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# IW PERSPECTIVE



## Russian Private Military Companies May Become a Security Threat to Their Hosts in Africa

Since mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin died in a plane crash in 2023, the Kremlin has assumed more [direct control](#) over his Wagner Group and its operations in Africa. As Russia becomes more [assertive](#) with its strategic approach to Africa, African nations hosting Russian private military companies (PMCs) may find themselves facing a dire security threat.

As the U.S. [reassesses its policy on foreign aid](#) and takes a turn from [value-based cooperation](#) to [trade-focused](#) policy towards Africa, Russia's repurposing of PMCs could influence African nations as they [consider future governance options](#). Russian PMCs, now more aligned with the Kremlin's agenda and less focused on profit and equipped with a full suite of [subversive capabilities](#), could help steer their African hosts away from

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the U.S. and impede African progress toward economic prosperity.

PMCs like the Wagner Group and the [Afrika Corps](#) that followed now [play a vital role](#) in Russia's influence operations and its [irregular warfare](#) strategy. Russia has used PMCs to expand its footprint in NATO's southern flank, degrade Western influence and strengthen economic engagement on the continent. Before Prigozhin's death, the Wagner Group leveraged [diplomatic and military](#) support from the Kremlin to gain a foothold in Africa to operate [lucrative businesses](#) that provided services in exchange for [economic concessions](#) including natural resource exploitation.

This transactional dynamic between the Wagner Group and the Kremlin abruptly shifted after Prigozhin's [rebellion](#) and subsequent death. Taking control of the Wagner Group under the rebranded name of Africa Corps, the Kremlin has [sent defense and intelligence officials](#) to reassure the host nations of a smooth transition. However, the host nations may no longer find the PMCs easy to manage with purely economic leverage. Because PMCs are now part of the Kremlin's larger picture for Africa rather than independent profiteers, it may take more than economic opportunity to satisfy their ambitions.

This could be problematic for African host nations when they seek to tackle the [root causes](#) of conflicts through cooperation and economic development, as suggested by the U.N. Facing [declining foreign aid](#) to the continent, African nations might need to assume a more proactive and cooperative approach towards the West to cultivate development opportunities, such as addressing corruption and improving [aid effectiveness](#).

However, Russian PMCs might become a major obstacle. For example, Wagner Group [influence operations](#) have been particularly successful at spreading [pro-Russian propaganda and anti-Western narratives](#). This could make any Western-friendly policy shifts less likely.

Doubling down on the [status quo relation with Russian PMCs](#) for near-term regime security needs, on the other hand, might be even more costly as the appeal of allowing a Russian presence diminishes.

First of all, Russia has [very little to offer](#) in terms of investment or aid. This prospect might drive these nations to align more with China, which would limit PMCs' opportunities to profit. Russia could leverage its PMC assets in Africa to push back against such competition, create a security threat that could block the path to African prosperity.

The PMC proposition of resources in exchange for regime security did not pan out as Russia had [marketed](#) it either. The Africa Corps has faced [many challenges](#) in delivering on its [promise of security](#) to African regime clients. It suffers from [recruiting problems and low personnel quality](#) and shows records of underperformance in counterinsurgency and regime-stabilizing tasks. Sometimes it produces [outright failures](#) such as its initiatives around the 2019 counterinsurgency operation in Mozambique and the Madagascar 2018 presidential election. The Africa Corps' methods for contract execution at times directly [aggravate local insurgency movements](#). Russian PMCs also compiled [dreadful](#) records of human rights abuses, including [torture and summary execution of civilians](#).

African regime clients face the risk of [growing ever more dependent](#) on Russian PMCs for security. The PMCs can contribute to [intra-military frictions](#) that lead to civil-military tension and deterioration of morale. PMC clients could thus be more susceptible to [coups and mutinies](#), even as their growing dependence on a "[mercenary-industrial complex](#)" advertises it as a coup-proofing solution. Outsourcing military and security operations to Russian PMCs may bear serious [long-term consequences](#) to the social dynamics of the



stability, including details about VIP security, military tactics and doctrines, key military personnel and threat vulnerabilities. They also may have developed relationships with anti-government guerillas and other rebel elements.

Should its agenda in Africa falter, Russia can be expected to leverage its [PMC incumbency in Africa](#) to disrupt African cooperation with its competitors like the U.S. and China. This grim prospect is not only potentially devastating in its own right but could also allow violent non-state actors like [terrorist groups to expand, creating security threats](#) beyond the immediate region.

[Recent analyses](#) done by researchers at RAND and other institutions validate and underscore the [conclusion](#) that employing Russian PMCs for security needs comes with troubling unexpected consequences for African nations, including worsening security situations and deteriorating civil-military dynamics as the PMCs profit from them. PMCs are now seeking to extract economic concessions from host nations while at the same time doing the Kremlin's bidding. In the context of [Great-Power Competition](#), the U.S. might consider a more flexible approach to its African policy and leverage policy tools to help concerned African nations find relief from the Russian PMC dilemma.

client nations, on top of the [common repercussions of privatization of war](#).

Russian PMCs like the Wagner Group have also engaged in a [variety of non-combat activities](#) including VIP security, training and advising, paramilitary activities, as well as [disinformation and political violence](#). Through these activities, they have demonstrated a robust capability to carry out [destabilizing operations](#).

In addition, Russian PMCs are likely to have gained information that could be used to threaten regime

*Weilong (David) Kong is an assistant policy researcher at RAND and a Ph.D. candidate at the RAND School of Public Policy.*

