

There is no doubt that the use of this type of company entails innumerable advantages at the operational level (trained and well-equipped personnel almost immediately, such as the most significant), at the geopolitical level (mainly the absence of legal attribution before the international community or its lower economic cost than a deployment of conventional forces) and also at the national level (it reduces or even eliminates a conscription, which minimizes the social cost of a conflict and a lack of affection for the casualties).

But it also has negative aspects such as its lack of effectiveness against a strongly organized opposition force (or even a conventional enemy) in the long term² or the usual and repeated suspicions of violations of international humanitarian law that usually accompany them.

This opinion piece does not intend to advocate for or against the existence or activities of PMSCs (with a current growing market) but to examine Russia's use of them as a geopolitical tool; although as a result of its performance in the illegitimate invasion of Ukraine, it seems to be modifying this approach by trying to subordinate them to its governmental structure via the Ministry of Defence or the Ministry of the Interior.

This increase in command and control is contrasted with the loss of anonymity (absence of attribution and therefore almost impunity) or the flexibility that characterizes them. Are we facing the end of a cycle?

We must remember that, although Russian legislation is very strict regarding the legality of this type of company on its territory, Russia is not a signatory nation to the Montreaux document and none of its PMSCs adhere to the codes of conduct that, voluntarily subscribed, try to regulate their professional actions.

To identify where a leader wants to direct his foreign policy, two factors can be considered³: official documents and facts such as military actions.

2 <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/evolución-legal-de-la-figura-del-mercenario-en-el-conflicto-de-ucrania-respect-or-by-a-IHL-> accessed on 28 March 2025.

3

https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320887/neo_urasianismo_en_el_kremlin_2025_dieeee16.pdf/ebfa3a4d-9eb3-4c19-7154-cb9dc5d6c53e?t=1741004130088 accessed March 10, 2025.

We will refer to these actions, but not only in the Russian case, thus having the opportunity to compare with other approaches, such as the United States of America, China or Turkey.

From the origin in Crimea

There is a general consensus that the public origin of Russian PMSCs in Crimea was placed in 2014 with the appearance of graphic documents of the so-called "little green men".

Although there are few Russian PMSCs that have been made public, there are or have been a myriad of them, which some studies⁴ put at almost forty.

On the occasion of Russia's illegitimate aggression against Ukraine, this number has multiplied as a result of the exponential increase in demand.

In addition to the existing ones (*REDUT*, *PATRIOT* or *CONVOY* to name just a few), others emerged, for example, the company *GAZPROM* is believed to have established three private security companies (*POTOK*, *FAKEL* and *PLAMYA*) with the mission of securing its facilities outside the Russian Federation, although it is likely that at least two of them will be integrated into the Ministry of Defence at the beginning of the illegitimate aggression against Ukraine.

Not only have they been successful, but moving into 2022, in Gossi (Mali), Wagner starred in one of its greatest failures by trying to blame the French armed forces for the murder of civilians and subsequent attempt to hide them in a mass grave, ignoring the fact that today we are on a transparent battlefield and through the observation of a UAV⁵ it was possible to dismantle this narrative in the eyes of public opinion.

The case of the "sponsored" Armed Forces units

On the occasion of the so-called Russian special operation in Ukraine, units of the Russian armed forces "sponsored" by oligarchs, cities or even workers' unions such as the Ural battalion or the Tatarstan battalion have also been detected that would not fall

4 <https://molnar.com/en/blog/catalog-of-russian-pmcs/> accessed February 25, 2025.

5 Unmanned Air Vehicle.

into the category of PMSCs as they are part of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

These sponsors do not interfere in the command and control of these units, limiting themselves solely and exclusively to the pecuniary contribution (either as a complement to the payroll, equipment improvements or even an increase in maintenance).

Legal aspects

Article 13.5 of the Russian constitution⁶ reflects the absolute prohibition of creating armed units and article 359 of its criminal code criminalizes the figure of the mercenary. It is one of the few nations that not only incorporates the definition of mercenary in Article 47.2 of Protocol I of the Geneva Convention, but also develops in depth some aspects adapting the figure of the mercenary to the present day.

Even so, in September 2021, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov himself acknowledged with a paralogism the existence of a Russian PMSC, which had signed a legal contract with the Malian government.

Following the Wagner PMSC mutiny (which we will discuss later), on February 14, 2024, President Putin signed a law⁷ amending the criminal code and the code of criminal procedure, expanding the crimes, penalties, and circumstances related to sabotage, treason, and security to cite:

*"In addition, all assets used or intended to finance terrorism, extremist activities, an organized group, **an illegal armed unit**, a criminal network (criminal association) or any activity against the security of the Russian Federation shall be subject to confiscation.»*

This clear warning, even with the ambiguity of the wording, already anticipates the patrimonial requisition that would be suffered by anyone who founded an EMSP, if they did not have the approval of the Kremlin.

⁶ <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm> accessed February 15, 2025.

⁷ <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/73448> accessed March 20, 2025.

The "March of Justice" (June 2023)

At the press conference on June 10, 2023, Nikolai Pankov, Deputy Minister of Defence⁸, assured that the recruitment was a success, included among the volunteer formations (note the irony) which he estimated at more than forty and reported that they would have to formalise a contract before the end of the same month, which would give them legal status; for this the Ministry of Defence would develop a procedure to be followed.

One after the other they were subordinated to a greater or lesser extent since they did not necessarily have to be integrated into the operational structure of the Ministry of Defence. The intelligence departments also required these services, and even the Ministry of the Interior.

But Wagner, led by its CEO Y. Prigozhin (he was not really a tactical commander) had taken on too much of a leading role to simply subordinate himself. Beyond the public disagreements with certain authorities of the Ministry of Defense or the succulent business, he had a direct line to Putin (who personally assisted and decorated several of the fallen of this group), integrated members of the Duma into his social activities, recruited in prisons, bought weapons outside Russia without government channels and even had his own social work for the benefit of "his fallen".

Wagner was a very useful actor, but on the other hand very annoying at the domestic level, especially considering the illegality of his activity under Russian law and the repeated clashes, once Y Prigozhin publicly confirmed both his existence and his leadership, with certain authorities of the Ministry of Defence whom he insulted as well as blaming for the lack of both ammunition and equipment and therefore, of failures in Ukraine through social networks.

After what Prigozhin considered a point of no return, a bombardment of Wagner forces by the military units of the Russian Federation (however, the Ministry of Defence itself described this information as a "hoax"), what he called the *march of justice* began towards Moscow , reaching 150 km from the capital.

To find a solution, a negotiation between the President of Belarus and the CEO of Wagner was necessary, subsequently endorsed by the President of the Russian Federation since

⁸ https://t.me/mod_russia/27277 accessed March 10, 2025.

the Russian units deployed before Wagner were not able to stop them and even Kadyrov's forces, once they received the order to stop Wagner's march, they failed to arrive in a timely manner to fulfill their mission.

After the "mutiny"

Wagner fighters were offered to join the military units participating in the so-called Special Operation in Ukraine (through a contractual relationship with the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation) or to move to Belarus while maintaining their existing contract with Wagner, provided that during the mutiny they had not participated in the bloodshed.

At the same time, Wagner's social networks maintained their presence in cyberspace, and while they claimed to be in meetings with officials from the Ministry of Defense to resume hiring and their activities, they boasted of social action for the families of both the injured and the deceased, although curiously, as if it were a voluntary concession or an imposed toll, they advertised the recruitment of certain other conventional military units.

They established new Wagner channels in Belarus (mainly telegram) advertising all kinds of social activities, demonstrations or tactical exercises relatively very close to NATO's borders (Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) as well as the border with Ukraine, in a clear display of force.

Belarus also took advantage of this situation by organizing a greater number of military units, called Special Forces, which were instructed by Wagner members, as well as teaching classes and seminars at Belarusian military academies.

But, in a country (Belarus) where the formation of mercenary groups is strictly prohibited and the creation of security companies is very restricted, it was viewed with suspicion from Western nations that the only private security company authorized to dispose of weapons (decree of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of March 22, 2021⁹), *GuardService*, receive weaponry, equipment, and instruction from Wagner members. Curiously, the only private security company closely linked to the top of the Belarusian government.

Some analysts believed that they were facing a new PMSC prepared and alerted to act in Ukraine through sabotage actions or a rapid incursion into Kiev as part of a military

⁹ https://pravo.by/upload/docs/op/W22136726_1622667600.pdf accessed March 15, 2025.

operation. In any case, it is believed that it forced Ukraine to maintain a reserve to counter that possible offensive and probably increased alert levels at NATO's borders.

Back in Russia, the authorities closed the Molkino training center (Krasnodar Krai) and the St. Petersburg headquarters, called *the Wagner Center*¹⁰ and now converted into a mausoleum, saw its distinctive signs disappear. But its social networks were still active calling on its members to calm down while waiting for the subsequent development of events.

However, it was not the first time in Russia's modern history that a PMSC and its academic structure had been dismantled by the security services of the Russian Federation after acquiring a certain notoriety (as in the case of the PMSC *ENOT*).

Two months after the mutiny (and two days after Prigozhin's death) President Putin signed a decree obliging volunteer formations to take an oath to the Russian flag¹¹.

Africa changed its modus operandi, taking over from the Afrika Corps (AC).

In parallel, General Yunus-bek Yevkurov, deputy defense minister, visited Burkina Faso and Mali in September 2023¹², probably to inform those governments that the contracts with Wagner were still in force and would be fulfilled. Perhaps this concern is related to the direction of the vote of these African countries within the United Nations every time a proposal to condemn or reproach Russia in the face of the aggression against Ukraine has been presented since February 2022.

And while it is true that the ultimate intention of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation seemed to be to integrate the Wagner structures into AC by forcing the situation by limiting salaries and reducing if not denying logistical support, the evolution of the situation in Ukraine caused a part of AC to have to return from Africa and both structures were operational. At least temporarily.

10 According to E. Prigozhin, "The Wagner Center is a group of buildings with places for inventors, project developers, IT specialists, experimental manufacturers, and various start-ups."

11 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/08/25/putin-signs-decree-forcing-paramilitary-fighters-to-swear-oath-a82251> accessed March 3, 2025.

12 <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230920-notorious-russian-general-master-spy-duo-organise-in-africa-after-prigozhin-s-demise> accessed March 1, 2025.

Even the Russian ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire, Alexei Saltykov, told local media that Russia would cooperate with all interregional organizations in its support for pan-Africanism. Asked about conflicting issues such as Wagner, he assured that Wagner was going to cease to exist and his place would be taken by AC.

This information was denied by Wagner's social networks, which even publicized a political map of Africa in which the Russian flag was seen in some countries and the Wagner logo in others. Thus, each audience had the expected message, although the deployment declared by Wagner was reduced during 2024.

This situation was aggravated by the consequences of the ambush suffered by Wagner and the Malian armed forces at the end of 2024. In addition to the tactical defeat and a possible synergy between the Tuaregs and the JNIM terrorists, Andrey Yusov¹³, spokesman for the Ukrainian military intelligence agency, acknowledged their involvement.

In the end, Mali and Niger broke diplomatic relations with Ukraine. Later, Mali expelled the Swedish ambassador Kristina Kühnel as a result of statements related to this ambush.

These same Wagner networks publicised that even though there was a deployment of AC in Equatorial Guinea, this country had granted a succulent concession of its main ports to a Turkish company, *Albayrat*, allegedly linked to politicians from both countries, which Wagner considers a clear allusion to the lack of political vision of those responsible in the Russian Federation.

From the end of 2024 and in the first quarter of 2025, a significant number of AC members who would have been operating in Syria would be redeployed in Africa, which has boosted their actions (they are troops with a very high level of both training and equipment).

But they remain separate structures. In the advertised job offers, AC demands interpreters of English, French and Spanish (due to its last deployment in Guinea) while Wagner only hires interpreters of French.

¹³ "The rebels have received information, and not just information, that allowed a successful military operation against Russian war criminals," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/29/ukraine-military-intelligence-claims-involvement-in-deadly-wagner-ambush-in-mali> consulted on April 10, 2025.

This is because Wagner currently advertises that they are only deployed in Mali, the Central African Republic and Belarus while AC claims to be in Africa, in the self-styled special operation in Ukraine or wherever "the Motherland demands it", in the face of complaints on their Telegram channels by alleged members of AC who claim to have signed a contract to deploy in Africa and are currently on Ukrainian soil.

It also maintains differences in recruitment. While a contract is signed with the company at Wagner and personnel who have a contract in force with the armed forces cannot be transferred, and this contractual relationship must be terminated prior to joining Wagner, at AC the contract is signed with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and it is possible to transfer personnel already contracted with the Ministry of Defence provided that (1) they are not deployed in the so-called special operation and (2) their commanders authorize it.

As a curiosity, when selecting candidates in AC, priority is given to members of the Special Forces, certain select units and "Wagner members", an express citation and without any reference to any other PMSC. It is precisely the presence of former Wagner members that is publicized to increase recruitment. The only restriction for AC is to recruit active personnel in the Border Guard or in the Ministry of the Interior.

On the intellectual side, to counteract Wagner's closeness to *Casa Rusia* (a tool of marked governmental influence) in Africa, the "*African Initiative*"¹⁴ has been established in aid of AC (which implies that both follow instructions from Moscow) which acts as a think tank with cognitive campaigns, one of the latest being the dissemination of an interview with *Aleksander Dugin* in which he explains how Russia fully supports his interpretation of pan-Africanism.

All this is fully in line with the Russia-Africa ministerial summits held where, in addition to the plenaries, Russia acknowledged having signed bilateral agreements and, of course, the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum Action Plan 2023 - 2026.

By way of analogy with the drone units, it should be noted that in August 2024 a center called *Rubicon* was established as a center of excellence in terms of drones, covering not only instruction but also technical development or even development of tactics,

¹⁴ <https://afrinz.ru/en/> accessed April 4, 2025

techniques and procedures for use, nothing new since this initiative was already implemented at the Wagner center.

In October 2024 it was visited by Defence Minister Andrei Belousov¹⁵ and even at the end of 2024 the idea of elevating everything related to drones to independent service within the Russian Armed Forces was publicised.

The military objectives are clear, to centralize both knowledge and instruction and training, to reorganize existing units (thus assigning personnel to duplicate positions and therefore now without a mission to assault troops) and to facilitate command and control.

But there are other objectives such as integrating the different civilian organizations and volunteer units that have emerged throughout the Russian geography and have been collaborating in the self-styled special operation, subordinating them within the scope of the Ministry of Defence.

In short, the same policy that was established for PMSCs. There is a doubt as to whether it is a question of centralising because it is in times of war (economy of means) or to avoid what happened with PMSCs, at least in terms of the prominence achieved.

Although the possibilities of using drones in a hybrid warfare scenario are unimaginable.

But Russia is not the only nation...

In January 2025, during the truce between Israel and Hamas, a checkpoint was set up in the division between the southern and northern parts of Gaza, where a consortium of PMSCs was immediately deployed.

This consortium is made up of several companies, the EMSP *UG Solutions*¹⁶ founded in 2023 and based in North Carolina (USA), the company *Safe Reach Solution (SRS)* based in Wyoming (USA) and specialized in planning and logistics which was joined by an Egyptian EMSP. Signifying that the U.S. has been a signatory nation to the Montreaux document since September 2008, while Egypt has not adhered to the document.

15 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2024/10/11/1068074-belousov-proinspektiroval> accessed March 22, 2025.

16 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/30/us-private-armed-contractors-gaza-checkpoint> accessed March 22, 2025.

All this after confirming Israel's rejection of a United Nations force, Hamas's refusal to allow any Israeli PMSC to be deployed in that area and the reluctance of all state actors in the face of a deployment of forces from a third nation continued over time due to the difficult balance to be maintained.

This use allows the US to have eyes on the ground with the approval of almost all state actors, since not wearing a uniform (or carrying flags) does not convey an image of occupation forces and the regular forces do not face risks (lethal or not) that civil society is currently reluctant to take.

It thus recovers its role as the main actor (if not judge or guarantor) in this scenario, thanks precisely to PMSCs.

It allows the rest of the regional actors to reach a satisfactory understanding that is really pragmatic by employing companies with a low public profile, lacking controversial previous actions, financially supported by third states and without the need to expose their own armed forces.

China represents another paradigmatic model of use of this tool, characterized by its low public profile, signatory of the Montreaux document since September 2008 and with several of its companies as members of ICOCA¹⁷ (the international association of code of conduct that guarantees respect for human rights by private security companies).

It is not in favour of using official resources such as the Chinese People's Army, outside its borders, due to its policy of peaceful coexistence (non-interference, non-aggression, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality between countries) and so as not to stress the areas in which its interests lie, both economic and social (feelings of animosity towards the Chinese community mainly).

To this end, in September 2009 it approved through Decree 564, the Regulation on the Administration of Security and Guard Services, published in the gazette of 30 October 2009, which de facto legalizes private security companies (PSCs) as opposed to private military companies (PMCs), which are still prohibited. Although the adjective "private" is nothing more than a subtle irony.

¹⁷ <https://icoca.ch> accessed March 20, 2025

These companies have training, advisory and security missions, although they have very severe restrictions on the possession and use of weapons (they must comply with the legislation of the country where they are working and Chinese legislation) which causes certain services to be subcontracted to local forces or militias, not without controversy, mainly with regard to the fulfillment of human rights.

Together, with the language barrier that prevents the integration of personnel of other nationalities in these companies and the strict control that China exercises over them, practically forces them to be employed only in defense of Chinese interests, without the possibility of entering the international PMSC market.

The few existing references on instruction, training and equipment also have an influence on aspects that according to these references could be greatly improved.

Precisely, U.S. government sources¹⁸ consider that "*Private security contractors from the People's Republic of China operate in different areas of Africa, mainly to protect the commercial interests of the People's Republic of China.*"

Another aspect to consider is whether its calling card as a "non-colonialist" nation is the prelude to an economic neocolonialism thanks precisely, among others, to the use of its PMSCs.

A different case, but also of interest for the purposes of this document, is the case of Turkiye (a country that is not a party to the Montreaux document) with a PMSC with a very low public profile in terms of its activities but brought to light by its action in Africa precisely because of Wagner's social networks, called *SADAT*.

This PMSC, with a very strong religious component¹⁹, is also related to a think tank called *ASSAM*.

In fact, the son of the founder and current chairman of the board in both organizations, Melih Tanriverdi, described them²⁰ as elements of soft power in Turkiye, even going so far as to claim on social media that it coordinates its actions with the Turkish intelligence

18 https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12566/IF12566.6.pdf accessed March 24, 2025.

19 <https://www.sadat.com.tr/download/SADAT-eng-full-v02.pdf> accessed March 20, 2025.

20 <https://assam.org.tr/index.php/en/news/news/yumusak-guc-unsuru-olarak-assam-ve-sadat-en.html> accessed March 21, 2025.

service²¹, so for the purposes of this document its positioning as a geopolitical tool framed in Turkish neo-Ottomanism is established.

Conclusions

After the future cessation of hostilities (the word peace seems distant) in Ukraine, and as long as other conflicts do not arise (or are reactivated), Russia will have enough human resources to act in other scenarios comfortably (currently Africa) while maintaining a significant and threatening rate of coverage in its regular units²².

It seems highly unlikely that it will completely eliminate PMSCs or force them to join the *Afrika Corps initiative*, as it would lose a tool that has proven to be very useful for exerting its influence by distancing and even avoiding unpleasant concepts such as legal attribution or responsibility to the international community, especially if we are referring to "alleged violations of international law".

He would even lose the opportunity to be able to pivot his support from one side to the other within the same conflict, as has happened in the Sudanese civil war.

In addition, they are tools that not only do not detract from economic resources, but some are self-sufficient and even profitable.

Since the freedom march or mutiny, Russia has preferred to keep the Wagner group in certain areas almost with a false full autonomy. It has neither promoted nor dismantled it.

In the long term, and if there is no struggle of egos within the Russian Federation's Ministry of Defence, everything leads to the idea of the founding of a new PMSC by some oligarch close to the Kremlin's circles of power with no apparent relationship with Wagner, thus recovering a certain "penumbra" necessary to be able to operate in the grey zone. Meanwhile, in the medium term, the sequence of events leads one to think that they want to keep Wagner in a dormant but operational state until it is fully absorbed.

Although other plausible scenarios such as the continuity of Wagner or its own refoundation losing everything that the Wagner brand implies cannot be ruled out.

21 <https://nordicmonitor.com/2021/03/turkish-paramilitary-firm-sadats-ceo-admits-it-works-with-the-turkish-intelligence-agency-mit/> accessed March 20, 2025.

22 In fact, since April 2025, the recruitment of troops, non-commissioned officers or in the first officer jobs while they are on active duty is not allowed.

The rest of the contracting nations (according to the terminology of the Montreaux document) will continue to use these tools to a greater or lesser extent for the benefit of their foreign policy, especially in this new era in which the cognitive battle is the protagonist and PMSCs a useful tool.

By way of epilogue, it should be noted that on June 6, Wagner's social profiles released a document announcing their departure from Mali with an intriguing final phrase "Mission accomplished, the Wagner EMP returns home", while in parallel they continued to offer both logistical and operational jobs.

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