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Private Military Companies Expand Russia's Operational Reach Globally

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia employs private military companies (PMCs) as deniable, coercive instruments of state power to achieve strategic objectives and offset conventional military limitations. These pseudostate forces operate as extensions of Russian military and foreign policy, integrating military, economic, and informational lines of effort, particularly in regions where direct military intervention is politically risky. The evolution and employment of PMCs like the Wagner Group demonstrate a high tolerance for operational risk and a model that complicates the global security environment, challenging traditional escalation dynamics and presenting direct threats to Western interests. Russia's PMC employment norms have reduced operational warning for conflicts in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Poor coordination and deconfliction has also resulted in direct conflict between Russian PMCs and U.S. Forces.

PMCS A LEGACY OF SOVIET ERA

The contemporary framework for Russian PMCs developed from the instability that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The rapid downsizing of the Soviet military and state security apparatus resulted in a massive surplus of highly trained combat and intelligence personnel. Early post-Soviet Russia was characterized by a highly volatile security environment that drove the high demand for unregulated security services.¹ Veteran associations initially served as organizational hubs for early iterations of PMCs that provided violence-as-a-service domestically throughout the 1990s. These entities operated primarily within the chaotic internal Russian security market before expanding their operational reach to foreign conflicts, notably in the former Yugoslavia and Africa.²

PRIVATE MILITARY AND SECURITY COMPANIES

Private military companies are privately owned corporate entities that conduct military-type activities as a fee-based service. They may be organized for combat operations.

Private security companies are privately owned corporate entities that provide security as a fee-based service, often focused on personnel or fixed-site security. They are typically not organized for combat operations.

In practice, both Russia and China maintain a heavy state interest in the ownership and employment of these privately armed groups to extend the reach of traditional state power.



Early Russian proxy forces frequently operated under the guise of “volunteer” organizations, such as ostensibly independent Cossack units. These groups established the precedent for the formalized, state-integrated PMCs observed today, advancing Russian geopolitical interests in regional conflicts including Moldova, Georgia, and the Balkans.³ Russian domestic law, specifically Article 359 of the 1996 Criminal Code, explicitly criminalizes mercenary activity.⁴ This legal prohibition was most likely maintained intentionally, allowing government-aligned patrons maximum deniability when employing early PMCs. Rather than eliminating PMCs, this legal framework forced them to operate outside formal legal structures, increasing their dependence on the Russian state and intelligence services for patronage, logistics, and operational impunity. This legally ambiguous environment allowed unregistered PMCs to flourish, directly facilitating the rise of organizations like the Wagner Group. By the 2010s, these groups had increased their integration with Russian military and intelligence services as evidenced by their colocation and training at facilities maintained by the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) and Russian Special Operations Forces.⁵

EVOLUTION AS A PSEUDOSTATE ACTOR

Russia has deliberately cultivated PMCs as a mechanism within its foreign policy and military operational framework to pursue strategic objectives across the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe, deliberately generating instability to challenge U.S. and allied interests. This employment model allows the Russian state to project combat power and political influence into contested operational environments while retaining plausible deniability. The Russian approach to PMCs, most notably exemplified by Wagner, diverges significantly from Western commercial security models.⁶ Unlike the Western model where private corporate entities fulfill defense contracts, or the Chinese model that depends largely on liaison and host-nation security forces, Russian PMCs operate as state-sponsored, offensive instruments designed to supplement and, in certain theaters, replace conventional military and intelligence capabilities.⁷ This approach is a deliberate strategic choice aimed at fundamentally altering the balance of power in regional conflicts without triggering direct, state-on-state conventional warfare.



Figure 1: Differentiated View of Risk to National Agency Using PMCs/PSCs (Source: T2COM G-2)

The 2018 Battle of Conoco Fields in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, serves as a critical case study for the implications of PMC employment in politically sensitive environments. During this engagement, a battalion-sized formation of pro-Assad forces, including a large number of Wagner mercenaries, initiated an unprovoked armored and artillery assault on an outpost held by U.S. Special Operations Forces and allied Syrian Democratic Forces.⁸ When U.S. commanders used established deconfliction communication channels, their Russian military counterparts explicitly denied the presence of any Russian personnel in the area. This denial resulted in a massive kinetic response that destroyed the advancing combined Syrian regime and Wagner formation.

Russia’s reliance on PMCs is driven by profound conventional military limitations. The Russian Armed Forces demonstrate significant capability gaps in their capacity to project and sustain expeditionary combat power on a global scale—an area where the United States maintains a decisive advantage.⁹ Russian military logistics are highly reliant on rail networks and lack the robust and

agile expeditionary sustainment infrastructure required for prolonged overseas deployments. This systemic weakness, observed during operations in Syria and ongoing conflict in Ukraine, severely restricts the Kremlin's ability to globally project military power using uniform forces.¹⁰

To circumvent these structural limitations, the Russian state utilizes PMCs as self-sustaining operational entities.

Russian PMCs frequently fund their deployments through resource-capture contracts negotiated with host-nation governments. An exemplar of this self-funding model was observed in the Central African Republic (CAR), where Wagner secured concessions for gold, diamond, and timber extraction in exchange for regime security and counterinsurgency support.¹¹ This fee-for-service and resource-extraction model allows Russia to conduct foreign military interventions at a negligible cost to the national defense budget. This approach has effectively challenged U.S. and European security cooperation efforts in the CAR. By offering unconditional military assistance devoid of the human rights or governance caveats typically required by Western partners, Russian PMCs have successfully displaced allied influence and secured strategic resource access for Moscow.

The Wagner Group evolved beyond a traditional paramilitary force into a hyper-empowered pseudostate actor. Success in the fee-for-service model allowed Wagner to further Russian state objectives through economic coercion and information warfare.¹² Wagner's St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency was heavily involved in global disinformation campaigns and electoral interference.¹³ In operational theaters across Africa, the Russian government delegated significant political and economic authority to PMC leadership, effectively allowing organizations like Wagner to dictate foreign policy execution, manage local commercial networks, and control critical natural resources. This integration indicates that the Russian state actively outsources components of its intelligence and subversion portfolios to nonstate proxies to obscure attribution and complicate Western responses. It also suggests this level of empowerment transformed the PMC into a comprehensive geopolitical weapon, capable of achieving strategic destabilization and narrative control through coercion and violence that the Kremlin could officially disavow.



Figure 2: Wagner Group Mercenaries in the Central African Republic (Source: Corbeau News Centrafrique, Creative Commons 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en.>)

VULNERABILITIES AND RESTRUCTURING

Despite its strategic utility, the June 2023 mutiny led by Wagner leader Yevgeniy Prigozhin exposed systemic weaknesses in the Russian PMC model. The escalating public conflict between Wagner leadership and the Russian Defense Ministry over logistical shortfalls, operational control, and high-casualty assignments in Ukraine culminated in an armed march on Moscow.¹⁴ This event represented a catastrophic failure of the Kremlin's principal-agent relationship; the delegation of unchecked coercive power and financial autonomy to a proxy actor yielded significant short-term foreign policy gains but ultimately threatened the regime's core monopoly on violence.



Figure 3: Yevgeniy Prigozhin
(Source: FBI <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/counterintelligence/yevgeniy-viktorovich-prigozhin>.)

Following the mutiny and the subsequent death of Prigozhin, the Russian state initiated a comprehensive restructuring of its proxy forces.

Wagner's global assets, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, were systematically absorbed into new, state-managed entities such as the Africa Corps, operating directly under the purview of the Defense Ministry and the GRU.¹⁵ This consolidation tightens command and control and reduces the autonomy previously afforded to PMC commanders. While this restructuring mitigates the internal threat to the regime, it highly likely degrades the plausible deniability and operational agility that originally made the PMC model so effective. The Russian state is now more overtly linked to the actions and atrocities committed by these units, altering the strategic calculus for their employment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

The proliferation and integration of Russian PMCs within shared operational environments fundamentally alter the global security landscape and directly impact U.S. Army operations. These organizations deliberately operate in a gray zone below the threshold of conventional armed conflict, complicating military deconfliction, obscuring early warning indicators, and significantly elevating the risk of tactical miscalculation. U.S. Army formations deploying to support regional stability or security assistance platforms would benefit from collaboration with interagency stakeholders to identify possible PMC operations. By integrating with interagency partners, Army formations can better prepare to support diplomatic and information efforts to minimize the risk posed by these organizations.

Adversaries will use PMCs to test U.S. resolve, probe defensive perimeters, and execute localized offensives while exploiting the ambiguity of proxy forces to avoid direct state-level retaliation.

For U.S. Army intelligence staffs, the presence of pseudostate soldiers necessitates a fundamental reassessment of operational environment visualization. Planners are likely to need to account for adversary formations that do not adhere to traditional military hierarchies, uniform conventions, or international laws of armed conflict.

The employment of PMCs by peer adversaries challenges established escalation dynamics. If an adversary state refuses to acknowledge its proxy forces, traditional deterrence signaling may prove ineffective. Expanding the U.S. Army intelligence preparation of the battlefield framework to track the financial, logistical, and informational networks that sustain these PMCs as environmental conditions may limit future impacts to Army operations. Understanding the doctrinal application, logistical dependencies, and command-and-control vulnerabilities of Russian pseudostate forces is paramount for developing effective countermeasures, ensuring force protection, and maintaining freedom of action in contested theaters.

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