

II. Private military and security companies in sub-Saharan Africa

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As set out in section I of this chapter, private military and security companies (PMSCs) are found in a variety of contexts and fulfil diverse roles that include intelligence and risk advisory services, cybersecurity, (dis)information campaigns, close protection for high-profile individuals, security for property and infrastructure, military and security training, technical and logistical support services to host state and expeditionary forces, and in some cases combat operations. They have also become increasingly involved in providing protective and logistical services to United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.¹

This section focuses on the contemporary use of PMSCs in sub-Saharan Africa, especially those with links to armed conflict and natural resource extraction. It discusses several trends shaping the current context of PMSC activities in sub-Saharan Africa, including the incidence and character of political violence and armed conflict, and the intersecting drives for political, military and economic influence of external powers such as China, Europe, Russia and the United States on the African continent. These factors help to explain the recent increase in the presence of PMSCs and the emergence of new actors, some of whom act as proxy forces for their home governments.

While Russia and China appear to be driving the current expansion of PMSC activity in Africa (and are the main focus of this section), both returned relatively late to the continent. From the 1960s onwards Africa experienced foreign mercenary attacks as European powers sought to preserve financial interests and influence during decolonization processes.² Mercenaries were also used to bolster and strengthen US influence on local allies in cold war conflicts in Africa and other areas of the Global South, while maintaining plausible deniability.³ The demise of bipolar rivalry with the end of the cold war resulted in the broad decline of superpower influence and withdrawal of their patronage and support for proxy actors in Africa. Russia became largely

¹ Tkach, B. and Phillips, J., 'UN organizational and financial incentives to employ private military and security companies in peacekeeping operations', *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2020); and United Nations Human Rights Council, 'Impact of the use of private military and security services in humanitarian action', Report of the working group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, A/HRC/48/51, 2 July 2021.

² See e.g. French, H., 'The mercenary position', *Transition*, no. 73 (1997).

³ Voss, K., 'Plausibly deniable: Mercenaries in US covert interventions during the cold war, 1964–1987', *Cold War History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2016); and Gleijeses, P., "'Flee! The white giants are coming!': The United States, the mercenaries, and the Congo, 1964–5", *Diplomatic History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (spring 1994).

disengaged from the 1990s until 2014 (with the exception of arms sales), while China focused on its internal economic development.⁴

However, with rising instability, insurgencies and civil wars in the early 1990s, unleashed by the end of the cold war and other factors, a proliferation of new private military firms emerged to offer combat services in Africa, including Executive Outcomes (South Africa) and Sandline International (United Kingdom).⁵ This was followed by mainly US and British PMSCs offering a broad array of services, as neo-liberal policies to outsource governmental defence- and security-related services gathered pace. The deployment of large numbers of military contractors—to support US forces in Iraq and operations in Afghanistan and to protect private corporations, including extractive firms in conflict-affected regions of the world—provided impetus for an expanding global ‘market for force’.⁶ The final part of this section briefly examines the latest wave of PMSC activity in selected conflict-affected states.

Shifting geopolitical trends and continental dynamics

The current phase of growing PMSC involvement in Africa has occurred in a context of increased geopolitical rivalry and internationalized armed conflict on the continent compared to the immediate post-cold war period. There has been a significant rise in the number of state-based armed conflicts, with 15 such conflicts occurring in Africa in 2011 and 25 in 2021.⁷ There is also a high rate of conflict recurrence.⁸ Internal armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa are markedly internationalized—an external state or states actively participate in the conflict by rendering support to the government, the opposing side or both—and this tends to make them more severe and protracted. Whereas 12 internationalized internal conflicts were recorded in sub-Saharan Africa between 1991 and 2010, this rose to 27 such conflicts

⁴ Duursma, A. and Masuhr, N., ‘Russia’s return to Africa in a historical and global context: Anti-imperialism, patronage, and opportunism’, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2022); Webber, M., ‘Soviet policy in sub-Saharan Africa: The final phase’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Mar. 1992); and Shinn, D. H., ‘China–Africa ties in historical context’, eds A. Oqubay and J. Yifu Lin, *China–Africa and an Economic Transformation* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2019).

⁵ Howe, H. M., ‘Private security forces and African stability: The case of Executive Outcomes’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1998).

⁶ Singer, P. W., *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 2003); Pelton, R. Y., *Licensed to Kill: Hired Guns in the War on Terror* (Three Rivers Press: New York, 2006); and Avant, D. D., *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009).

⁷ Palik, J., Obermeier, A. M. and Aas Rustad, S., *Conflict Trends in Africa, 1989–2021*, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Paper (PRIO: Oslo, 2022), p. 12. ‘State-based conflict’ is defined here as a conflict in which at least one party is a state, involving armed force that results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year; see Palik, Obermeier and Aas Rustad, p. 7.

⁸ Jarland, J. et al., ‘How should we understand patterns of recurring conflict?’, PRIO, *Conflict Trends*, Mar. 2020.

between 2011 and 2021.⁹ According to the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the number of ‘internationalized’ civil wars in Africa increased from 11 in 2018 to 19 in 2020, before falling to 17 in 2021.¹⁰ The continent hosts multilateral peace operations mounted by the UN, the European Union (EU), the African Union and subregional organizations, currently the Eastern African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).¹¹ Other intervening forces, public and private, include Western powers (the USA, France and other European states), regional powers such as Kenya and Rwanda, and increasingly China and Russia, and other powers such as Türkiye and Israel. The growth of interference in armed conflicts on the continent strongly suggests the weakening of multilateralism.¹²

Competition between China, the USA and the EU

Heightened geopolitical competition among major powers plays out on the continent in intertwined military, commercial and diplomatic spheres, forming an important backdrop for understanding the development of PMSC presence. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at building land and sea routes connecting China to key markets globally, has since 2013 provided loans, constructed roads, railways and ports and struck trade accords with developing states, often in exchange for access to natural resource concessions and without the required ‘liberal peace’ commitments to improve governance or human rights that Western partners have emphasized. However, China has also sought to play a bigger role in peace, security and stability in Africa.¹³ Since 2009, when it overtook France, China has been the largest contributor of uniformed personnel to UN peacekeeping missions among the permanent members of the UN Security Council.¹⁴ Since 2018 it has ranked among the top ten contributors of uniformed (troop and police) personnel of all UN member-states.¹⁵ Moreover, it has become increasingly involved in conflict mediation, including recently in the Horn of Africa.¹⁶

⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), ‘The Armed Conflict Survey 2022: Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Analysis’, IISS Analysis, 18 Nov. 2022.

¹⁰ Palik, Obermeier and Aas Rustad (note 7), p. 16.

¹¹ For a comprehensive picture of multilateral peace operations in Africa, see SIPRI, ‘SIPRI map of multilateral peace operations 2022’, May 2022; and chapter 3 in this volume.

¹² IISS (note 9).

¹³ Ryder, H. and Eguegu, O., ‘Africans welcome China’s role in peace and security, but are pushing for greater agency and responsibility’, ACCORD, Conflict and Resilience Monitor, 10 Feb. 2022.

¹⁴ SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, accessed 3 Mar. 2023; and International Peace Institute (IPI), ‘UN peacekeeping personnel contributions by the P5 (Nov. 1990–Aug. 2017)’, Troop contributions, Providing for Peacekeeping database, accessed 20 Mar. 2023.

¹⁵ SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, accessed 3 Mar. 2023; and United Nations Peacekeeping, ‘Troop and police contributors’, Country contribution reports, Dec. 2018–22.

¹⁶ Nantulya, P., ‘China’s diplomacy in the Horn—Conflict mediation as power politics’, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Spotlight, 12 Oct. 2022.

Furthering China–Africa security cooperation (building African capacities and enhancing military, police, counterterrorism and law enforcement cooperation) was also identified as a strategic priority in the China–Africa Action Plan agreed at the eighth ministerial conference of the Forum for China–Africa Cooperation in November 2021.¹⁷

China's presence has spurred competing commercial and diplomatic efforts by, among others, the USA, Russia, Türkiye, Japan and the United Arab Emirates on the continent.¹⁸ A new US initiative aimed at revitalizing relations with Africa was launched in mid 2022, emphasizing support for traditional priorities of democracy and security, as well as advancing pandemic recovery and economic opportunity, and supporting conservation, climate adaptation and a just energy transition. The strategy notably repeats its objective to counter 'harmful activities' by China, Russia and other actors.¹⁹ A modest EU policy initiative to invest globally in infrastructure development around the world, with a particular emphasis on Africa, has also emerged to counter Russian and Chinese influence.²⁰

In the post-cold war era, US, European and South African PMSCs preceded Russian and Chinese companies on the continent, often having close links to the security sectors and assistance programmes of their home states. US and British PMSCs such as Academi (formerly Blackwater and Xe Services LLC), CACI, Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI), Halliburton, G4S, Erinys, Triple Canopy, Amentum (which absorbed DynCorp in 2020), Control Risks, Aegis Defence Services (acquired by GardaWorld in 2015) and Olive Group became prominent actors during the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.²¹ Western PMSCs remain active in Africa, especially in various counterterrorism initiatives.²² For example, the US company CACI was awarded a six-year US\$249 million contract in 2020 to provide operations, planning and training support to the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), assisting its headquarters in Germany and presence across Africa in

¹⁷ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan', 30 Nov. 2021, para. 6.1.

¹⁸ Wong, E., 'The US wants to counter China's moves in Africa. But American officials try not to mention that', *New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2022; Smith, E., 'Top US, Chinese and Russian officials tour Africa as global charm offensive gathers pace', *CNBC*, 31 Jan. 2023; 'Turkey is making a big diplomatic and corporate push into Africa', *The Economist*, 23 Apr. 2022; Japan vows billions to counter China in Africa', *Deutsche Welle*, 27 Aug. 2022; and Butt, U., 'UAE: The scramble for the Horn of Africa', *Middle East Monitor*, 31 Jan. 2021.

¹⁹ White House, 'Fact sheet: US strategy toward sub-Saharan Africa', 8 Aug. 2022; White House, *US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa* (White House: Washington, DC, Aug. 2022); and Baker, P. and Walsh, D., 'Biden aims to inject new energy into US relations with African nations', *New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2022.

²⁰ Barbero, M., 'Europe is trying (and failing) to beat China at the development game', *Foreign Policy*, 10 Jan. 2023.

²¹ Overton, I., Benevilli, E. and Bruun, L., 'Britain is the world centre for private military contractors—and it's almost impossible to find out what they're up to', *openDemocracy*, 20 Dec. 2018.

²² E.g. Priest, D. and Arkin, W. A., 'National Security Inc.', *Washington Post*, 20 July 2010.

‘planning and executing peacetime, crisis and contingency operations’.²³ AFRICOM supports counterterrorism efforts by partners in Somalia and the Horn of Africa against al-Shabaab; and in West Africa it supports efforts to limit terrorist expansion in the Sahel and the coastal states.²⁴ Further, PMSCs play an important role in information or influence operations to counter disinformation.²⁵ Since 2016 the US Department of Defense has worked with private contracting firms to counter misinformation from US adversaries in the media, including social media, and to ‘degrade the ability of adversaries to persuade, inspire and recruit’; in 2021 the department doubled its allocation to the Counter Threat Messaging Support Program through a five-year, \$979 million contract with Peraton to support US Central Command in countering misinformation from US adversaries.²⁶

Geopolitical rivalry is also reflected in rising public resentment towards the continuing involvement of former European colonial powers in the national security and political affairs of certain African states. For example, anti-French protests have spread through West African states, in particular those where France has conducted counter-insurgency operations that are widely perceived as having failed.²⁷ France claims that this anti-French sentiment is stoked by Russian disinformation campaigns.²⁸ Populist sentiments have created fertile ground for the expansion of Russian influence through commercial links, especially over gold and minerals, although Russia’s own approach to counterinsurgency has attracted increasing criticism (see below).²⁹ Trade restrictions and other sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine have reinforced the growing importance of Russia’s economic ties in the region. For example, the Wagner Group’s

²³ CACI, ‘CACI awarded \$249 million task order to provide support to US Africa Command’, Press release, 16 Mar. 2020.

²⁴ US Department of State, ‘Special online briefing with General Stephen J. Townsend Commander, US Africa Command (US AFRICOM)’, 26 July 2022.

²⁵ Paul, C. et al., *The Role of Information in US Concepts for Strategic Competition*, RAND Research Report (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2022); and Pecquet, J., ‘US looks to expose Russian propaganda in Africa’, *Africa Report*, 25 May 2022.

²⁶ Hewitt Jones, J., ‘DOD awards \$1 B contract to Peraton to counter misinformation’, *Fedscoop*, 11 Aug. 2021.

²⁷ Thomas-Johnson, A., ‘Senegal: Anti-French sentiment on the rise as protests continue’, *Al Jazeera*, 12 Mar. 2021; Lorgerie, P., ‘Thousands take to the streets of Bamako in anti-French protest’, *Reuters*, 5 Feb. 2022; ‘Chad: Hundreds stage anti-French Protest in N’djamena’, *Africanews*, 15 May 2022; Carayol, R., ‘Anti-French protests in West Africa spill over into Chad’, *Mediapart*, 1 June 2022; Arslam, F. E., ‘Protesters in Niger call for departure of French troops’, *Andalou Agency*, 19 Sep. 2022; Morrow, A., ‘Anti-French anger grips Burkina Faso in wake of second military coup’, *RFI*, 2 Oct. 2022; and Melly, P., ‘Why France faces so much anger in West Africa’, *BBC News*, 5 Dec. 2021.

²⁸ Rankin, J., ‘Emmanuel Macron accuses Russia of feeding disinformation in Africa’, *The Guardian*, 20 Nov. 2022; and Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘Mapping disinformation in Africa’, 26 Apr. 2022.

²⁹ ‘Moscow guns for African gold’, *Africa Confidential*, vol. 63, no. 2 (20 Jan. 2022); Felbab-Brown, V., ‘Nonstate armed actors in 2023: Persistence amid geopolitical shuffles’, *Brookings Institution, Order from Chaos Blog*, 27 Jan. 2023; and ‘French commander accuses Wagner of “preying” on Mali’, *Arab News*, 21 July 2022.

tendency to work for payment in the natural resource sector, including gold and diamonds, reflects not only the high value of those resources but their advantages for circumventing Western sanctions.³⁰

Russian PMSCs

The presence of Russian PMSCs has increased globally since around 2015. At least 11 such companies have been identified and a number of them cooperate closely with the Russian Ministry of Defence and/or the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).³¹ The Wagner Group is the PMSC currently attracting the most attention for its presence and activities in conflict zones. It is an informal, semi-state network of overlapping shell companies, natural resource extraction businesses and private military forces financed and led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a confidant of Russian President Vladimir Putin.³² Although mercenarism is technically illegal in Russia according to Article 359 of the Criminal Code, and this lack of formal juridical identity has enabled the Russian government to deny association with such groups, Wagner Group and other PMSCs have been used in cooperation with the Russian military and/or private individuals connected to Putin's regime.³³ A distinguishing facet of the Wagner Group is its capacity to shift fluidly—sometimes within the same setting—between being a proxy for the Russian government and being an autonomous, profit-seeking commercial entity engaged by other governments.³⁴ The Wagner Group operates generally as a light, mobile force. When using heavier equipment, this appears to often occur in cooperation with the Russian military or local forces.³⁵ Wagner's fluidity was first seen in Syria, linked to its commercial mode of working for foreign governments confronted by insurgency in exchange for ownership shares or profits from the extraction of natural resources.³⁶

³⁰ Hunter, M., 'Going for Gold: Russia, sanctions and illicit gold trade', Policy Brief, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva, Apr. 2022; and Keating, J., 'Russia's bright, shiny anti-sanctions weapon: Inside the billion-dollar business of "blood gold"', Grid, 15 July 2022. On trade restrictions on Russia, see chapter 12, section III, in this volume.

³¹ Jones, S. G. et al., *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, July 2021), p. 15.

³² Mackinnon, A., 'Russia's Wagner Group doesn't actually exist', *Foreign Policy*, 6 July 2021.

³³ Marten, K., 'Russia's use of semi-state security forces: The case of the Wagner Group', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2019); and Fasanotti, F. S., 'Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, commercial concessions, rights violations, and counterinsurgency failure', Brookings Institution, Order from Chaos Blog, 8 Feb. 2022.

³⁴ Galeotti, M., 'The protean PMC: Learning the lessons of the Wagner Group's ability to be both proxy and autonomous agent', Written evidence submitted to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament, May 2022, para. 3.

³⁵ Faulkener, C. and Plichta, M., 'Win, lose, or draw, the Wagner Group benefits from the war in Ukraine', *Lawfare*, 23 Oct. 2022.

³⁶ Galeotti (note 34), para. 10.

Despite the many media and think tank reports that have appeared on Russian PMSCs in recent years, the precise extent of their activities in sub-Saharan Africa remains unclear. According to a report published in 2022 by RAND, Russian PMSCs are highly likely to have conducted at least 35 operations in at least 16 sub-Saharan African states since 2005.³⁷ The report describes most Russian PMSC activity as resembling that carried out by Western or African PMSCs, with about 60 per cent involving ground or maritime security and 30 per cent training or support services. The remaining 10 per cent consisted of combat or operational tasks, all of which were carried out by the Wagner Group.³⁸

Another independent report shows recent Russian PMSC activity as having increased sevenfold globally, from operating in 4 countries in 2015 to 27 in 2021, including in at least 16 sub-Saharan African states between 2016 and 2021.³⁹ It identifies the Wagner Group as the most prolific, having operated in 14 sub-Saharan African states.⁴⁰ Other Russian PMSCs identified include Redut-Antiterror/Centre R and Moran Security Group (Somalia); Moran Security Group (Nigeria); RSB-Group (Russian Security Systems) (the Gulf of Guinea); Patriot (Burundi and the Central African Republic, CAR); and Sewa Security Services (CAR).⁴¹

The most documented deployments of Wagner personnel concern four states—CAR, Mali, Mozambique and Sudan—where they provided military training or combat services for the governments.⁴² The Wagner Group has been the focus of numerous UN reports or investigations for alleged human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, including by the UN Security Council, UN-appointed independent experts on human rights, the UN panel of experts on CAR and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA).⁴³ The actions of the Wagner Group have also prompted hearings by US and British legislators.⁴⁴ The arrival of Russian PMSCs in CAR and Mali followed years of unsuccessful efforts by UN stabilization missions, the EU and France to counter insurgency and stabilize the states. France, the USA and other Western powers

³⁷ Grissom, A. R. et al., *Russia's Growing Presence in Africa: A Geostrategic Assessment*, RAND Research Report (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2022), pp. 16–17.

³⁸ Grissom et al. (note 37), p. 17.

³⁹ Jones et al. (note 31), pp. 1, 52.

⁴⁰ The 14 sub-Saharan African states are: Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, the Comoros, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan and Sudan.

⁴¹ Jones et al. (note 31), p. 15.

⁴² Stanyard, J., Vircoulon, T. and Rademeyer, J., 'The grey zone: Russia's military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Feb. 2023, pp. 12–13.

⁴³ See the discussions in sections I and III of this chapter.

⁴⁴ British Parliament, Foreign Affairs Committee, 'The Wagner Group and beyond: Proxy private military companies', Inquiry, Oral and written evidence, 2022–23.

have alleged Africa-wide disinformation campaigns coordinated by Yevgeny Prigozhin to build and amplify hostility towards them, while promoting influence and support for Wagner and Russia.⁴⁵ The situations in CAR and Mali are discussed in more detail below.

When political operations are included, such as disinformation and influence campaigns or politically biased election observation, the number of states involved is larger. According to the US Treasury Department, a front company linked to the Wagner Group has conducted fake election monitoring missions and influence operations in Zimbabwe, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Africa and Mozambique.⁴⁶ In Madagascar certain candidates were offered funding by Wagner advisers to run in the 2018 presidential election campaign in return for mining access.⁴⁷ Wagner also has a commercial hub in Cameroon, running convoys of natural resources from CAR to the port of Douala, including gold extracted from the mines it controls.⁴⁸ Russia signed a military cooperation agreement with Cameroon in April 2022, leading to speculation that it was paving the path to more active Wagner activity in the country.⁴⁹

The Wagner Group, or in some cases affiliates and shell companies considered part of the wider group of entities under the control of Prigozhin, has often been compensated in sub-Saharan Africa through control of local mining assets, which is something that is also claimed to be driving its involvement in areas of Ukraine where lucrative mines are located.⁵⁰

Sanctions against the Wagner Group

The USA has repeatedly imposed sanctions against Yevgeny Prigozhin and individuals and companies connected to him for attempting to influence the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, for combat operations in Ukraine and for destabilizing activities elsewhere, including countries in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵¹ On 13 December 2021 the EU imposed a set of 'restrictive measures' against the Wagner Group and eight individuals holding key positions in or linked to it, for sending mercenaries to conflict zones in CAR, Libya, Syria and Ukraine, fomenting violence, committing serious human rights violations and abuses, looting natural resources and intimidating civilians in violation

⁴⁵ US Department of State, 'Yevgeniy Prigozhin's Africa-wide disinformation campaign', 4 Nov. 2022; and Lederer, E. M., 'US and Russia clash over violent extremism in Africa', AP News, 11 Jan. 2023.

⁴⁶ US Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury escalates sanctions against the Russian government's attempts to influence US elections', Press release, 15 Apr. 2021.

⁴⁷ Stanyard, Vircoulon and Rademeyer (note 42), p. 13.

⁴⁸ Olivier, M., 'CAR-Cameroon: An investigation into the Wagner Group's African financial model', Africa Report, 18 Jan. 2023.

⁴⁹ 'Cameroon signs agreement with Russia in further boost to military ties', RFI, 22 Apr. 2022.

⁵⁰ Bertrand, N., Liebermann, O. and Marquardt, A., 'Russian artillery fire down nearly 75%', US officials say, in latest sign of struggles for Moscow', CNN, 10 Jan. 2023.

⁵¹ US Department of the Treasury (note 46); and US Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury targets assets of Russian financier who attempted to influence 2018 US elections', Press release, 30 Sep. 2019.

of international law.⁵² On 1 June 2022 the European Court of Justice ruled against Prigozhin, who had sought the annulment of EU sanctions against him.⁵³ Despite years of sanctions levied by the USA and the EU, Prigozhin is estimated to have generated revenues of over one-quarter of a billion dollars from the extraction of oil, gas, diamonds and gold in Africa and the Middle East during the four years leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁴

Chinese PMSCs

The international Chinese private security industry has developed more cautiously compared to those in other countries and has certain characteristics that set it apart from Western counterparts. The first Chinese private security contractors, which focused on the protection of infrastructure and personnel from theft and attacks or abduction, began to offer overseas services in 2010.⁵⁵ They have been increasingly deployed to areas in sub-Saharan Africa where China has expanded its investments and commercial presence as part of the BRI. Since its inception in 2013, the BRI has brought over 10 000 Chinese companies, including some 2000 state-owned enterprises, and over 1 million Chinese citizens to the continent.⁵⁶ The BRI presents clear opportunities for private security firms, as 84 per cent of Chinese BRI investment occurs in medium-high risk areas.⁵⁷ Yet despite the existence of over 7000 PMSCs that serve the domestic market and employ around 5 million former military and police personnel in China, observers maintain that only around 20–30 Chinese PMSCs operate internationally, although the numbers employed by these firms are believed to far exceed the 3200 formally reported.⁵⁸ Moreover, Chinese PMSCs are not ‘private sector’ because they are expected to follow government directives and exist either as

⁵² ‘L’Europe sanctionne le groupe russe Wagner pour ses “actions de déstabilisation” [Europe sanctions Russian Wagner Group for its “destabilizing actions”], *Jeune Afrique*, 14 Dec. 2021; and Council Implementing Decision (CFSP) 2021/2199 of 13 Dec. 2021 implementing Decision 2013/255/CFSP concerning restrictive measures against Syria, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L4451, vol. 65, 13 Dec. 2021, pp. 14–23.

⁵³ Court of Justice of the European Union, ‘The General Court confirms the restrictive measures adopted by the Council against the Russian businessman Yevgeniy Viktorovich Progozhin, in view of the situation in Libya’, Press release no. 91/22, 1 June 2022.

⁵⁴ Johnson, M., ‘Wagner leader generated \$250mn from sanctioned empire’, *Financial Times*, 21 Feb. 2023.

⁵⁵ Ghiselli, A., ‘Market opportunities and political responsibilities: The difficult development of Chinese private security companies abroad’, *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2020).

⁵⁶ Nantulya, P., ‘Chinese security firms spread along the African Belt and Road’, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 15 June 2021.

⁵⁷ Devonshire-Ellis, C., ‘84% of China’s BRI investments are in medium-high risk countries’, Silk Road Briefing, 2 July 2020.

⁵⁸ Nantulya (note 56); Arduino, A., ‘China’s private army: Protecting the new Silk Road’, *The Diplomat*, 20 Mar. 2018; and Yuan, J., ‘China’s private security companies and the protection of Chinese economic interests abroad’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 33, no. 1–2 (2022), p. 179.

state-owned sole proprietorships or with at least 51 per cent of their capital state-owned.⁵⁹

The Chinese government has been cautious regarding the development of these firms, with ongoing restrictions on their ability to offer armed services, although certain PMSCs operating abroad have been authorized to carry arms.⁶⁰ China has been slow to develop adequate legislation and national guidance for PMSCs working abroad, potentially constraining the professionalization of the industry. This has raised concerns that some PMSCs may be using legal grey areas to provide armed security without adequate oversight.⁶¹ These gaps in the regulation of Chinese PMSCs operating abroad increase the risks of serious misconduct and resulting political and reputational damage.⁶²

Nevertheless, the Chinese government encourages the use of Chinese PMSCs for its overseas businesses and personnel. Despite having less operational experience than some other PMSCs in high-risk environments, these firms offer certain advantages over well-established Western PMSCs in terms of a common language and culture, greater affordability and greater expected reliability in protecting proprietary information.⁶³ Based on comments by President Xi Jinping at the 20th Communist Party congress in October 2022 that China will be strengthening its protection of Chinese citizens and legal entities overseas, observers believe that Chinese PMSCs will be enabled to play a larger role in coming years.⁶⁴

Chinese fishing fleets and cargo vessels have encountered piracy, armed robbery and kidnap-for-ransom risks in Somalia and more recently in the hotspot of the Gulf of Guinea, where in 2019 some 73 per cent of kidnappings and 92 per cent of hostage-takings worldwide had occurred.⁶⁵ These and other coastal attacks have spurred the development of Chinese maritime security services, notably the company Hua Xin Zhong An (HXZA), which was the first (and by 2020 the only) Chinese PMSC to have obtained permission to conduct armed escort missions abroad, including off the coast of Somalia.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Nantulya (note 56).

⁶⁰ Yuan (note 58).

⁶¹ Nouwens, V., 'Who guards the "Maritime Silk Road"?', War on the Rocks, 24 June 2020; and Nantulya, P., 'Chinese security contractors in Africa', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 Oct. 2020.

⁶² Legarda, H. and Nouwens, M., 'Guardians of the Belt and Road: The internationalization of China's private security companies', Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), China Monitor Report, 16 Aug. 2018, p. 14.

⁶³ Sukhankin, S., 'An anatomy of the Chinese private security contracting industry', Jamestown Foundation, 3 Jan. 2023; and Nouwens (note 61).

⁶⁴ Honrada, G., 'China private security companies making a BRI killing', *Asia Times*, 1 Nov. 2022.

⁶⁵ 'Seventeen Chinese, Ukrainian seamen kidnapped off Cameroon', France 24, 16 Aug. 2019; 'Crew of Chinese boat freed after ransom payment: Nigerian army', Al Jazeera, 7 Mar. 2021; and International Chamber of Commerce, 'Gulf of Guinea remains world's piracy hotspot in 2021, according to IMB's latest figures', 14 Apr. 2021.

⁶⁶ Nouwens (note 61).

It is also the only Chinese PMSC that, as of early 2023, is certified by the International Code of Conduct Association, an international industry self-regulatory body.⁶⁷

Attacks on Chinese personnel and infrastructure within the region have become more common and the Chinese private security industry appears to be developing more capacity to operate in high-risk environments.⁶⁸ Haiwei Dui, also known as Overseas Security Guardians (HK) Company, is one of the pre-eminent Chinese PMSCs that have expanded globally, with a presence in 51 countries.⁶⁹

In the eastern DRC, Chinese mining companies have encountered increasing attacks and abductions by rebel groups. In 2020, Frontier Services Group (FSG), a Hong Kong-listed firm first established by former Blackwater founder Erik Prince but now controlled by the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC), won the contract to protect the Sino Congolaise des Mines (Sicomines) project.⁷⁰ Under the controversial \$6 billion joint venture, which was originally agreed in 2007, China would provide transport infrastructure in exchange for cobalt and copper mining rights.⁷¹ After Prince resigned from FSG in April 2021, the company became the 'first choice for Chinese firms in Africa'.⁷² FSG's contracts with Chinese companies in the DRC and Nigeria resulted in its safety, insurance and infrastructure division doubling its revenue between 2020 and 2021.⁷³ In the DRC, FSG has provided protection for Chinese diplomats, personnel and property in the mining sector.⁷⁴ For example, the Chinese Enterprises Association in the DRC is reported to have hired FSG to provide security training.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ See International Code of Conduct Association (ICOCA), 'HXZA—Company profile', accessed 20 Mar. 2023.

⁶⁸ Clover, C., 'Chinese private security companies go global', *Financial Times*, 26 Feb. 2017; and Pintado, C., 'Chinese mercenaries in Africa', *Small Wars Journal*, 6 May 2021.

⁶⁹ Arduino, A., 'The footprint of Chinese private security companies in Africa', China–Africa Research Initiative (CARI) Policy Brief no. 42, John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, 2020, pp. 16–17.

⁷⁰ Fisher, M., Shapira, I. and Rauhala, E., 'Behind Erik Prince's China venture', *Washington Post*, 4 May 2018.

⁷¹ 'Erik Prince wins keys security contract from Chinese–Congolese joint venture Sicomines', *Africa Intelligence*, 1 Dec. 2020.

⁷² 'Frontier Services Group becomes first choice for Chinese firms in Africa after DeWe takeover', *Africa Intelligence*, 5 Oct. 2021.

⁷³ 'Les recettes de Frontier Services Group, fondé par Erik Prince qui sécurise les mines chinoises en RDC sont passées de 4,3 à 8,6 millions \$' [Revenue from Frontier Services Group, founded by Erik Prince, which secures Chinese mines in the DRC, increased from \$4.3 million to \$8.6 million], *Congo Virtuel*, 6 Sep. 2021.

⁷⁴ Olander, E., 'DRC: Chinese ambassador pays visit to opposition leader Moise Katumbi', *Africa Report*, 18 Apr. 2022.

⁷⁵ 'Chinese miners hire Frontier Services Group for their security training in troubled Kivus', *Africa Intelligence*, 15 Feb. 2022.

Recent PMSC activity in selected conflict-affected sub-Saharan African states

Burkina Faso

Rumours that the groundwork was being laid for the engagement of the Wagner Group in Burkina Faso began circulating shortly after the military coup in January 2022.⁷⁶ Increasingly anti-French and pro-Russian rhetoric appeared in the media, and public demonstrations were organized by groups funded in part by Wagner-related entities through organizations in Mali and CAR. These groups waved Russian flags and called for France to leave and the new authorities to develop closer relations with Russia.⁷⁷

In an atmosphere of increasing Islamic extremist violence and following an attack on a humanitarian assistance convoy by jihadist forces on 30 September 2022—which killed 37 people, including 27 soldiers—Burkina Faso experienced another coup.⁷⁸ Soldiers ousted Paul-Henri Damiba, who had seized power from the democratically elected President Roch Marc Kaboré in a coup in January.⁷⁹ In December 2022, Ghanaian President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo alleged that Burkina Faso's military government had reached an agreement with the Wagner Group for assistance in combating the jihadist violence in exchange for a gold mining concession in the south of the country. The allegations were strongly denied by the Burkinan authorities.⁸⁰ Akufo-Addo's comment came shortly after Burkina Faso's prime minister, Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla, travelled to Moscow to strengthen Burkinan–Russian relations.⁸¹

Central African Republic

Amid a long-running rebellion and insurgency, and in response to the inability of UN peacekeepers to stabilize CAR, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra sought Russian weapons and military instructors to train the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) in 2017.⁸² CAR received Russian assistance in the form of weapons and 175 military advisers, although only 5 of the advisers were Russian military, with the other 170 comprising private contractors hired by Lobaye Invest, part of the complex network of companies owned by Yevgeny

⁷⁶ Roger, B., '[Enquête] Le Burkina Faso dans le viseur de Wagner' [(Investigation) Burkina Faso in Wagner's sights], *Jeune Afrique*, 30 June 2022.

⁷⁷ Roger (note 76).

⁷⁸ 'Burkina Faso: Recounting the attack on a convoy in Gaskindé days before a second coup', *Africanews*, 7 Oct. 2022.

⁷⁹ 'Burkina Faso's military leader ousted in second coup this year', *The Guardian*, 30 Sep. 2022.

⁸⁰ Skrdlik, J., 'Burkina Faso denies hiring Wagner mercenaries', *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 23 Dec. 2022.

⁸¹ Mednick, S., 'Burkina Faso contracts Russian mercenaries, alleges Ghana', *The Independent*, 15 Dec. 2022.

⁸² Bax, P., 'Russia's influence in the Central African Republic', *International Crisis Group, Africa Commentary*, 3 Dec. 2021.

Prigozhin. Despite the fact that President Touadéra denied any formal contract with the Wagner Group, 1000–2000 Wagner personnel were soon observed in Bangui, the capital of CAR.⁸³ An elite squad from the Wagner Group also provides security for President Touadéra. Former FSB member Valery Zakharov, overseeing the Russian elements of Touadéra's presidential guard, functions as an adviser for national security, with an office in the presidency.⁸⁴

Moreover, the Wagner Group's arrival coincided with the award of diamond and gold mining licences to Lobaye Invest.⁸⁵ The gold is reportedly exported uncontrolled and without the payment of taxes through Bangui M'Poko International Airport.⁸⁶ In 2019, three Russian journalists who were in CAR to investigate the link between Russian private military contractors and CAR's gold and mineral resources were killed in an ambush.⁸⁷ In 2022, mercenaries working for the Wagner Group were alleged to have launched a series of attacks on artisanal gold mines in the border region between CAR and Sudan, resulting in the deaths of dozens of migrant miners. Rather than securing the mines to extract gold, the attacks appear to have been mainly aimed at violent plundering of the sites.⁸⁸ Wagner has also been accused of violently taking control of the diamond industry in CAR through the shell company Diamville, which buys and sells diamonds.⁸⁹ Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin denied these allegations.⁹⁰

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has found Wagner Group forces to have high levels of civilian targeting in their counter-insurgency operations, and since mid 2021 they have increasingly operated independently of FACA.⁹¹ In November 2021, a leaked EU report described most FACA units as 'operating under direct command or supervision by WG [Wagner Group] mercenaries', who exercise strong influence over the general staff and command and control of FACA, and 'who are able unhindered to take

⁸³ Bax (note 82).

⁸⁴ Olivier, M., 'CAR: Who are President Touadéra's Russian guardian angels?', *Africa Report*, 17 Mar. 2021.

⁸⁵ Malkova, I. and Baev, A., 'A private army for the president: The tale of Evgeny Prigozhin's most delicate mission', *The Bell*, 31 Jan. 2019.

⁸⁶ Olivier (note 84).

⁸⁷ Lister, T. and Shukla, S., 'Murdered journalists were tracked by police with shadowy Russian links, evidence shows', *CNN*, 10 Jan. 2019.

⁸⁸ Burke, J., 'Russian mercenaries accused of deadly attacks on mines on Sudan–CAR border', *The Guardian*, 21 June 2022.

⁸⁹ European Investigative Collaborations, Dossier Center and All Eyes on Wagner, 'CAR: Prigozhin's blood diamonds. A report by the project All Eyes on Wagner', Dec. 2022.

⁹⁰ Ilyushina, M. and Ebel, F., 'Russian mercenaries accused of using violence to corner diamond trade', *Washington Post*, 6 Dec. 2022.

⁹¹ Serwat, L. et al., 'Wagner Group operations in Africa: Civilian targeting trends in the Central African Republic and Mali', *ACLED*, 30 Aug. 2022.

over command on the spot and thus use FACA for their own operations'.⁹² UN experts have also said that Russian PMSCs have been connected to violent attacks in CAR, including mass summary executions, arbitrary detentions, torture and force disappearances. In March 2021, a group of independent human rights experts working for the UN Human Rights Council (including the members of the UN working group on the use of mercenaries, the special rapporteur on torture and other experts in the special procedures of the Human Rights Council) issued a joint statement about their concerns that Russian PMSCs, including Sewa Security Services, Lobaye Invest and the Wagner Group, operating jointly with FACA, were linked to a series of violent attacks following presidential elections in December 2020, as well as grave human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, for which no one had been held accountable.⁹³

The independent human rights experts further flagged the presence of Russian military advisers and trainers at MINUSCA bases, including Russian 'trainers' who had been medically evacuated. They warned that the close proximity and coordinated meetings with peacekeepers risked blurring important distinctions between civil, military and peacekeeping operations.⁹⁴ A joint statement by the human rights experts issued in October 2021 drew attention to reports of the intimidation and violent harassment of civilians and communities, including peacekeepers, journalists, aid workers and minorities, by Russian 'instructors' working closely with FACA and the police, including in the arrest and detention of individuals. The experts noted widespread reports of rape and sexual violence committed by Wagner personnel, and the lack of accountability of personnel and instructors in this context.⁹⁵

As tensions between the Wagner Group and MINUSCA increased, disinformation about the UN mission appeared on social media, heightening the risks to UN personnel. Some UN personnel were prevented from carrying out their duties in areas controlled by Wagner, including the deputy head of mission, Louise Brown, who was physically threatened while near the border with Chad in May 2021.⁹⁶ On 22 February 2022, four French soldiers serving as bodyguards for French General Stéphane Marchenoir, MINUSCA's chief of staff, were arrested at Bangui Airport and accused of planning to assassinate

⁹² European External Action Service (EEAS), 'Political and strategic environment of CSDP missions in the Central African Republic (CAR)', EEAS(2021) 1213, 15 Nov. 2021, para. 5.

⁹³ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'CAR: Experts alarmed by government's use of "Russian trainers", close contacts with UN peacekeepers', Press release, 31 Mar. 2021.

⁹⁴ OHCHR (note 93).

⁹⁵ OHCHR, 'CAR: Russian Wagner Group harassing and intimidating civilians—UN experts', Press release, 27 Oct. 2021.

⁹⁶ *Africa Confidential*, 'France and Russia tussle in Bangui', vol. 62, no. 15 (19 July 2021).

the president. The four men were released only after MINUSCA threatened to leave CAR.⁹⁷

Democratic Republic of the Congo

In October 2022, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi publicly declared that he would not engage Russian mercenaries to assist the government in combating the M23 armed group.⁹⁸ Shortly thereafter, the DRC announced the procurement of Russian military combat and transport helicopters.⁹⁹ On 21 December 2022 the UN Security Council lifted notification requirements for arms shipments to the DRC, as well as provision of assistance, consultancy services or military training, while maintaining the arms embargo on all non-governmental entities and individuals.¹⁰⁰ Various East European PMSCs are present in the DRC, including Agemira from Bulgaria, which services Russian combat helicopters and aircraft, and Asociația RALF from Romania, which guards Goma International Airport.¹⁰¹

Mali

A widening insurgency in Mali, including the expansion of jihadist groups, and two military coups (in 2020 and 2021) escalated tensions between the military-controlled government and former colonial power France and Western allies. In December 2021 the government invited Russian instructors (widely reported as being part of the Wagner Group) to begin operating in Mali.¹⁰² As a result, France withdrew its counterterrorism troops and the European multinational Task Force Takuba in mid 2022. The Malian government then established a military cooperation agreement with Russia in November, ostensibly to provide military training to local Malian forces. However, during 2022 evidence emerged that the Wagner Group was fighting alongside the Malian armed forces to combat Islamic extremists, often targeting ethnic Fulani communities (perceived to be linked to the insurgents) using tactics associated with Wagner's previous actions in CAR and Libya.¹⁰³ According to ACLED, civilian targeting accounted for 71 per cent of Wagner involvement in political violence in Mali in 2022, and over 2000 civilians have been killed since December 2021, one-third of which

⁹⁷ 'UN clashes with Wagner worsen', *Africa Confidential*, vol. 62, no. 6 (8 Mar. 2022).

⁹⁸ Khalaf, R., Pilling, D. and Schipani, A., 'DR Congo leader rules out deploying Russian mercenaries to quell rebels', *Financial Times*, 18 Oct. 2022.

⁹⁹ 'DRC: Kinshasa strikes military procurement deal with Moscow', *Africa Intelligence*, 27 Oct. 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Tasamba, J., 'UN Security Council lifts notification requirements for arms supply to DR Congo', *Andalou Agency*, 21 Dec. 2022.

¹⁰¹ Schlindwein, S., 'Are white mercenaries fighting in the DRC conflict?', *Deutsche Welle*, 17 Jan. 2023.

¹⁰² For developments in Mali in 2021, Baudais, V. and Hickendorff, A., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in West Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2022*, pp. 202–12.

¹⁰³ Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: Massacre by army, foreign soldiers', 5 Apr. 2022.

were attributable to the Wagner Group. In contrast, 500 civilians were killed in the previous 12 months.¹⁰⁴ Russian-speaking soldiers, believed to have been Wagner personnel, and Malian armed forces are accused of killing around 300 civilian men, including some detained suspected Islamist fighters, in an operation on the village of Moura in central Mali between 27 March and 1 April 2022.¹⁰⁵

The Wagner Group allegedly provided security services to the Malian government for \$10 million per month in early 2022.¹⁰⁶ However, ECOWAS had imposed sanctions against the government for postponing elections and the transition to civilian rule, leaving it unable to meet its obligations to pay Wagner until sanctions were lifted in July 2022, having agreed to hold elections in 2024. One apparent solution to the funding problem was (similar to Wagner's experience in CAR) to seek to get the operating permits of some of the gold mines transferred to the Wagner Group.¹⁰⁷

Sudan

In November 2017 a new phase in Russia–Sudan cooperation began with several security and economic agreements. These included the establishment of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea, and concession agreements between the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals and the company M-Invest, a Russia-based entity controlled by Prigozhin, for gold prospecting and mining in Sudan, then the third largest producer of gold in Africa.¹⁰⁸ Afterwards, Wagner Group personnel were deployed to Sudan to provide a range of military and security services, including training Sudanese military and police personnel, transportation of weapons and information operations. According to the US Department of Justice, these forces suppressed local pro-democracy uprisings against the regime of President Omar al-Bashir, who was ultimately deposed. Additionally, social media disinformation campaigns and staged executions were organized by M-Invest. In payment, M-Invest was awarded concession agreements to explore gold mining sites in Sudan.¹⁰⁹ Financial facilitators based in Thailand and Hong Kong supported these activities in Sudan, and were included in US sanctions for having assisted Prigozhin to evade sanctions. The Wagner Group has continued to

¹⁰⁴ Serwat et al. (note 91).

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch (note 103); Burke, J. and Akinwotu, E., 'Russian mercenaries linked to civilian massacres in Mali', *The Guardian*, 4 May 2022; and UNOCHR, 'Mali: UN experts call for independent investigation into possible international crimes committed by government forces and "Wagner group"', Press release, 31 Jan. 2023.

¹⁰⁶ AFP, 'Mali paying Wagner Group \$10 mn a month, US General says', *Barron's*, 3 Feb. 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Roger, B., 'Mali: Comment Wagner compte faire main basse sur des mines d'or' [Mali: How Wagner plans to get its hands on gold mines], *Jeune Afrique*, 7 Sep. 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Yakoreva, A., '"Putin's Cook" set out to mine gold in Africa', *The Bell*, 5 June 2018.

¹⁰⁹ US Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury targets financier's illicit sanctions evasion activity', Press release, 15 July 2020.

work with Sudan's military leaders and through the Meroe Gold venture has undertaken joint mining activities with the Rapid Support Force, with gold allegedly smuggled to Russia to build up its reserves before the war in Ukraine.¹¹⁰

Conclusions

Recent trends concerning PMSC involvement in sub-Saharan Africa suggest that the ascendant actors have close, symbiotic links to home state interests as instruments of national policy and geopolitical competition. Control and extraction of natural resources is a common focal point. Russian PMSCs, in particular the Wagner Group, engage directly in military operations, typically for governments (and currently juntas or military transition governments) threatened by rebels or insurgents, with payment often in high-value natural resources or mining concessions. Chinese PMSCs have emerged more slowly and in a more restrained and circumscribed manner, but with a close connection to the Chinese state. China has been increasing its economic and political power throughout Africa with a massive injection of investment, infrastructure development and trade expansion. This may portend a more lasting engagement for Chinese interests and actors, including PMSCs, and a greater strategic impact on access to natural resources and, more broadly, sub-Saharan African political dynamics. Regulation and oversight of both Russian and Chinese PMSCs remain grey areas, which is a concern in view of the scope of demand for private security resulting from Chinese investments across Africa and the seemingly upward trajectory of geostrategic competition playing out on the continent.

¹¹⁰ Eltayeb, A. F., 'Sudan: The Wagner-RSF ties that block the path to democratisation', Africa Report, 2 Feb. 2023.