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Sgt. Ben Levine of Company D, 1st Battalion, 102nd Infantry Regiment (Mountain), Task Force Iron Gray, Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, assists security force assistance brigade (SFAB) service members and soldiers from the Armed Forces of Djibouti Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide on M240B machine gun capabilities 20 October 2021 in Djibouti. The SFAB is comprised of military advisors who support foreign security forces in the U.S. Africa Command area of interest. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Dyer, U.S. Air Force)

The Wagner Group and U.S. Security Force Assistance in Africa

Changed and Challenging Dynamics

Dr. Christopher Spearin

Past analysis points to challenges confronting U.S. security force assistance (SFA).¹ As captured in joint doctrine, “SFA activities are often used to shape the OE [operational environment] or assist a PN [partner nation] in defending against internal and transnational threats to security or stability ... SFA activities may be used to assist a PN to defend against external threats or help contribute to multinational operations and help develop or reform another country’s security forces or supporting institutions.”² No doubt, the United States is by far the world’s largest provider of SFA, whether assessed in terms of the range of activities performed, the number of countries engaged, or the amount of money spent. Nevertheless, U.S. SFA efforts are often plagued by self-doubt, (sometimes unrecognized) limitations, and marginal effectiveness. As one study put it, “SFA’s real costs and risks are easy to underestimate, and its military benefits have often been oversold.”³

This article examines how U.S. SFA challenges in Africa are now heightened by Russia’s Wagner Group, the armed nonstate actor increasingly favored by the Kremlin. To expand, according to a 2018 RAND report, SFA is the predominant form of U.S. engagement in Africa.⁴ Hence, improving U.S. SFA is both important and no small feat on its own given the multiple objectives of reducing conflict, countering terrorism, and promoting democracy and accountable civil-military relations on the continent. With the Wagner Group and associated actors in Africa, there is presently not only an alternative for assistance, there is also a competing provider that does things very differently in terms of means and ends, all the while strengthening Russia. The Wagner Group’s growing presence on the continent underscores the urgency of a longer-term partnership-oriented response by the United States.

Though the Wagner Group operates in many African countries, this study’s evidence is predominantly drawn from two cases: Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali.⁵ For the former, Russian personnel arrived in 2017, and the United Nations (UN) reports that as many as 2,300 individuals are active. Although nominally described as “instructors,” their activities have gone beyond training to include fighting alongside CAR’s armed forces in the country’s civil war, securing mining sites, and providing close protection to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra’s regime. As for Mali, approximately one thousand Wagner Group personnel have engaged in

training, counterterrorism, and junta protection tasks since December 2021.⁶ These two cases are important as the countries have had past military relations with Western countries, including the United States. They are emblematic of the model Russia is honing for the Wagner Group’s activities.⁷ Lastly, in a geostrategic sense, CAR and Mali are in a larger region deemed conducive to further Wagner Group operations or those of other similar Russian actors.⁸

The Wagner Group

Looking at the U.S. context, the private military and security company (PMSC) might be the actor most closely resembling the Wagner Group at first blush. The United States has extensive relationships with PMSCs, especially those developed over the course of the two major interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq earlier this century. These PMSC efforts were reflective of the U.S. government’s needs for guard, defensive, and training services and in keeping with the longstanding desire of multiple presidential administrations to introduce private actors into the defense realm.⁹ Through a mix of competitive contracting and sustained demand, PMSCs became an important part of the contractor pool helping to form the “Total Force” concept identified in the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review*.¹⁰ To fulfill its needs, the U.S. government relied on both U.S. PMSCs and those of other countries. Similarly, the United States, though an important client for PMSCs, was not the sole source of their revenues. PMSCs sought out commercial relationships with other countries, corporations, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, sometimes simultaneously with U.S. government requirements.

The first indication that the Wagner Group is something different rests with the fact that while it is often classified as a PMSC, analyses have frequently used other descriptions too. Examples include the following: “a proxy organization of the Russian state,” “a nebulous network that combines military force with commercial and strategic interests,” “a ‘pseudo-private’ military company,” and “an informal semi-state security group.”¹¹ Correspondingly, the Department of State labels the Wagner Group as a “surrogate for the Russian ministry of defense.”¹² As such, the Wagner Group does not offer its services on the open market; it provides for the needs of the Kremlin and supporting



A Wagner Group mercenary gives a tactical training lesson to members of the armed forces of the Central African Republic circa September 2022. (Photo from the Wagner Group website)

oligarchic networks—notably those linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin.¹³ In turn, the Wagner Group frequently utilizes Russian military infrastructure, platforms, and kit. Contracting, if that is the appropriate term, is not open and transparent.

The legality of the Wagner Group is similarly oblique. On the one hand, it lacks a legal corporate registration. As well, under Article 359 of the Russian Federation's Criminal Code that concerns mercenaries, an entity like the Wagner Group is seemingly forbidden.¹⁴ On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin has muddied the legal waters: "If ... Wagner is violating any Russian law, the General Prosecutor should conduct an investigation. If they violate no Russian law, they can pursue their business interests in any part of the world."¹⁵ The general prosecutor has not acted against either the Wagner Group as an entity or those that operate under its name since Russia's reliance commenced in 2014.

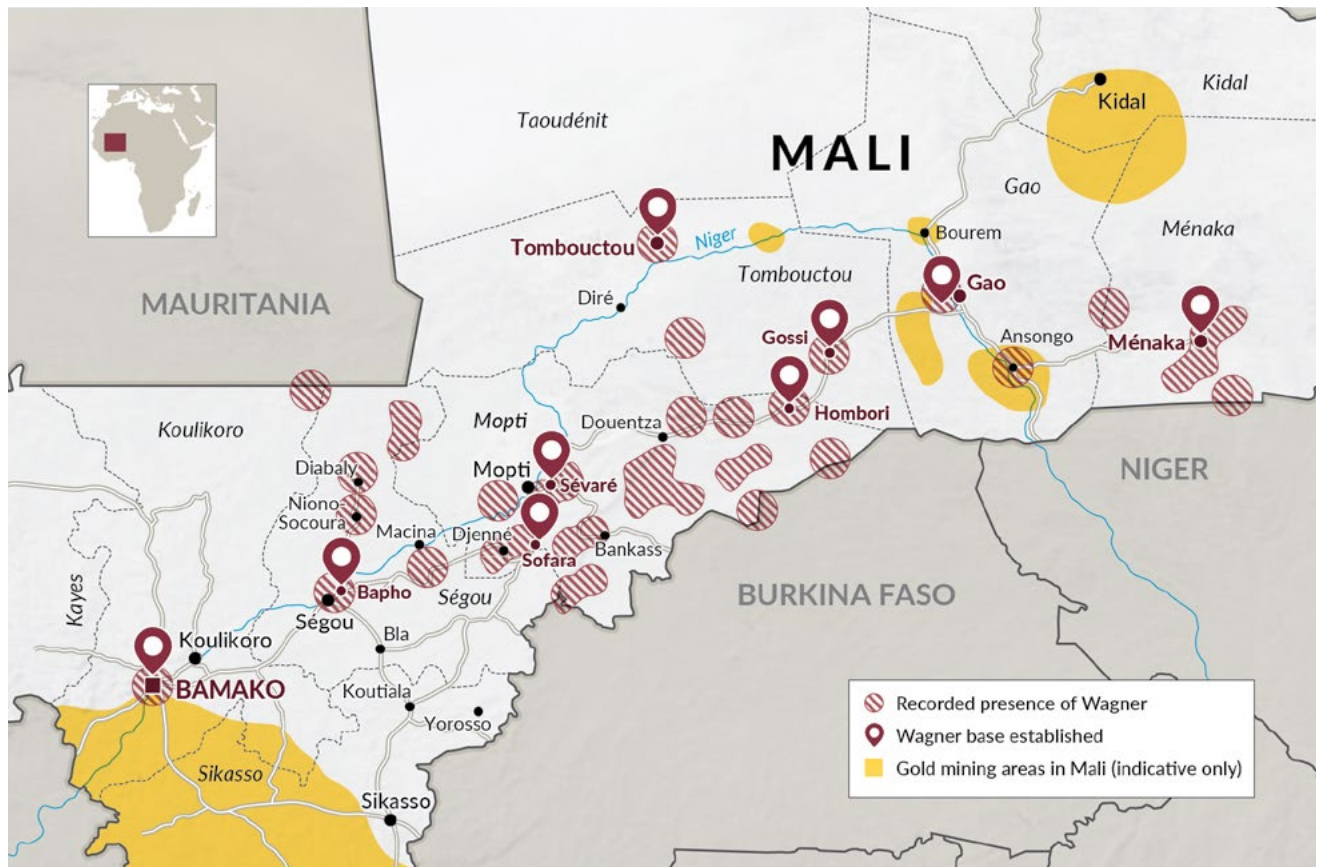
A further distinction pertains to the Wagner Group's service offering. Like the U.S. experience with PMSCs, the Wagner Group provides protective, defensive, and training services. However, unlike the U.S. PMSC case, the Wagner Group employs offensive violence in terms of taking the initiative, seizing territory, and changing

the political status quo. The United States Federal Acquisition Regulation plainly asserts that "security contractors are not allowed to conduct direct combat activities or offensive operation."¹⁶ To juxtapose, Russian military officials have perceived what they term "private military companies" as a potentially offensively oriented and inherently disruptive tool.¹⁷

U.S. Security Force Assistance Challenges

Objectives and incentives. For the United States, the appeal of SFA is replacing large-scale military commitments in favor of shifting the emphasis to PN activities and developments. Part of this effort concerns dealing with U.S. security needs related to countering terrorism or insurgency in a cost-effective way. Another part concerns making African state security apparatuses more professional, democratically oriented, and cognizant of U.S.-associated civil-military relations norms through exposure, guidance, training, and education.

SFA's considerable scope underscores both lofty intentions and inherent tensions. Other investigations have revealed the high bar set through their questions. A 2018 RAND report asks, "Do partner security



(Map from Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, *The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Member, and Criminal Engagement in Africa* [Geneva: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2023])

institutions use the improved capabilities gained from U.S.-provided equipment and training in ways that contribute to stability and reduce violence?”¹⁸ Similarly, for Øystein Rolandsen, Maggie Dwyer, and William Reno, “Does the provision of SFA make the people in the recipient country feel safer? Does it enable the recipient state to assert control over its territory and populations in an accountable manner?”¹⁹ Seeking answers to these questions is critical because of what Rita Abrahamsen refers to as “combative contradictions” in the African milieu.²⁰ On the one hand, SFA is about making African security institutions more capable to counter threats. On the other hand, it is about simultaneously restraining those increasingly potent institutions “in the name of development, democracy and civilian oversight.”²¹

SFA contradictions are increasingly apparent as strengthening security institutions has become more prominent than constraining and shaping them. Analysis reveals successive U.S. policy waves dating from the late 1990s that have shifted the balance.²²

Again citing Abrahamsen, the onset of the Global War on Terrorism particularly saw “the imperative to ‘train and equip’ ... [dominating] over more developmental and political ambitions to limit defence spending and ensure democratic oversight ... [and] accountability.”²³ This emphasis invigorates the urgency of combatting actors that threaten PN and U.S. interests alike. But it also signals engagement with fewer objectives, less profundity, and shorter timelines that stymie the sustainment of transformative partnerships. This is about recalibrating the balance so that U.S. commitment toward substantive change in PN is more than just rhetoric.

A concomitant set of tensions for the United States stems from SFA objectives that do not always correspond with the incentive structures of PN leaders and elites. There are three factors. First, at its heart, SFA is often oriented toward a performance-based legitimacy common in the developed world whereby the state is essential in the provision of services and security.



Members of the Wagner Group oversee training in Central African Republic circa end of 2022. (Photo courtesy of the Russian government via Ahmed Hassan, Grey Dynamics)

than from within. In the specific realm of security, a leadership may not need to turn to its population for validation and to develop relationships between the citizen and the state through the harnessing of military might.²⁷ Internal resources can be minimized and outsiders can alternatively be employed.

The CAR and Malian leaderships have taken advantage of this even though it may heighten state fragility. In CAR, Russian-trained local personnel were not reintegrated into the European Union training mission (suspended in December 2021), thus setting the groundwork for a parallel security structure.²⁸ Moreover, especially sensitive tasks fell to foreigners only. Sewa Security Services, interconnected with the Wagner Group and Prigozhin, provide security details to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and key members in his government. Wagner Group personnel

numbers in country also increased in December 2020 for fear of election-related violence and instability threatening Touadéra's regime. As for Mali, the Wagner Group, through its close protection activities, backstops the ruling junta's control as it recalibrates the country's democratic future. While initially there was to be an eighteen-month transition period, it shifted to five years with elections now pushed back to 2026. As recognized by the Center for International and Strategic Studies, "The Malian junta's turn to Russia and the Wagner Group is intended to shore up its domestic political position rather than to meaningfully address insecurity in the country."²⁹ Also note the incentive structures regarding resource extraction. The so-called "resource curse" evident in many African countries permits elites to benefit from resource exploitation, which in turn entrenches their control/governance. Rather than turn

to citizens to form a bargain for their taxes and efforts in return for services and security, elites can rely instead on the global marketplace.³⁰ The Wagner Group and the associated Prigozhin network are linked to the curse and add their own dynamics. In CAR, as the quid pro quo for the Russian presence, Lobaye Invest, another Prigozhin entity, has secured concessions in gold and diamond mining areas. Wagner Group/Sewa Security Services in turn provide site protection and collect customs duties.³¹ Revenues simultaneously sustain their presence and that of Touadéra's regime. As for Mali, access to three gold mining concessions accompanied the Wagner Group's introduction.³² True, Malian mineral resources are not relied upon to the same degree as the CAR case, in part because many sites are in rebel held areas, and in part because of existing controls over mining at the central and tribal levels.³³ Nevertheless, Russia has expressed continued interest in Mali's resources and commentary reveals changes in the Malian mining code allowing for expanded Russian extraction activities.³⁴

Human rights. The United States has a longstanding interest regarding the human rights observance of PN military units that receive SFA. Since the late 1990s, the Leahy Law is a prime manifestation of this interest. With statutory provisions applying to both the Department of State and the Department of Defense, the U.S. government is prohibited from funding SFA for PN military units for which there "is credible information implicating that unit in the commission of gross violations of human rights (GVHR)."³⁵ These violations include rape, torture, extrajudicial killing, and enforced disappearance. In some instances, SFA to promote human rights and the respect for the rule of law in "Leahy-ineligible" PN military units is permitted, but not for individual unit members or commanders for which there is credible information linking them to gross violations of human rights.³⁶ This particular policy arose out of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act and can now be nestled into requirements in place since the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act calling for all SFA to include human rights training.³⁷

It stands to reason that should a SFA PN unit subsequently go on to commit violations, this is doubly vexing for the United States. The first relates to seeming U.S. complicity and the second to making it harder to justify and maintain relationships with a particular PN. Analysis identifies many instances when

such violations have occurred in Africa, analysis that informs arguments for the substantial reduction in SFA to limit these transgressions.³⁸ When conditionality is not exercised and a relationship with a PN nevertheless remains unaltered due to U.S. security needs, Washington's commitment to human rights is derogatorily deemed "fluid" and its reputation harmed.³⁹

Certainly, the Wagner Group's African efforts have faced human rights criticism. For instance, in the midst of offensive Wagner Group operations alongside CAR personnel in 2021, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights received "reports of mass summary executions, arbitrary detentions, torture during interrogations, forced disappearances, forced displacement of the civilian population, indiscriminate targeting of civilian facilities, violations of the right to health, and increasing attacks on humanitarian actors."⁴⁰ Similarly, in 2022, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali identified a "significant surge in gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law" instigated by Malian soldiers, "accompanied by Russian elements in many instances."⁴¹ A Brookings Institution examination underscores the distinction: the Wagner Group offers "the ability to conduct counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations unconstrained by human rights responsibilities, unlike the United States, allowing African governments to be as brutish in their military efforts as they like."⁴²

It follows that conditionality is absent and human rights vexations do not similarly trouble Russia's presence in Africa through the Wagner Group. Policy wise, Russia follows a stabilization approach that, contrary to a liberal

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Children mine for gold in a traditional mine on 5 May 2014 in the Central African Republic village of Gam, where gold mining is the main business activity of the region. Wagner Group elements inside Mali and the Central African Republic are frequently reported to be collocated with Russian mining interests. Numerous deadly attacks against miners as well as common practices related to the exploitation of child labor for mining are attributed to Wagner Group operatives. (Photo by Issouf Sanogo, Agence France-Presse)

stance, places primacy on the utility of violence and sovereignty and much less so on human rights.⁴³ From the perspective of either the leadership in CAR or Mali, this reliance on violence and sovereignty allows it to fend off unwelcomed interventions, contain unrest, and gives it a freer hand in responding to domestic challenges.⁴⁴ Moreover, the human rights transgressions of Wagner Group supported units and Wagner Group personnel do not impact negatively upon the Kremlin in a de jure manner in two ways. One relates to the Wagner Group's aforementioned blurriness that allows the Kremlin to deny a command-and-control relationship. For Sorcha MacLeod, the chair of the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries, the "distance between the Russian state and the group" is purposeful: "It operates in a situation of opacity, there's a real lack of transparency and that's the whole point."⁴⁵

The second is the diplomatic top-cover Russia extends through the UN. For CAR in 2022, Russia

pushed off a U.S. attempt in the UN Security Council to investigate abuses by Russian and local personnel. It also blocked the renewal of a UN arms embargo monitoring group. In the case of Mali, Russia prevented the UN from launching an independent investigation into a March 2022 incident at Moura in which approximately three hundred people were allegedly killed by Malian soldiers and Wagner Group members. Taken together, this protection from further scrutiny solidifies Russia's approach and is representative of its ongoing commitment to its African partners.

Next Steps

Russia's activities through the Wagner Group could motivate a recasting and a reinvigoration of U.S. SFA in Africa. Although SFA may be the predominate mode of U.S. engagement as noted above, it is an approach that often enjoys only fickle political and institutional backing.⁴⁶ This reinforces the narrowing



A Wagner Group operative provides personal protective overwatch to Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadéra who waves to the crowd as he arrives to celebrate the sixty-fourth anniversary of Central African Republic independence during a military parade in Bangui on 1 December 2022. (Photo by Barbara Debout, Agence France-Presse)

of scope and timelines analyzed earlier. Competition could seize U.S. policymakers and push back what has uncharitably been referred to as “strategic dithering.”⁴⁷ This would not be to mimic the Russian approach; that would simply be a race to the bottom from the U.S. perspective. Instead, competition could lead toward (re)launching the needed and ongoing partnerships with African states, but not for the sake of simply providing a robust alternative to the Wagner Group. Rather, substantial partnerships are required for U.S. SFA to bear fruit. They allow for political and cultural relationships and understandings to develop.⁴⁸ Moreover, they recognize that not only does SFA objectively demand a lot of a PN, it also asks PN leaders to change the way they do things, to take risks, and to follow other incentives. Knowing that U.S. support and assistance will be there for the long term and appreciating that change may only occur incrementally is important. Competition with Russia might inform the rationale for this approach, but U.S. policymakers should not lose sight of effective partnerships through SFA as the goal.

This competition will likely grow, thus augmenting the urgency of a U.S. shift. The Wagner Group’s current presence is part of the larger Russian “pivot to Africa” launched after the 2014 invasion of Crimea to escape the resulting economic and political isolation implemented by the United States and others. Since then, to advance diversification, the Kremlin instigated military agreements with more than twenty African countries and Russian extractive firms have expanded their footprint on the continent. Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin’s impetus to avoid the effects of sanctions and to take the initiative has only grown. Gold and diamond extraction and sale can avoid sanctions put in place on Russia’s banking sector.⁴⁹ Russian investment in African natural resource extraction may permit the laundering of illegally obtained funds.⁵⁰ As well, developing stakes in African oil and gas concessions grants the Kremlin even greater influence over how European states satisfy their energy requirements.⁵¹ It is telling, therefore, that though some Wagner Group personnel shifted to Ukraine in 2022 to support Russian operations,

most of the group's contingent remained in Central Africa.⁵² This demonstrates commitment to existing African partners and shows resolve to others who may be attracted to what Russia, through the Wagner Group, has to offer.

Certainly, many African states are arguably so attracted. Again, this relates partially to the considerable demands of U.S. SFA coupled with the uncertainty that the United States will be a long-term partner. What Russia offers via Wagner Group engagement is a competing alternative that does not come with the same strings attached. Yet attractiveness is also evident in African empathy toward Russia's stance. In the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the largest number of abstentions in the UN General Assembly's condemnation and in the suspension of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council came from Africa. Also in this vein, African states have not fulsomely embraced the economic sanctioning of Russia. Taken together, as stressed by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, "Africa is fast becoming crucial to Putin's efforts to dilute the influence of the United States and its international alliances."⁵³

Concluding Remarks

Though Russia does not operate with the intent and scale of the Soviet Union nor possess the growing power the likes of China, it is fair to recognize that Russia has utilized "niche strengths" to effectively "punch above its weight."⁵⁴ The Wagner Group, given its actions, capabilities, and opaqueness, forms one of

these niches that has been applied in CAR and Mali. As such, Russia should not be simply viewed as "a geopolitical gremlin," putting a spanner in the works wherever it goes.⁵⁵ It has certain goals, partially anchored in a desire for standing and partially based on necessity in the wake of its increased isolation after 2014 and doubly so now after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. What it offers through the Wagner Group is a competing alternate method of engagement with very different means and objectives that may be appealing to some African leaders given their political situations and the incentives they face. This pressurizes U.S. SFA efforts, but potentially allows for reorientation through the formation of long-term partnerships that are more than just responding to the Russian challenge.

Regarding future issues for research that fall out of this article, one can look both externally and internally. For the external, it is evident that U.S. policymakers are looking to like-minded Western allies for support and assistance in Africa.⁵⁶ Key here will be ensuring that these foreign providers of SFA are equally committed, not only to limiting Russia's space to maneuver, but also to developing and sustaining partnerships with African states over the long term. Internally, there has been criticism that U.S. forces providing SFA are often short changed in terms of training, the maturing of language competencies, and timely recognition and promotion.⁵⁷ Keeping partnerships with African states energetic and beneficial to all parties will require ongoing consideration of these variables internal to the U.S. military ecosystem. ■

Notes

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