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The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not represent the position of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies or the Department of Defense.

I want to thank Chair, Representative Lynch, as well as Ranking Member Grothman and all the members of this subcommittee for the invitation to speak to the panel on Russia’s use of irregular security forces such as the Wagner Group and the destabilizing implications of their deployment.

My remarks will primarily draw from Africa, which has been the focus of my research on Russia’s grand strategy.

Russia has deployed the shadowy paramilitary outfit, the Wagner Group, in at least a half dozen African countries in recent years, making Africa one of the most active regions of Russia’s mercenary deployments globally. With its many weak governments, abundant natural resources, colonial legacies, proximity to Europe, and 54 votes at the United Nations General Assembly, Africa provides Russia an easy and attractive theatre where Moscow can deploy non-statutory forces to advance its geostrategic interests with limited financial or political costs.²

With many of its leaders and foot soldiers comprised of current and former Russian defense intelligence forces working in alignment with Russian foreign policy objectives, Wagner operates more like an under-the-radar special operations force than a private military contractor.³ In fact, the Wagner Group is not a legal, registered entity but rather

¹ [The Africa Center for Strategic Studies](#) was established in 1999 as an academic institution within the U.S. Department of Defense for the study of security issues relating to Africa. The Africa Center does not formulate or promulgate U.S. or DoD policy, nor does it represent the views of the U.S. intelligence community.

² Joseph Siegle, [“Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability.”](#) chapter in *Russia’s Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, edited by Graeme Herd, George C. Marshall European Center for Strategic Studies, 2021.

³ Kimberly Marten, [“Where’s Wagner? The All-New Exploits of Russia’s “Private” Military Company.”](#) *PONARS Eurasia*, September 15, 2020.

a codeword for an amalgamation of military, business, political, and disinformation entities controlled by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁴ Private military contractors, furthermore, are illegal in Russia, indicating the level of Kremlin consent to the activities of this group. Prigozhin is also seen as Putin's point person for advancing the Kremlin's interests in Africa. Reflective of its highly opaque nature, Prigozhin regularly denies the very existence of Wagner – or that he is its leader. Given the number of professionally produced films, commercials, and other such media hyping Wagner's activities, however, Prigozhin is apparently intent on increasing the group's stature.⁵

To better understand how Moscow uses Wagner, it is helpful to briefly review Russia's strategic objectives in Africa.

Russia's Strategic Objectives in Africa

A central Russian objective in Africa is to gain influence over strategic territory along the southern Mediterranean and Red Sea. This includes establishing maritime port and airfield access. Such infrastructure allows Russia to flow military, intelligence, or mercenary forces, materiel, and illicit gains as well as to increase influence with the host regime. If Russia establishes a naval presence in this region, Russia would be in a position, among other things, to monitor and disrupt global maritime transport (including Western naval movements) through the chokeholds of the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab strait between Yemen and Djibouti. Over 30 percent of global container traffic relies on these corridors. Russia's naval order of battle to hold such shipping at risk is low, but the geopolitical benefits of such a presence are high.

A second Russian strategic objective in Africa is to displace Western influence. Doing so enhances Russia's posture as a Great Power whose interests must be considered in every region of the world. This objective has taken on greater importance in the wake of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine, as Moscow seeks to avoid international isolation and demonstrate that it remains a viable global actor.

A third strategic objective of Russia's engagements in Africa is to reshape the rules-based international order enshrined in the United Nations Charter.⁶ Undermining principles such as respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political

⁴ Candace Rondeaux, [“Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare,”](#) New America and Arizona State University's Center on the Future of War, November 5, 2021; Sergey Sukhankin, [“Unleashing the PMCs and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas,”](#) *War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad*, Jamestown Foundation, September 3, 2019.

⁵ Sebastian Shukla, [“Russian Mercenaries Get the Big Screen Treatment. The Reality behind the Film is as Murky as the Plot,”](#) CNN, May 28, 2021.

⁶ Joseph Siegle, [“Putin's Threats to the International Order Loom over Africa,”](#) in *Side Effects: Ukraine's Perfect Storm Looming over Africa*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, May 6, 2022.

independence – at the heart of Russia’s aggression toward Ukraine – are central features of the transactional and patron-client based world view that Russia is promoting in Africa. Facilitated by concerted disinformation messaging aimed at denigrating democracy as an unstable governance model, this objective seeks to offset the inherent disadvantages Russia faces in a rules-based, democratic global order.

Wagner’s Multifaceted Role

Moscow uses Wagner to advance each of these objectives. Borrowing from its Syria playbook, Moscow has followed a pattern of swooping in with irregular forces to prop up politically isolated authoritarian leaders facing crises in geostrategically important countries, often with abundant natural resources. These leaders are then indebted to Russia, which assumes the role of regional powerbroker.

That the entry point for Wagner’s deployment is often through an autocratic leader who operates without checks and balances domestically is far from coincidental.⁷ Lacking legitimacy or popularity, these leaders provide an easy mark for Moscow to expand its influence quickly and cheaply. The resulting partnership – of an unaccountable regime hosting unaccountable mercenaries – is a ready recipe for trouble. Indeed, every deployment of Wagner forces in Africa, allegedly to bolster stability, has left a wake of *instability* for the citizens of the host country and the further retrenchment of illiberal actors.

Isolated authoritarian leaders benefit under these arrangements with Wagner via bolstered regime security, access to arms, expedited natural resource revenue flows, and an international patron that offers a veneer of credibility and veto power at the United Nations Security Council.

Moscow benefits by realizing dramatically expanded influence, the displacement of Western ties, an embellished Russian geostrategic posture, and increased opportunities for natural resource exploitation.

While rationalized on security grounds, the deployment of Wagner forces should not be confused with a security cooperation intervention. Wagner is often compensated in cash and natural resource access by the host regime. Moreover, the relatively modest number of irregular forces Moscow deploys in these contexts (usually in the hundreds or low thousands) are typically insufficient to alter the security environment in African countries facing an insurgency. These forces are, however, sufficient to help keep a regime in power – which is the primary means through which Moscow can leverage its geostrategic interests.

⁷ Joseph Siegle, [“Russia in Africa: Undermining Democracy through Elite Capture,”](#) Democracy in Africa, September 23, 2021.

Wagner deployments, thus, do not happen in isolation but are part of a package of initiatives to keep Moscow's ally in power. Complementary initiatives include relentless and sophisticated disinformation messaging (e.g., Prigozhin runs the infamous Internet Research Agency troll farm), opaque arms for resources deals, political support, sanctions evasion, and election meddling, among others.⁸

In other words, Wagner deployments should be seen as a political, rather than solely a security tool.

Some illustrations of these methods may be instructive.

In Libya, Russia has aggressively worked to undermine the United Nations' efforts to establish a stable, unified government in Tripoli. Russia deployed irregular forces from the Wagner Group in 2019 in a heavy-handed play to install its ally, Khalifa Haftar, as the new strongman leader. While Russia's efforts have thus far been thwarted, political jockeying and attempts to seize Tripoli by force continue. Should Russia ultimately succeed, this would provide Moscow an enduring military presence in North Africa on NATO's southern flank – as well as increased access to Libya's vast hydrocarbon reserves. Russia has steadfastly ignored repeated calls by the United Nations for the withdrawal of all foreign forces.

In the Central African Republic (CAR), President Faustin-Archange Touadéra welcomed 400 Wagner "instructors" in 2018 ostensibly to help fend off a collection of rebel groups. Wagner then struck a deal with some of the rebels to secure diamond mines in the north of the country. These have subsequently been incorporated into Wagner's illicit mineral trafficking network linking western Sudan, CAR, and the East Africa coast.⁹

As part of the deal with Wagner, Touadéra appointed a Russian as his National Security Advisor, and Wagner forces serve as his presidential guard. CAR government officials who have raised concerns over Russia's undue influence have been replaced. Intent on keeping their ally in office, Russia vigorously supported Touadéra's controversial reelection in December 2020. Wagner troops in CAR, now estimated to be around 2,300, have been accused by the United Nations of human rights abuses including extrajudicial killings, attacks on civilians, torture, and rape.¹⁰ Reliant on the Russians for

⁸ Sergey Sukhankin, ["The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa,"](#) *War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad*, January 10, 2020.

⁹ Nathalia Dukhan, ["State of Prey: Proxies, Predators, and Profiteers in the Central African Republic,"](#) The Sentry, October 2020.

¹⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ["CAR: Russian Wagner Group Harassing and Intimidating Civilians—UN Experts,"](#) October 27, 2021.

his security, Touadéra's policy options and the sovereignty of CAR itself are compromised. Meanwhile instability in CAR persists.

In Mali, Russian disinformation campaigns first seen in 2019 were instrumental in stirring up the protests that led to the military coup in August 2020 that toppled democratically elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta.¹¹ In addition to maligning Keïta, the messages from these campaigns were anti-French, disparaging of democracy, and pro-Russian. A subsequent opaque deal between the Malian military junta and Wagner led to the deployment of 1,000 irregular forces. Ongoing Russian disinformation blaming France and the UN for Mali's problems has further strained relations for these actors, precipitating the departure of 5,000 French and EU forces and putting the 15,000 UN peacekeeping (MINUSMA) mission in Mali in jeopardy. Meanwhile, militant Islamist group violence in Mali continues to accelerate under the junta.¹²

Wagner forces in Mali have primarily focused on helping the junta hold onto power and secure gold mines. As in other cases of Wagner deployments, these have been linked to human rights abuses. Since March 2022, Wagner and Malian junta forces have been linked to at least six alleged civilian massacres, including the extrajudicial killings of 300 people in the village of Moura, causing tens of thousands of people to flee the region.¹³ To the extent that these human abuses are also targeting members of a particular ethnic community, such as the Fulani, they risk further tearing at the fragile social fabric of the country and may further fuel the insurgency.

In Sudan, Russia had been a backer of longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir for years. Russia has maintained its influence with the military junta that ultimately toppled Bashir, following massive popular protests in 2019. This includes the deployment of Wagner forces to support the Sudanese military with arms and training while facilitating the trafficking of billions of dollars in gold in the west of the country through the Prigozhin-linked firm, Meroe Gold.¹⁴ Wagner continues to advise the junta to more aggressively crack down on protesters who are demanding a democratic transition. Russia is simultaneously attempting to secure naval port access in the Red Sea, through Port Sudan.

¹¹ Joseph Siegle and Daniel Eizenga, "[Russia's Wagner Play Undermines the Transition in Mali](#)," *AllAfrica.com*, September 23, 2021.

¹² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "[Mali's Militant Islamist Insurgency at Bamako's Doorstep](#)," *Infographic*, August 29, 2022.

¹³ Benoit Faucon and Joe Parkinson, "[Russian Mercenaries Project the Kremlin's Power Far from Its Troubles in Ukraine](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 21, 2022.

¹⁴ Nima Elbagir et. al., "[Russia is Plundering Gold in Sudan to Boost Putin's War Effort in Ukraine](#)," *CNN*, July 29, 2022.

In addition to these cases, Wagner is linked, in various capacities, to 6-10 other African regimes.

Implications for Governance and Stability in Africa

The experience from Libya, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan shows that, once Russia gains a foothold, it will use Wagner's coercive and disinformation tools to intimidate opposition voices and marginalize Western actors to entrench Russian influence. Extricating Moscow from this powerbroking role in the domestic politics of these countries will be a major challenge for these societies.

Given that the deployment of Wagner forces is accompanied with the undermining of legitimate governments, fomenting social polarization through disinformation campaigns, and propping up unconstitutional claims on power, they are inherently destabilizing.¹⁵

A deterioration in respect for democratic norms, in turn, has direct implications for African security and development. Three-fourths of Africa's conflicts and 85 percent of the continent's 36 million forcibly displaced people originate in authoritarian governments.¹⁶ Since the continent's democracies have realized substantially higher levels of stability, sustained growth, rule of law, control of corruption, and living conditions, the fall-out from Russian efforts to roll back democratic gains in Africa is high.

The undermining of democratic systems in Africa also runs counter to the aspirations of the 75 percent of Africans who consistently state that they prefer democratic government over any other political system.¹⁷

Mitigating Russia's Malign Influences in Africa

With its decades' long and robust diplomatic, foreign direct investment, trade, development, security, and cultural ties with Africa, the United States' engagement on the continent is several orders of magnitude greater than that of Russia. Mitigating the malign influences stemming from Wagner's deployments, therefore, must be nested within the United States' broader engagement in Africa, not as a singular end of its own.

¹⁵ Joseph Siegle, ["Russia's Asymmetric Strategy for Expanding Influence in Africa,"](#) London School of Economics Africa Blog, September 17, 2021.

¹⁶ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ["Autocracy and Instability,"](#) Infographic, March 9, 2021.

¹⁷ E. Gyimah-Boadi, Carolyn Logan, Josephine Sanny, ["Africans' Durable Demand for Democracy,"](#) Journal of Democracy, vol. 32 (3), July 2021.

The United States' security and economic interests in Africa are advanced by long-term partnerships with stable, economically inclusive, and democratic governments committed to the rule of law.¹⁸ It is these contexts that are most conducive to domestic security, private sector investments that generate jobs and profits, and cooperation against threats to the international order. There is, accordingly, a high level of overlap between African and American interests.

The United States can build on these shared interests by working with like-minded African governments, civil society groups, regional organizations, and the United Nations to uphold the principles of a rules-based international order enshrined in the African Union charter. African government, media, civil society, and business leaders must ultimately defend African interests against external spoilers. There is much the United States can do, however, to support and strengthen African agency and interests.

Recognizing that the deployment of Wagner forces is a symptom of unaccountable regimes, a key pillar of a U.S. response should be to further incentivize democratic processes on the continent – the strongest antidote to malign Russian influence. This means offering opportunities for stronger diplomatic, economic, developmental, and security partnerships, subject to how these governments came to power and their commitment to upholding the rule of law. It also entails strengthening democratic institutions that can provide the domestic guardrails against autocracy and its vulnerability to external cooption. These include bolstering election management bodies, as well as strengthening African judiciaries, media, and professional militaries.

Prioritizing democratic governance – including the condemnation of coups and isolation of coup makers – denies Russia a key entry point for influence. The United States must avoid falling into the Cold War trap of competing with Moscow for the affections of autocrats. This is a competition that the United States will surely lose – and works counter to U.S. and African interests.

The United States can also work with partners to invoke the African Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism, which went into effect in 1985, prohibiting states from allowing mercenaries into their territories. Such a dialogue can, at the least, raise awareness of the destabilizing effects from Wagner's deployments. Declaring Wagner a mercenary force would identify them, appropriately, as an illegal entity, one that should be prohibited from operating on the continent.

Another pillar deserving of attention is strengthening African capacity to expose malign Russian actions, such as disinformation. U.S. support can strengthen the capacity of African governmental and non-governmental fact-checking and digital forensic firms to

¹⁸ Joseph Siegle, "[Russia's Activities and Influences in Africa](#)," testimony for U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights, July 14, 2022.

identify fake Russian-sponsored accounts, trolls, and disinformation campaigns. In addition to funding, technical support is needed to rapidly build and share countering disinformation best practices.

A final point of attention is the recognition that Russia has been able to rapidly expand its malign influence in Africa in recent years because it has faced few reputational or economic costs for its actions.

In recent years, the United States has strengthened the framework through which it can pursue legal and financial remedies for destabilizing activity sponsored by Russia or other international actors in Africa. These, along with the Global Magnitsky Act, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act, and other legislation provide the United States a robust menu of options for imposing penalties on Russia for its destabilizing activities in Africa. While such actions may not immediately curtail Russian bad behavior, they do increase the cost of doing business. These measures also signal and substantiate the destabilizing nature of nefarious Russian activities on the continent to African governments and media.

By giving heightened attention to these issues, the United States can help Africa become less of a permissive environment for disruptive Russian activities in Africa at the expense of African stability, sovereignty, and democracy. This is in both African and U.S. interests.

Thank you.
