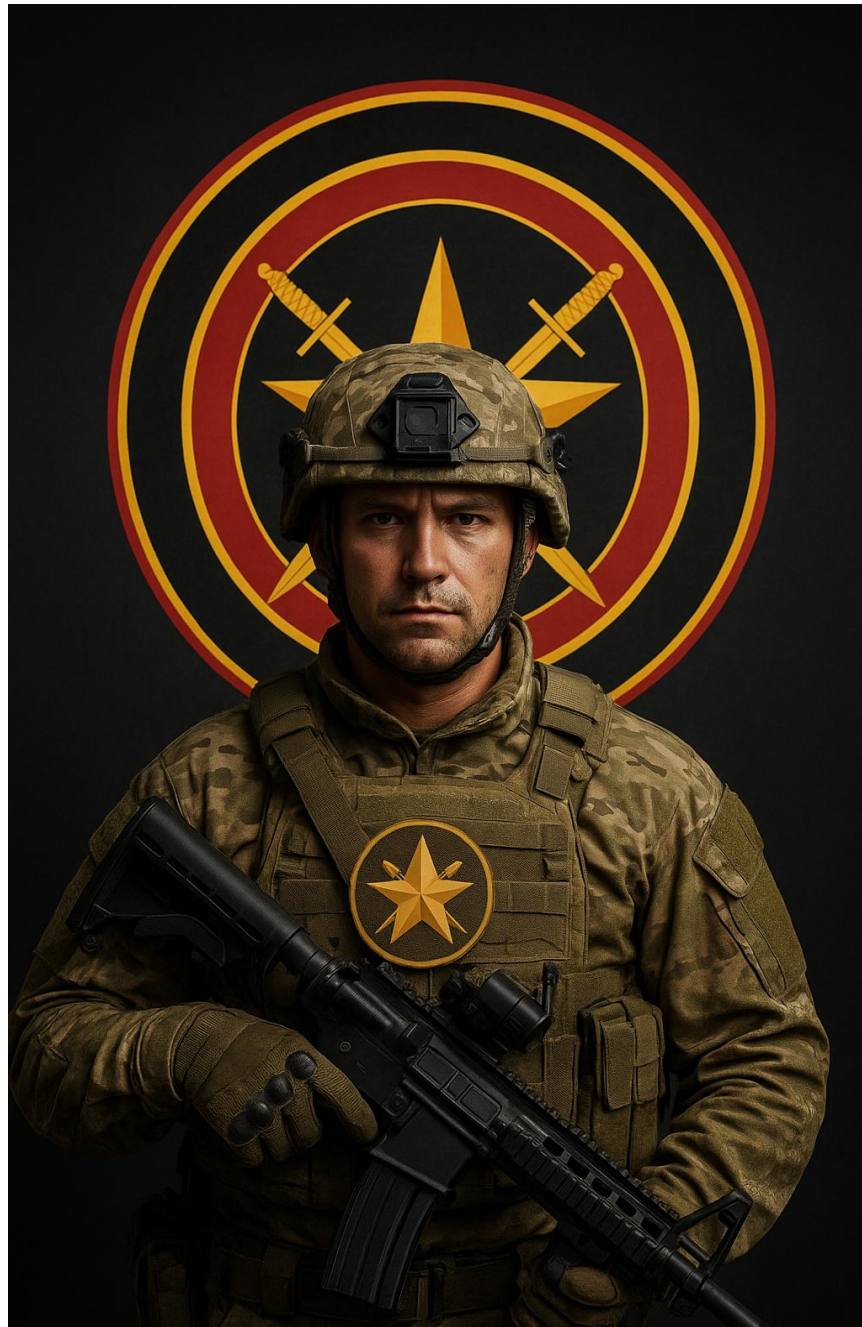


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Private Military Companies in International Relations: Continuities, Risks, and Strategic Challenges

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Prologue

The growing presence of Private Military Companies (PMCs) in contemporary conflict environments has reshaped assumptions about how power is exercised in international relations. Although the privatization of violence has historical precedents, the twenty-first century marks a shift in structure, legitimacy, and geopolitical purpose. Today, PMCs operate not only as commercial service providers but also, in some cases, as tools of foreign policy, enabling states to exert influence without assuming formal responsibility. The strategic consequences of this development are profound: accountability becomes fragmented, sovereignty is blurred, and conflict increasingly becomes a transactional domain. This paper examines these dynamics by situating PMCs within their historical evolution and analyzing how their legal ambiguity and operational flexibility enable both state and non-state actors to redefine the boundaries of warfare. Special attention is given to the Wagner Group, whose role as a Russian state-linked proxy illustrates the fusion of private military capacity and geopolitical ambition. By examining historical continuities, legal and ethical risks, and regional impacts, this research highlights why PMCs pose enduring challenges for states and international institutions.

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Abstract

Private Military Companies (PMCs) have emerged as influential actors in modern conflict, challenging traditional understandings of state control over the use of force. This paper analyzes, briefly, their historical evolution, legal and ethical implications, and operational divergence across Western and Russian models. While PMCs represent a continuation of long-standing mercenary practices, their corporate organization and integration into state strategies mark significant developments. The Wagner Group exemplifies the strategic use of PMCs as geopolitical instruments, operating across Ukraine, Syria, and Africa while enabling Russia to maintain deniability. Following Wagner's 2023 collapse and subsequent restructuring, including the emergence of the so-called Africa Corps, regional implications continue to unfold. Drawing on official EU and Council of Europe assessments, academic analysis, and NGO reporting, this paper argues that existing regulatory frameworks are insufficient. It concludes with policy recommendations emphasizing binding international standards, strengthened oversight mechanisms, and enhanced EU support to partner states to prevent reliance on privatized force. Without coordinated action, PMCs will continue to erode accountability, undermine state authority, and reshape the future of global security.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War transformed global security structures, leading to widespread military downsizing and expanded international interventions. As states reduced standing forces, they increasingly outsourced military and security functions, creating fertile ground for the rise of PMCs (Abbott & Breslin, 2009). These companies offered services ranging from logistical support and training to armed protection and, in some cases, direct combat roles. Unlike classical mercenaries, typically individuals motivated by personal gain, PMCs operate as legalized corporate entities, often registered in developed economies and contracted through formal state agreements.

However, their rapid proliferation introduced new risks. The privatization of force allows governments to conduct military operations with reduced political cost. As Friedman (2006) notes, heavy reliance on contractors during the Iraq War allowed U.S. policymakers to sustain military engagement while minimizing public scrutiny. Casualties among contractors were not included in official tallies, weakening democratic accountability. For the EU, the issue is particularly complex. Although the EU does not deploy PMCs for offensive operations, it acknowledges their potential to undermine governance and public trust in partner regions. Gerber (2023) warns that accountability for PMC abuses remains “mostly absent,” and the Council of Europe has called for more robust regulatory mechanisms. Meanwhile, Russia's use of the Wagner Group demonstrates how PMCs can evolve into geopolitical instruments, enabling intervention while maintaining plausible deniability (Evans & Wallis, 2023).

This paper examines PMCs through four analytical lenses: historical continuity, legal and ethical vulnerability, operational differences between Western firms and Russia's Wagner model, and the strategic implications of post-Wagner restructuring. By synthesizing EU reports, scholarly analysis, and NGO documentation, it evaluates how PMCs affect sovereignty, regional stability, and international governance, concluding with policy recommendations designed to strengthen regulatory coherence.

1. Historical Continuities

Despite being framed as a modern development, PMCs are part of a long tradition of outsourcing military labor through collective or personal mercenary contracts. Abbott and Breslin (2009) argue that PMCs reflect evolution rather than rupture: while legal frameworks and corporate branding distinguish them from historic mercenaries, continuity persists in their profit incentive and utility as instruments of deniability. Throughout history, states have relied on hired forces, sometimes entirely, when lacking capacity or seeking strategic distance from conflict.

The post-Cold War era accelerated this trend. The demobilization of large standing armies, particularly in Africa and Eastern Europe, produced a surplus of trained personnel. Simultaneously, international peacekeeping expanded without proportional increases in state troop commitments. PMCs emerged as a solution to capability gaps, offering rapid deployment, specialized skills, and political insulation. The U.S.-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan represented a turning point in scale. Friedman (2006) notes that private contractors formed a central pillar of operations, performing roles from convoy protection to perimeter defense. Outsourcing allowed governments to circumvent domestic constraints, as contractor casualties remained largely invisible to the public.

In contrast, the EU adopted a more cautious approach, using PMCs primarily for diplomatic protection, training, and logistical support rather than frontline engagement (Busch, 2023). Nonetheless, the reliance on private actors signaled a shift in the state's monopoly over force. Historically, outsourcing was temporary and exceptional; today, it is embedded in national security strategies, raising structural concerns about dependency and accountability.

1a. Legal & Ethical Challenges

The legal ambiguity surrounding PMCs is one of the central dilemmas in international governance. Existing instruments, such as the Geneva Conventions, were not designed for corporatized military entities. Gerber (2023) emphasizes that accountability for PMC abuses remains limited and inconsistent, with victims frequently lacking access to legal remedies. The Montreux Document provides non-binding guidelines, while industry initiatives like the International Code of Conduct offer voluntary compliance mechanisms. However, neither establishes enforcement or addresses state responsibility. As Abbott and Breslin (2009) note, states may exploit PMCs to avoid legal liability while benefiting from military outcomes.

The EU has expressed growing concern: Council decisions have warned that PMCs may undermine democratic institutions and enable authoritarian consolidation in fragile states (Busch, 2023). Ethical risks stem not only from legal gaps but also from commercial incentives. PMCs profit from insecurity and have no structural motivation to support long-term stability. In regions such as the Sahel, reliance on private security forces may weaken national armies and erode civilian oversight (Gerber, 2023).

Moreover, when PMCs act as proxies, such as Wagner, the distinction between state and non-state violence collapses. Evans and Wallis (2023) demonstrate how Wagner's decentralized network allowed Russia to shape conflict outcomes while displacing attribution. This blurring of responsibility presents unprecedented ethical challenges: violations occur without transparency, while state actors retain plausible deniability.

Article 47 of the Additional Protocol I (1977) provides one of the most authoritative international legal definitions of a mercenary and clarifies their status under the law of armed conflict. The provision explicitly states that a mercenary does not have the right to be considered a lawful combatant or a prisoner of war. This exclusion reflects the view that mercenaries operate outside the legitimate structures of state armed forces and lack the legal protections granted to regular combatants.

The article sets out six criteria that must all be met for an individual to be classified as a mercenary. These include being specially recruited to participate in an armed conflict, taking direct part in hostilities, and being motivated primarily by private financial gain, with compensation significantly exceeding that of regular soldiers. Additionally, a mercenary must be neither a national nor a resident of a party to the conflict, must not belong to the armed forces of any party, and must not be sent by a non-party state on official military duty.

1b. Operational Models & Comparative Notes

Operational models differ widely across PMCs, reflecting distinct political environments and strategic purposes. Western firms typically function as commercial service providers. Their activities are shaped by market competition, contractual transparency, and legal scrutiny. Although controversies have occurred, their operational scope is generally limited to security support rather than regime change or resource extraction.

In contrast, the Wagner Group represented a hybrid model. Evans and Wallis (2023) describe Wagner as a networked structure combining military, financial, and media arms. Rather than operating as a conventional company, it served Russia's foreign policy objectives, particularly in regions where Moscow sought influence without formal deployment.

Busch (2023) notes that EU sanctions recognized Wagner as a destabilizing actor. Its operations went beyond security provision: Wagner secured mining concessions, conducted political influence campaigns, and employed coercive violence to entrench client governments. This model differs not only in method but in purpose, while Western PMCs seek profit through service contracts, Wagner pursued geopolitical leverage through military intervention paired with economic extraction.

2. Wagner Group

2 a. Profile

The Wagner Group emerged in 2014 during Russia's covert intervention in eastern Ukraine. Evans and Wallis (2023) identify Dmitry Utkin, whose callsign "Wagner" probably named the whole PMC, as its military leader and Yevgeny Prigozhin, known also as "Putin's chef", as its financial patron, enabling the group to operate outside formal state structures while receiving state support. Novact (2023) documents Wagner deployments in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Mali, where the group combined military assistance with economic exploitation, including mining concessions and resource control agreements.

Wagner's appeal to partner regimes stemmed from its ability to provide immediate military capability without governance conditions. Unlike Western security assistance, which often requires transparency and reforms, Wagner offered regime survival, a transactional exchange of protection for access to resources.

2 b. The Downfall, Africa Corps & Post-Wagner Transition

Wagner's trajectory changed dramatically after the June 2023 mutiny against Russian military leadership. Busch (2023) reports that the EU expanded sanctions following the crisis, signaling recognition of Wagner as a systemic threat. Following Prigozhin's death, Russia initiated a restructuring process, replacing Wagner with successor formations, often referred to as the Africa Corps.

Evans and Wallis (2023) note that the transition did not dismantle Wagner's operational footprint. Instead, control shifted more directly under Russian military intelligence. The Africa Corps continues to operate in the Sahel and Central African regions, indicating continuity in strategic objectives despite organizational rebranding. This suggests that Wagner's downfall was less a termination than a state-managed consolidation.

2c. The Risks & Regional Impacts

Wagner and its successor structures have had significant effects on regional stability. Novact (2023) documents systematic abuses in Ukraine, including arbitrary killings and coercion. The EU has identified Wagner as a destabilizing actor and imposed restrictive measures accordingly (Busch, 2023). Evans and Wallis (2023) warn that PMC involvement can weaken state institutions by creating dependency and undermining democratic control.

Furthermore, PMC-backed regimes often prioritize survival over reform. Gerber (2023) stresses that accountability mechanisms remain insufficient, allowing abuses to escalate while international responses lag. In Africa, Wagner's presence has reshaped geopolitical competition, displaced Western influence, and altered security partnerships. PMCs thus act not only as military actors but as catalysts for long-term political realignment.

3. Policy Recommendations

Addressing the challenges posed by Private Military Companies (PMCs) requires coordinated action across international, regional, and national levels. Strengthening the legal framework is essential, as existing voluntary guidelines are inadequate for ensuring accountability. Binding international agreements are needed to clarify state responsibility and define contractors' status under international humanitarian law (Gerber, 2023). At the regional level, the European Union must reinforce oversight mechanisms by improving vetting procedures and reporting standards for private security contracts to ensure compliance with human rights norms (Busch, 2023). Additionally, reducing reliance on PMCs depends on supporting partner states' security sector reform, enhancing the capacity of national forces to manage security autonomously (Abbott & Breslin, 2009).

Further measures include expanding targeted sanctions to cover not only PMC personnel but also the broader financial and logistical networks enabling their operations (Busch, 2023). Transparency is another crucial component, as public disclosure of PMC contracts would improve democratic oversight and limit the risks associated with secretive military outsourcing (Gerber, 2023). Without such structural reforms, PMCs will continue to threaten international stability and weaken state authority. Implementing these recommendations in a coordinated manner would enhance the EU's strategic resilience and ensure that the growing privatization of military force does not undermine global security.

Conclusion

PMCs have become enduring actors in international security, reshaping conflict dynamics and challenging foundational norms. Although rooted in historical mercenary practices, their modern evolution reflects new geopolitical realities. Western PMCs operate primarily as market-driven service providers, whereas Wagner demonstrated how PMCs can function as tools of state power, enabling intervention while preserving deniability. Following Wagner's 2023 collapse, Russia has shifted to successor structures, ensuring continuity rather than withdrawal.

Enforcement gaps persist, and legal ambiguity continues to enable abuses. The future of international security depends on whether states can establish binding frameworks that prevent the privatization of warfare from eroding accountability and sovereignty. Without coordinated action, PMCs will remain influential actors in a global landscape where conflict is increasingly outsourced and responsibility obscured.

Image

OpenAI. (2025). *AI-generated image of a soldier and emblem* [Digital image]. Generated with ChatGPT using DALL·E.

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