



## The Wagner Group's Influence in the Global South: Implications for Security and Governance

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**Cover photo:** Wikimedia, PMC Wagner in Belarus

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### Summary

- The Wagner Group's operations continued after the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, with increased integration into Russia's Ministry of Defence, signaling Russia's deeper involvement in the continent's security dynamics.
- Moscow's activities in Africa signal a broader strategy to challenge Western influence by supporting local regimes and displacing Western control over critical resources, while securing Russia's standing as a dominant player in the region's security and economic landscape.
- Russia has secured access to valuable natural resources through its African interventions, extracting billions in gold and pursuing strategic control over uranium in countries like Niger. These resources likely help fund Russia's broader geopolitical ambitions, including its war efforts in Ukraine.
- Russia offers "pragmatic engagement" as a substitute for dwindling Western aid in Africa, capitalizing on the gap left by reduced Western support to build influence through military assistance, resource extraction, and infrastructure projects.

## Russia's Strategic Push into Africa

*By multiplying risks in the Global South, Russia seeks to undermine the United States and its allies, positioning itself as a dominant force in the region.*

In 2020, the world witnessed a record 56 unique conflicts, the highest number in a single [year since 1946](#).<sup>1</sup> Over half of these were internationalized civil wars, where external powers sponsor local actors to fight on their behalf. This practice, known as conflict delegation, has become a strategic tool for powerful states looking to extend their influence without direct involvement. As a result, geopolitical tensions have escalated, with [proxy wars](#) becoming a common feature of modern conflict.

One of the most prominent players in these proxy wars is Russia, which relies heavily on private military security contractors (PMSCs) like the [Wagner Group](#). These contractors provide a range of services, including intelligence gathering, military training, logistical support, and infrastructure protection. Operating in countries like Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), the Wagner Group has supplied military training and assistance while enabling Russia to maintain plausible deniability. By relying on these contractors, Russia can distance itself from controversial actions, all while securing a foothold in these key regions.

Even after the death of Wagner's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the group's operations have continued, [underscoring the strategic importance of their mission](#). Russia has adapted to ensure these activities persist, maintaining its involvement in ongoing conflicts and protecting its interests in Africa (Figure 1). Beyond military influence, Russia reaps significant rewards from these operations, including increased security leverage, access to critical natural resources, and the ability to offer African states an alternative to dwindling Western aid.

By multiplying risks in the Global South, Russia seeks to undermine the United States and its allies, positioning itself as a dominant force in the region.

Considering all this, this policy brief will first explore how the Wagner Group became instrumental in providing military support to countries like Mali and the CAR followed by an analysis of the post- Prigozhin period and the operations. Finally, the discussion will focus on what Russia gains from these activities—enhanced security leverage, access to valuable natural resources, and a pragmatic engagement to the diminishing development aid offered by Western countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946-2020 is published by the Peace Research Institute Oslo. Figure 1, page 2, presents the number of battle deaths and conflicts.

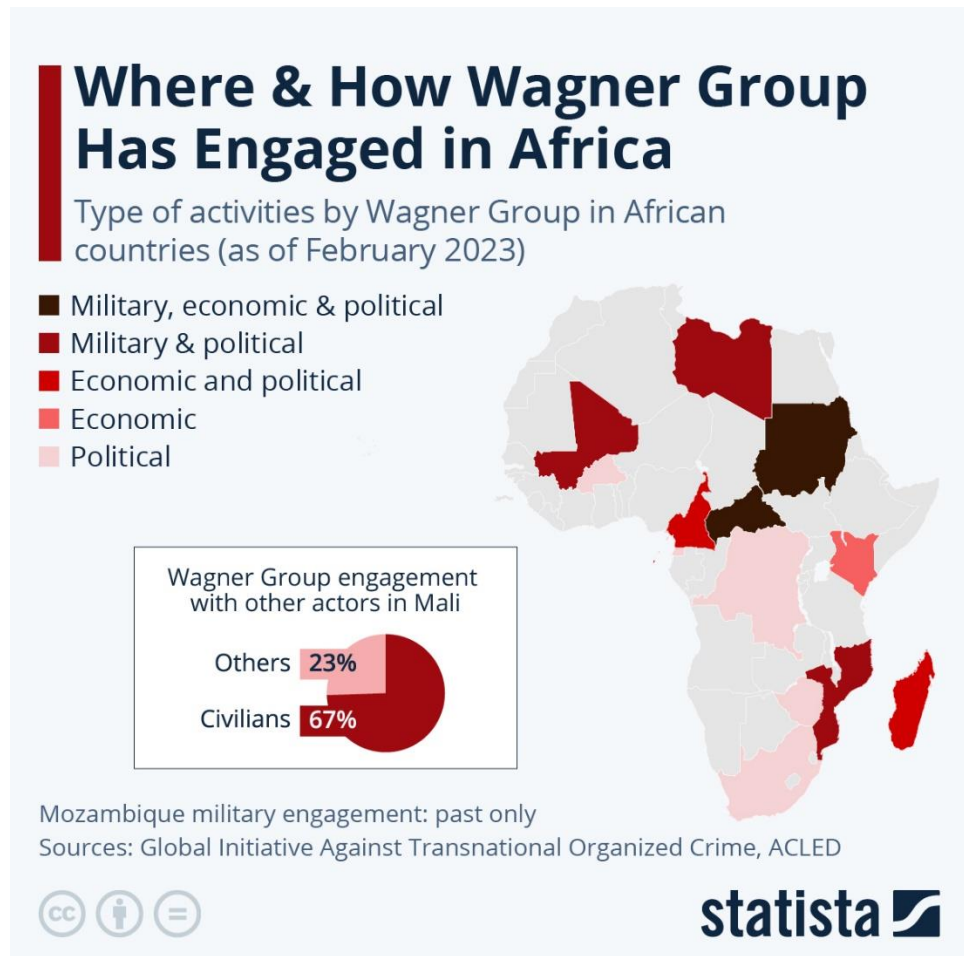


Figure 1: Where and How Wanger Group Has Engaged in Africa. Sources: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, ACLED, Kathrin Buchholz

<https://www.statista.com/chart/30665/wagner-group-engagement-africa/>

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### Wagner Group in Africa: A Tool for Russia's Military and Political Ambitions

Long before the war in Ukraine, Russia was already actively expanding its influence in the Global South, particularly through the Wagner Group, that allows Moscow to operate in conflict zones with plausible deniability. [Plausible deniability](#) refers to a strategy in which a sponsoring state avoids direct responsibility for its involvement in [foreign conflicts](#)<sup>2</sup>. By covertly supporting proxies, as the Wagner Group, the sponsor-state can reap the benefits of a potential victory without facing the risks and costs associated with direct intervention, including defeat or international condemnation. This approach allows the state to distance itself from the consequences of its actions, evading criticism from both international and domestic audiences. As a result, plausible deniability becomes a key incentive for states to engage in proxy wars. By leveraging Wagner's presence, Russia has been able to support regimes and shape outcomes while distancing itself from the group's often controversial and illegal activities.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Galeotti presents the benefits Russia reaps from covert proxy relationships highlighting how plausible deniability was expertly used in Ukraine, before the military invasion in 2022.

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Take Mali, for example. Since December 2021, Wagner has been actively involved in the country's security landscape, invited by the Malian government, which had grown frustrated with international forces like the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) and [French troops](#). Wagner's presence was intended to stabilize the country and support the peace process following the 2012 crisis. At its peak, over 2,000 Wagner personnel were stationed in Mali, providing military support, handling air force operations, and securing the ruling elite.

[Wagner's primary objective](#) was to strengthen Mali's offensive capabilities, particularly in the conflict-ridden northern region. Unlike international forces, Wagner and the Malian government reject population-centric, "soft" approaches to counterinsurgency. Wagner forces are notorious for their violent tactics, especially towards civilians, and they often coerce prisoners and locals into collaborating by providing intelligence or leading them to insurgent hideouts. While the French-backed reconciliation process with northern Tuareg rebels sought a more diplomatic solution, the Malian government—supported by Wagner—favored a military strategy, [fueling renewed conflict in the north](#). Without Wagner, Mali's armed forces would struggle to challenge insurgent control, and the demand for Wagner's expertise in training and air force operations continues to grow.

*Politically and socially, the group has exploited widespread discontent with the security situation and anti-French sentiments, positioning itself as a necessary force for stability.*

Wagner's impact in Mali [is not confined to military efforts alone](#). Politically and socially, the group has exploited widespread discontent with the security situation and anti-French sentiments, positioning itself as a necessary force for stability. This multifaceted approach extends Russia's influence far beyond the battlefield.

A similar pattern can be observed in the [Central African Republic \(CAR\)](#). Since January 2018, Wagner—alongside another Russian PMC, Patriot—has provided military training and security in exchange for access to valuable resources like gold, uranium, and diamonds. Wagner has been instrumental in bolstering the regime of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, particularly during a 2020 rebel incursion into Bangui, where the group played a critical role in defending the government. Wagner has since become a cornerstone of Touadéra's war efforts, helping him reclaim rebel-held territories.

However, Wagner's involvement in CAR has exacerbated violence and militarization, much like in Mali. Russian mercenaries have instructed local militias to merge with the national army and function as self-defense units. These units, however, soon became rogue, committing widespread human rights abuses against civilians. Wagner's presence has not only intensified the violence but also fragmented the region's security environment, further entrenching instability.

In both Mali and the CAR, Wagner's role extends beyond providing military support—it is about leveraging local grievances, securing valuable resources, and deepening Russia's influence while operating in the shadows. The group's activities have serious implications for the stability of these regions and underscore Russia's strategic use of conflict delegation to assert itself on the global stage.

## Post-Prigozhin Dynamics

Despite the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Wagner Group's operations across Africa have persisted, though not without adjustments. The ["Expeditionary Corps,"](#) Wagner's key operational unit, continued its activities in countries like [Sudan](#), Niger, and Burkina Faso, maintaining its original objectives and utilizing the same resources. While disruptions following the group's mutiny and Prigozhin's death caused some temporary instability—

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such as delayed salaries and suspended missions—operations quickly resumed, signaling the group's resilience.

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In Mali, for instance, after internal disagreements, Wagner reached a new agreement to work directly under the Russian Ministry of Defence. This shift allowed the Ministry [to supply Wagner](#) with essential military assets—vehicles, planes, and ammunition—at no cost, reinforcing Wagner's role in the region. Moreover, the Ministry of Defence has sought additional means of support, including potential collaborations with other groups like Redut, which operate similarly to Wagner.

Following Prigozhin's mutiny, the Kremlin formally moved Wagner's African operations under the control of Russian military intelligence, the GRU. This reorganization saw senior Russian officials, including General Averyanov and Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, visiting former Wagner strongholds in Africa in early September. Far from signaling the end of Russia's involvement, Prigozhin's death marked a deeper entrenchment of Russian influence in the region. Wagner's activities have since been rebranded under the Ministry of Defence as the "[Africa Corps](#)," reflecting this increased oversight<sup>3</sup>.

Russia's diplomatic engagement [has also expanded](#). In January 2024, Chad's junta leader, Mahamat Idriss Déby, met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow to discuss strengthening bilateral ties. This meeting is particularly significant, [as Chad](#) had previously maintained a pro-Western stance. These developments indicate that Russia's strategy in Africa, spearheaded by the Wagner Group and its successors, remains robust and continues to adapt to evolving geopolitical realities.

### Strategic Returns: Russia's Gains from its African Engagement

Russia's involvement in Africa through the Wagner Group brings several strategic advantages. First and foremost, it strengthens Russia's security posture. One clear example is Russia's ongoing effort to establish a naval base at Port Sudan, which would grant Russia vital access to the [Red Sea](#). Although the agreement has faced setbacks due to United States pressure, Russia remains determined to secure this critical foothold, signaling its broader ambitions in the region.

*Russia presents itself as a "pragmatic engagement" to diminishing Western development aid.*

Secondly, Russia gains access to valuable natural resources. Over the past two years, Russia has reportedly extracted \$2.5 billion worth of gold from Africa, with much of this wealth likely funding its war in Ukraine, according to the [Blood Gold Report](#). Russian fighters, many of them former Wagner mercenaries, also took control of the Intahaka gold mine in northern Mali, a strategically significant asset long contested by various armed groups. In Niger, Russia is actively pursuing uranium concessions, aiming to reduce French influence over these critical resources. The broader pattern is clear: Russia seeks to challenge Western dominance over Africa's minerals and energy reserves, positioning itself as a key player in this global resource competition.

Lastly, Russia presents itself as a "pragmatic engagement" to diminishing [Western development aid](#). With countries like the UK significantly cutting back on foreign aid, many African nations are turning to Russia as a reliable partner. By filling the void left by the West, Russia secures both influence and access to resources, while offering these nations

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<sup>3</sup> Wagner Group is a reference to the composer Richard Wagner. The reasons why this name was chosen remains [a mystery](#).

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military assistance, infrastructure projects, and less conditional diplomatic engagement. This approach allows Russia to build alliances, exert political influence, and further undermine Western presence in the region.

### Implications for Global Security: Russia's Growing Role in Africa

*Moving forward, it is crucial for policymakers and international actors to recognize the implications of Russia's growing influence and to respond accordingly.*

In conclusion, Russia's strategy in Africa, executed largely through the Wagner Group and other proxies, represents a multifaceted attempt to enhance its geopolitical influence while undermining the global standing of the United States and its allies. By providing military support, gaining control over vital natural resources, and offering a pragmatic alternative to Western aid, Russia is positioning itself as a dominant [force across the continent](#).

The death of Yevgeny Prigozhin did little to disrupt these plans, as Russia's operations have not only persisted but have expanded under direct Kremlin oversight. This deepened involvement, combined with its strategic maneuvering in key areas like Mali, the Central African Republic, and Chad, ensures that Russia remains a pivotal player in the Global South. Moving forward, it is crucial for policymakers and international actors to recognize the implications of Russia's growing influence and to respond accordingly. The stakes are not only regional but have far-reaching consequences for global security and resource access.

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