

# The Standoff Between Russia's Defense Ministry and Wagner's Prigozhin: Implications for Africa

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*The internal disagreements and possibly deep-seated dissatisfaction between Russia's Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Wagner Group leader over the 'special military operation' are aspects of the geopolitical chess game.*

*The unsuccessful military fight between MoD, the Kremlin and Wagner Group, at least, somehow ended without any direct clashes, bloodshed or civilian casualties. But there were potential conditions to resort into something disastrous which officials have referred to as "armed mutiny", a resemblance of the current political-military conflict in the Republic of Sudan. A short comparative analysis shows an element of commonality between Russia and Sudan, the fact that Kremlin signed a decree to absorb the private para-military group into the Ministry of Defense.*

In the case of Sudan, it also revolves around infighting between two rival groups: Sudan's Armed Forces (SAF) and a paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces. After the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir, forces loyal to two generals are vying for control of power. Sudan has been run by the army, with coup leader General Abdel-Fattah Burhan who has share power with the paramilitary leader General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo. He has worked alongside the Sudanese army to help keep the military in power.

Until today, the ceasefires agreed on by SAF and RSF have never worked in Sudan. As a result of this fact, there are growing negative political sentiments, deepening social discontent and the situation is pushing out people as refugees in the neighboring countries. The background to the political-military violence was a disagreement over how RSF paramilitaries should be incorporated into the Sudanese army.

Wagner's Yevgeny Prigozhin criticized Russian Defense Ministry formalization efforts on June 17. In its update, Prigozhin also claimed he attempted to submit a contract to formalize Wagner under the Defense Ministry. Obviously it implied that the Defense Ministry would confiscate weapons that volunteer units obtained outside of formal weapon deliveries and

that Russian commanders with higher military education would replace Wagner’s combat-effective volunteer commanders. It indicated that Wagner forces to subordinate to the Russian Ministry of Defense.

That however, the short-lived military drama, some alternatively described as theatrical military spectacle was primarily due to deep-seated internal conflicts allegedly between Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, and Wagner founder and CEO Yevgeny Prigozhin over aspects of the ‘special military operation’ started since late February 2022. Perhaps, Prigozhin dreamed he could push Putin into making some changes within the top brass of the MoD which Wagner chief publicly berated for months. Putin’s addresses have eradicated that prospect, he works closely with the top defense management.

## Achievements and Disagreements

Wagner has seemingly achieved a lot in Ukraine. For instance in May 2023, Putin congratulated them for distinguished part in the battle by awarding state decorations. Putin recognized the operation, on the authentic special report given by the Russian Defense Ministry on the completion of the operation to liberate Artyomovsk, (called Bakhmut in Ukraine). “In the Artyomovsk tactical direction, the assault teams of the Wagner private military company with the support of artillery and aviation of the southern battlegroup have completed the liberation of the city of Artyomovsk,” the defense ministry stated.



Source: [The Dossier](#)

Artyomovsk is located in the north of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and it served as a major transportation hub for the Ukrainian army’s supplies in Donbass. Fierce fighting to liberate the city started on August 1, 2022. The battle for this city is one of the largest battles during the liberation of Donbass since 2014. Some 72,000 people lived in Artyomovsk before the battle started.

The developments were quite clear. Reports have, over these few months, indicated sharp disagreements between Ministry of Defense is headed by Sergey Shoigu and Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin over aspect of the troops assigned to Ukraine. But the last straw that

broke the camel's back was Putin's decree that instructed incorporating the paramilitary into the regular army. The decree, in strictest terms, requested the ministry to manage, monitor and oversee all aspects of Russian troops, including the paramilitary, at the war frontline in Ukraine.

In an interview in December 2018, Putin said, in regard to Wagner PMC's operating in Ukraine, Syria and elsewhere, that "everyone should remain within the legal framework" and that if the Wagner group was violating the law, the Russian Prosecutor General's Office "should provide a legal assessment". But, according to Putin, if they did not violate Russian law, they had the right to work and promote their business interests abroad. The president also denied allegations that Prigozhin had been directing Wagner's activities.

In September 2022 Prigozhin officially admitted to founding and managing "Wagner Group" which started as a battalion participating from May 2014 on the Russian side in the war in Donbass. Private military companies are still illegal in Russia, but with their heavy participation in the war in Ukraine they have been legitimized by being referred by the Ministry of Defense and Russian government with the umbrella term of "volunteer detachments".

On 5 May 2023, Prigozhin blamed Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and chief of the Russian armed forces Gen. Valery Gerasimov for "tens of thousands" of Wagner casualties, saying "They came here as volunteers and are dying so you can sit like fat cats in your luxury offices." Thereafter there had been series of unpleasant exchanges between the Kremlin, MoD and Wagner, this time to leading what the Russian officials and the political elite viewed as mutiny against the Russian government.

On 24 June 2023, Prigozhin was accused by the Russian government of organizing an armed uprising after he threatened to attack Russian forces in response to a claimed air strike on his paramilitary soldiers. Russian security forces accused the founder of the Wagner group of launching a coup attempt as he pledged a "march of justice" against the Russian army. Prigozhin posted a voice memo claiming that Wagner had left Ukraine and was advancing on the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. Senior Russian generals urged Wagner's fighters to withdraw.

In the final analysis, Russia and Belarus presumably in a 'deal' agreed that Prigozhin moved to Belarus in order to ensure both personal safety and national security. As reported by both local and foreign media, decision was a follow-up to high-level negotiations. The terms appeared to include an amnesty for Wagner fighters who had participated in the insurrection, although it was not clear whether Prigozhin would still face punishment for his role in launching what was effectively the country's first armed coup in decades.

## Scope of Operations

Wagner, also known as PMC Wagner, is a private para-military organization, and has operated since 2014. It operates in support of Russia's interest, receives necessary equipment from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and has used MoD installations for training. In fact several years ago, Erica Gaston, a senior policy adviser at the UN University Centre for Policy Research, noted that the Wagner Group is not ideologically driven, but rather a network of mercenaries "linked to the Russian security state". Russia denies the connection and that officially the group does not exist.

But subsequently, the owner was established as Russian businessman Prigozhin – sometimes called ‘Putin’s chef’ because of his catering businesses that hosted dinners which Vladimir Putin attended with foreign dignitaries. As a paramilitary, it has represented Russia’s military operations abroad, including the Middle East. In Africa’s direction, following the deployment of its contractors between 2017 and 2019, to Sudan, Madagascar, Libya, Central African Republic and Mozambique. The Wagner Group has offices in 20 African countries. By March 2021, Wagner PMCs were reportedly also deployed forces in Zimbabwe, Angola, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, and possibly the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burkina Faso.

## United States and European Sanctions

Prigozhin was sanctioned by the United States in December 2016 for Russia’s involvement in the Ukraine conflict, and by the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom in October 2020 for links to Wagner activities in Libya. In December 2021, the EU imposed sanctions for committing “serious human rights abuses, including torture and extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions and killings, or in destabilising activities in some of the countries they operate in, including Libya, Syria, Ukraine (Donbas) and the Central African Republic.”

On 24 February 2022, Canada, Australia, Japan, Switzerland and New Zealand had sanctioned the group. In addition, in late January 2023, the United States announced it would designate Wagner as a “significant transnational criminal organization”, enabling further tougher sanctions to be implemented against the group.

In early 2023, the United States was reported to be working with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to put pressure on the military leaders of Sudan and Libya to end their relationship with the Wagner Group and expel them from the countries. The Wagner Group had supported the UAE’s and Saudi Arabia’s allies in Sudan and Libya. In addition, the Wagner PMCs in Libya were mainly funded by the UAE.

## Wagner and Africa

With the geopolitical developments, global players choice to make Africa their playing field and the exploit resources, Russia belatedly joined the band wagon. Russia’s practical focused interest is to strengthen military-technical cooperation and participate in sharing concession for natural resource exploitation. This aspect of its policy, although it has been denied, Wagner forces were visibly deployed in many African countries. One significant feature is natural resources are bartered for military equipment deliveries. Forces were despatched as training instructors with additional responsibilities of battling growing insurgencies and extremism on the continent.

Research academics especially those from the United States and Europe broadly argued that Wagner forces exhibited blindness to basic human rights, allegedly killed civilians and thousands were compelled to flee their home to seek refuge in nearby settlements. Both local and foreign rights organization and the United Nations Commission for Refuges have documented all these atrocities in Africa.

Sudan:

In an interview with The Insider in December 2017, Wagner PMCs were prepared to be sent from Syria to Sudan or South Sudan after Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, told Russia’s



president Putin that his country needed protection from aggressive actions of the United States. Omar al-Bashir visited on the special invitation from Putin.

During the July 2018 meeting, “We have very good opportunities to develop relations in a number of areas including the military-technical sphere, and this cooperation is developing,” Putin told Omar al-Bashir and his delegation. According to al-Bashir, Russia and Sudan relations really demonstrated positive dynamics. Russian companies, including those producing mineral resources, actively work in Sudan.

“Of course, there are positive shifts in the military-technical sphere and in military cooperation. We see big exchanges between specialists of Russia and Sudan. A big number of Russian specialists work in the country and this is why we highly praise the role that Russia plays in preparing Sudanese military personnel,” he emphasized during the discussions. He made reference to the UN Security Council regarding the withdrawal of forces of the UNAMID mission in Sudan.

Earlier in Sochi when the two leaders held talk in November 2017, Omar Al-Bashir documents were signed for the exploitation of mineral resources in exchanged for weapons and military equipment. Both noted good prospects in the energy sector, including geological prospecting, production and resource exchanges. The hydrocarbons sector, the power industry and the development of the civilian nuclear power industry.

“Our positions coincide on the majority of issues. We are primarily opposed to US interference in the domestic affairs of Arab countries, in particular US interference in Iraq,” he said and added “the problems the region is now facing have been caused by US interference. We think the situation that developed in country (the same applies to Darfur and South Sudan) has the same roots – US policy. As a result, our country split into two parts, which made a bad situation worse. We need protection from aggressive US actions.”

During the Sudanese delegation’s meeting with the Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu, expressed deep concern about the situation in the Red Sea. “We would like to discuss the use of military bases in the Red Sea. And re-enforcement, the re-equipment of our armed forces. Sudan may become Russian’s key to Africa.”

By mid-December 2017, a video surfaced showing Wagner PMCs training members of the Sudanese military, thus confirming Wagner’s presence in Sudan. It had already increased to 300. In May 2019, Russia signed a new military agreement with Sudan, which, among other things, would facilitate the entry of Russian warships to Sudanese ports. With the two military rivalries ongoing, some Sudanese and regional diplomatic sources claimed that the Wagner Group had provided surface-to-air missiles to the RSF against the SAF. But Sudan’s army chief, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, stated that “So far, there has been no confirmation about the Wagner Group’s support for the RSF.”

Central African Republic:

The situation is not exclusively different from Sudan. By May 2018, it was reported that the number of Wagner PMCs in the CAR was 1,400. The Ukrainian Security Service reported that the umbrella structure of Wagner in the CAR is a commercial firm affiliated with Prigozhin – M-Finance LLC Security Service from St. Petersburg, whose main areas of activity are mining of precious stones and private security services. At the present time, Prigozhin has been

sanctioned by the US government for his alleged involvement in election interference and other malign activities.

By 2021, the situation in the CAR had deteriorated further, with rebels attacking and capturing the fourth-largest city in the country. In response, Russia sent an additional 300 military instructors to train government forces and provide support in CAR. Quite recently, the Wagner Group sustained relatively heavy casualties as a new government military offensive was launched near the CAR border with Cameroon and Chad.

Madagascar, Libya, Mozambique have experienced similar situation with strong involvement with Wagner. As majority of African countries are undergoing different kinds of conflicts, Russia has used descriptions such as 'the growth of neocolonialism' to win sympathy and expand its military-technical cooperation through its affiliation with Wagner. Russia has encouraged African countries to view the United States and Europe as the key causes of their under development.

The Sahel Five has drastically reduced French presence in the region. The Republic of Mali and Burkina Faso against the United Nations multilateral force, and replaced it with Wagner forces. In late January 2023, the ruling junta demanded France withdraw its troops, numbering between 200 and 400 special forces members, from Burkina Faso. According to diplomatic and security sources, an agreement was finalized that would allow the Wagner Group to operate in Mali. At least 1,000 PMCs or less deployed to Mali, and another considerable number to Chad and Burkina Faso. The Wagner Group would be paid about 6 billion CFA francs a month for training of the Malian military and providing protection for government officials. The African Union Commission and the United Nations as well as ECOWAS have registered their collective dissatisfaction Mali's withdrawal from the Sahel-5 Joint Peacekeeping Force. The Sahel-5 are Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

While attending the conference at the United Nations, Sergey Lavrov told reporters that the Malian government was turning towards private Russian companies.

"This is an activity which has been carried out on a legitimate basis," he said during a press conference at the UN headquarters in New York. "We have nothing to do with that," he added, saying the Malian government estimated that "its own capacities would be insufficient in the absence of external support" and initiated the discussions.

Then during the joint media conference held with Mali's Foreign Affairs Minister, Abdoulaye Diop, in November 2021, Sergey Lavrov referred to the historical legacy, including the traditions of combating colonialism and overcoming colonial dependence and the subsequent recurrences of neo-colonialism in Africa. Regrettably, these have not yet become thing of the past.

"The fact that terrorist groups have been increasingly active, especially in the north of the country, does not offer a favourable environment for launching an election campaign. Mr Diop said the Malian government would determine the timeline for the election campaign," Lavrov told the media conference. "We understand the need to reinforce Mali's counter-terrorism potential. In this connection, the Russian state supplies the necessary equipment, weapons, and ammunition to prevent any threat to Mali's statehood and territorial integrity."

At the African Union summit on the Good Governance and Conflicts held in Equatorial

Guinea, Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, highlighted the factors contributing to lack of development including and good governance, the growing tendency of usurping power by the military and the significance of forging a collective solidarity as basis for resolving continental and regional problems.

That time both Macky Sall and Moussa Faki Mahamat, have issued official statements urging the military transitional governments in Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, CAR, Libya and Sudan to take to a constitutional regime as early as possible, reassuring that the solutions to continental problems and overcoming the existing challenges depends on strong mobilization of African leaders and the effective coordination provided by the African Union.

Mali, a landlocked West African state with an impoverished population, faces increasing isolation from the international community over the political power grab. Even as the African Union (AU), the continental organization, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the regional bloc, both suspended the membership of Mali following military coups in August 2020 and May 2021, the ruling military officials continue to onto political power by delaying the proposed democratic elections.

## Russia's Defense Ministry Takes Over Wagner

The Russia-Ukraine crisis, to large extent, is affecting Africa. At the United Nations, early March 2022, more than half the African states voted for the UN resolution. Eritrea is the only Africa that voted against it, and since has become the 'darling' ally of Russia. In mid-June, the Africa Peace Initiative headed by South African Cyril Ramaphosa underscored the the importance of access to both Russia and Ukraine uninterrupted supply of grains and fertilizer. Ukraine is concerned about the huge destruction of its nation, Africans think of food security. Russia's dream is to deal with NATO and United States at its backyard, Africans called for withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine as the well-refined step to end the one-and-half year-old conflict.

The latest developments especially relating to Wagner Group incorporated into the Ministry of Defense, the question many are asking is how this will impact on Wagner forces in Africa. For some of us in the academia, after a bit of brainstorming, many experts have arguments from various perspectives. These experts based their arguments on reports mostly from the leading global media including Associated Press (AP), Cable News Network (CNN), Agence France-Presse (AFP), British Broadcasting (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), Reuters, Al Jazeera and many others, well-noted for their comprehensive and verified coverage of geopolitical changes and developments shaping Africa's relation to Russia.

According to these several media reports, Russia's Wagner Group which is a shadowy mercenary outfit helps Africa to deal with conflicts and at the same time support Russia to secure mineral concessions. Russia has, during the past two decades of raising its economic influence and fight French neo-colonial tendencies, bartered military equipment in order to have complete access into mineral resources in Central African Republic, Guinea, Mali and Chad. There are similar cases in Sudan and Libya. We know that Russia has about military-technical cooperation with 15 African countries.

Vedomosti, a Russian daily Financial and Business newspaper, reported that Russia is interested in offering Sahel countries military equipment in exchange for exploiting the untapped minerals resources. Worth noting here that Russia, in its strategy on Africa is reported looking into building military bases in the continent. Further, some Russian official

explained that large numbers of Wagners and the military done constitute and should not be considered as military bases in Africa.

According to Russia's investigative media, Wagner has no legal status to operate in the Russian Federation. The organization was said to be registered in Argentina. In November 2022, Wagner opened a new headquarters in Saint Petersburg, where it coordinated its activities including recruitment of 'volunteers' and other categories of young people including 'prison labor' for the 'special military operation' in Ukraine.

South Africa based Institute for International Affairs' report titled – Russia's Private Military Diplomacy in Africa: High Risk, Low Reward, Limited Impact – says that Russia's renewed interest in Africa is driven by its quest for global power status. Few expect Russia's security engagement to bring peace and development to countries with which it has security partnerships. Moscow's opportunistic use of private military diplomacy lacks of transparency in interactions, the limited scope of impact and the high financial costs expose the limitations of the partnership in addressing the peace and development challenges in Africa. But then what would be the status of existing Wagner forces spread across Africa. At this point, it is however necessary to have contextual understanding of the Wagner element, strategic interests and its unfinished business in the current developments between Africa and the Russian Federation.

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