motivated by mining interests and the ineffectiveness of the DRC Army (FARDC)—and some information suggests that they may play an active role in FARDC military operations.⁴⁴⁵

One Russian analyst alleges that several Russian PMCs worked in Sierra-Leone, Angola (among the countries visited by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov⁴⁴⁶), and Kenya on “standalone contracts.”⁴⁴⁷ Moran Security (see the appendix: Syria) also claims to have performed missions in Kenya.⁴⁴⁸

According to Russian veterans’ groups who sought to petition the ICC over Russia’s use of PMCs, countries where Russian PMCs have operated (other than those already described above) include Gabon and South Sudan, as well as other unnamed countries.⁴⁴⁹ Evgeny Shabaev (committee chairman of the Russian Officer Congress, a veterans’ group) in July 2018 cited Brunei as a country where Russian PMCs operate, also noting “major talks about entering several African countries.”⁴⁵⁰

Additional countries noted by analyst Sergey Sukhankin as “operational theaters (proven and alleged)” include South Sudan, Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Burundi, Somalia, Mozambique, Gabon, Shri Lanka, Cambodia, Afghanistan, countries of the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and Moldova (Transnistria).⁴⁵¹

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