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Strategic Disruption: Opportunities to Counter Russian Paramilitary Expeditions within Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract: Russian paramilitary operations, activities, and investments are on full display in sub-Saharan Africa, principally through the Wagner Group and its post-2023 successor Africa Corps. Pursuant to Russian grand strategy, the employment of such private military companies exploits natural resources, fuels ongoing conflicts, and promotes authoritarian regimes. Simultaneously, it seeks advantages for access, basing, and overflight while destabilising nations such as Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan. The Kremlin's decisions, post Prigozhin-led mutiny, resulted in a paradigm shift of these organisations within sub-Saharan Africa creating various opportunities for the U.S. and their allies to erode Russia's influence and reinforce a rules-based international order. This study may be of interest to the Baltic nations and Finland as NATO's first line of defence against Russian advancement as well as the Caucasus and Moldova as potential targets of further Russian expansionism.

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Introduction

Russian paramilitary operations, activities, and investments (OAIs) within the African sub-Saharan region are detrimental to the national interest of the United States (U.S.) and other stakeholders. Moreover, Russian paramilitary OAIs have a deleterious impact to the African nations they operate in, their local populations, and regional international governmental organisations (IGOs). The exploitative natural resource extraction and exacerbation of nonstate conflict demonstrated by the Russian Federation's actions across Mali, the Central African Republic (C.A.R.), Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Chad require both a U.S. and multinational response. Harmful OAIs consist of natural resource extraction, indiscriminate violence against civilian populations, perpetuation of extremism, promotion of authoritarianism, and threatening of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) making this a regional concern for all responsible stakeholders. Through the lens of Mali, the C.A.R., and Sudan, the U.S. can pursue policy options to counter Russian influence through efforts such as Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) designation for Russian paramilitary groups while also expanding U.S. Special Operations Forces' (USSOF) presence and partnerships in the region providing viable opportunities to mitigate the Kremlin's efforts pursuant to strategic competition goals. A U.S. response should focus on opportunities for strategic disruption to delay, degrade, or deny Russia's pursuit of its interests in sub-Saharan Africa and open the door for adjacent elements of national power anchored on USSOF presence, capabilities, permissions, and authorities (Robinson et al., 2023, p.5). Elevating this type of U.S. response to Russian OAIs in the region further enables and encourages other IGOs to follow suit including the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The focus of this discussion is specific to U.S. responses

but includes opportunities for coordination and collaboration with allies and partners within and outside of sub-Saharan Africa, including international stakeholders such as France and the European Union (E.U.). Formulating an effective response will facilitate pre-emption of the Russian Federation's nascent paramilitary efforts within Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad to impose costs, create dilemmas, and exploit vulnerabilities in Russia's paramilitary operations in the region (Robinson et al., 2023, p.7).

The Russian Paramilitary Problem

The Russian Federation is making extensive use of private military companies (PMCs) as a foreign policy tool within its grand strategy for Africa, which has now progressed to more formally directed paramilitary operations. The Wagner Group was the principal agent within this strategy until late 2023, and remains so within specific countries like the C.A.R., despite the Wagner Group's post-mutiny reorganisation (Plichta, Faulkner, and Parens, 2024).¹ In the aftermath of the June 2023 mutiny, the Wagner Group began rebranding as the Russian 'Expeditionary Corps' (Inwood and Tacchi, 2024). After Yevgeny Prigozhin's death in August 2023, the Wagner Group reportedly splintered into four distinct groups with various associations to the Russian National Guard and the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), including the *Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie* (GRU) which is Russia's military intelligence arm (Banco, 2024). Over the course of 2024, the Russian MoD, via the GRU, began consolidating its control over the former Wagner Africa Branch, branding it as the new 'Africa Corps' under the overarching leadership of General Andrey Averyanov, becoming a direct extension of Russian foreign policy efforts on the continent (Ritter, 2024). While there is a degree of separation between the former Wagner Group and the formal Russian foreign policy apparatus, President Vladimir Putin is actively asserting control over the late Prigozhin's PMC in the aftermath of its short-lived mutiny against senior

¹ Wagner Group remains largely the same within the C.A.R. due to the higher level of integration across multiple sectors as well as the more complicated business construct that provided the economic and resource extraction backbone for Wagner Group's operations there through Prigozhin's personal enterprises.

leadership of the Russian MoD. The fact that PMCs are technically illegal in Russia previously provided a level of plausible deniability for the Russian government while still enabling it to reap benefits through using them as a key foreign policy tool (Rampe, 2023). However, with this updated and closer association to the Russian government, it is now more difficult to argue that paramilitary OAI's on the African continent have a degree of separation from Russia's formal foreign policy goals.

The following discussion will be focused on Russian strategy and the application of Wagner Group's successor Africa Corps within the sub-Saharan region; however, the applicability of this analysis and potential strategic responses is not limited to this region. Russia's demonstrated willingness to use PMCs to further its strategic goals impact countries and regions across the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's southern or eastern flanks. The succeeding discussion will address activities and opportunities by European Union members abroad, but due consideration must be given by all NATO countries at home in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War and other regional destabilisation efforts. This study may be of particular interest to the Baltic nations and Finland as NATO's first line of defence against Russian advancement as well as the Caucasus and Moldova as potential targets of further Russian expansionism. Combining lessons learned from the war in Ukraine with lessons learned from sub-Saharan Africa will create a cohesive understanding of how to combat Russian aggression, individually and collectively, in the future and would make an excellent next step as a research direction. This is especially relevant in the context of its penchant for use of PMCs and other obfuscatory tactics in the security arena.

The initial rebranding of the Wagner Group presages the next phase of Russia's expansion of OAI's in sub-Saharan Africa. Russian foreign policy efforts will capitalise on the Wagner Group's varying levels of integration in nations of the sub-Saharan region, including the C.A.R., Mali, and Sudan in addition to its more recent and nascent endeavours in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad (Ozdemir, 2023; also see Inwood and Tacchi, 2024). Russia's

paramilitary operations in Africa support three strategic objectives (Siegle, 2022) :

1. Expand influence over territory along the southern Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea to present a strategic challenge to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Southern Flank.
2. Displace Western influence across the continent to reinvigorate Russia's status as a great power.
3. Erode the Western-led rules-based international order that parallels the Kremlin's current revanchist activity in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

The sub-Saharan region is the prime arena where Russia has, for years, demonstrated PMCs' utility in advancing foreign policy goals. These activities are especially pertinent at a time when Russia is internationally sanctioned and eroding its alliance base. Russia capitalises on weak, unstable, and illiberal governments to achieve their strategic objectives listed above, offering a 'regime survival package' to governments with few to no alternatives (Inwood and Tacchi, 2024). Russia finds cases primed for exploitation in countries across sub-Saharan Africa as they have frequently been subject to a U.S. 'economy of effort' on the diplomatic and military assistance front.² This reduced level of effort stems from the U.S. government's strategic focus on the Middle East for the past twenty years as well as the United States' own attempts to pivot to OAs across all aspects of national power (diplomatic, information, military, economic) in the Indo-Pacific for the last ten years.

The Russian paradigm shifts from almost exclusive employment of PMCs with a level of plausible deniability to a Russian paramilitary organisation directly associated with the Russian MoD is a significant step that potentially has two benefits to the Russian government. First, reducing autonomy of Russia's most famous PMC could prevent another 'supremacy battle' with Russian national security leaders (Minde, 2024). Second, centralised and governmental control could increase its accountability for humanitarian violations

² The term 'economy of effort' or 'economy of force' is generally used in a military context for the commitment of the minimum essential resources to achieve desired outcomes when prioritising main and supporting efforts. It is considered one of the 12 principles of war.

documented throughout its participation in various campaigns across the sub-Saharan region (Minde, 2024). Conversely, it presents a potential strategic vulnerability that the U.S. and its partners and allies may exploit for strategic disruption in Russia's sub-Saharan Africa end game.



Figure 1: The African Sub-Saharan Region (Stronski, 2023).

Regional Case Studies

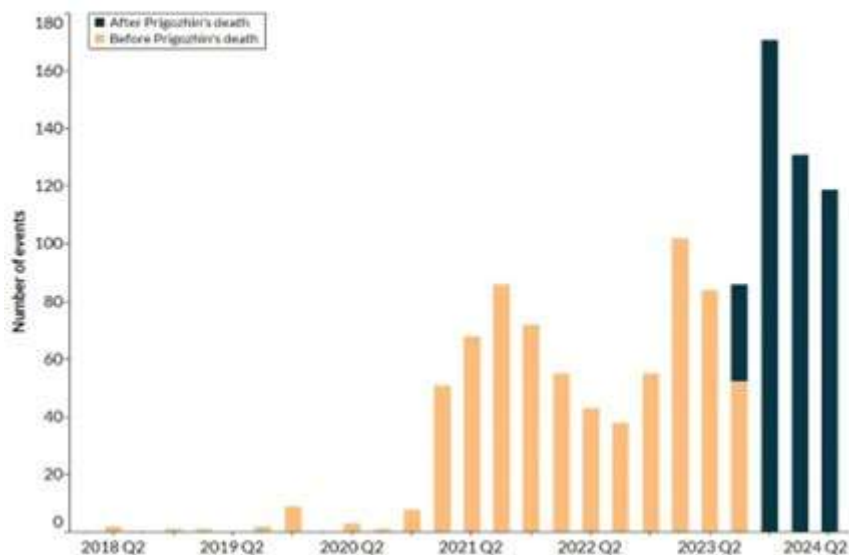
The Russian paramilitary OAs in this region provide both deliberate and opportunistic benefits for the Russian government including the displacement of Western influence (namely the E.U. and France), sanctions contravention through licit and illicit natural resource flows, and strategically beneficial access, basing, and overflight (ABO). For France in particular, specific issues in its execution of counterterrorism campaigns like Operation Barkhane in Mali have unquestionably contributed to the Russian ability to degrade overall Western influence (Powell, 2022). France's tone-deaf anti-jihadist methodology exacerbated ethnic tensions through the use of certain militias, which amplified its own colonial legacies in the Sahel region especially (Powell, 2022). This created a window of opportunity for multiple countries to seek alternative security partners that the Wagner Group energetically entertained,

and with which the Africa Corps will now expand upon supported by formal Russian state backing and direct control.

The Wagner Group exploited a dual justification for its employment throughout the region. The first justification led government elites that considered themselves to be at risk of regime change to request support from the Russian PMCs resulting in a form of 'elite capture' (Faulkner, 2022). The level of risk is especially elevated if those elites are associated with recent or incipient *coups d'état*. The second justification revolved around the presence of violent extremist organisations (VEOs) across the sub-Saharan region requiring a more traditional internal security solution (Faulkner, 2022). The worsening of societal conditions from VEO activities or, in the worst-case scenario, takeover by VEOs, are both factors of concern for the political elite regarding regime change. To the detriment of the civilian population throughout these countries, the Wagner Group OAs tended to create a negative feedback loop of various cycles of violence while reducing the effective influence of more responsible actors. The Wagner Group affects this feedback loop by employing certain tactics, such as indiscriminate targeting, that tend to perpetuate conditions which VEOs exploit such as general instability or popular grievances against the government. This can be seen most clearly in Mali, where Wagner, working in tandem with the Malian military, exacerbated an already unstable situation. It is not yet clear if the Wagner Group's successor, Africa Corps, will mitigate this and restrain its behaviour here now that it falls more centrally in the Russian foreign policy apparatus. However, violence involving Russian mercenaries, primarily in the sub-Saharan region, almost immediately doubled after the death of Prigozhin with sustained increases over the first two quarters of calendar year 2024 as indicated below (Serwat and Nsaibia, 2024).

Russian mercenary-related political violence in Africa

1 January 2018 – 30 June 2024



*Figure 2: Russian Mercenary Related Political Violence in Africa
(Servat and Nsaibia, 2024).*

Russia's regional exploitation of natural resources includes gold, oil, and uranium in addition to previously less competitive resources including timber (Saini Fasanotti, 2022; also see Faulkner, Parens, and Plichta, 2023). Natural resource exploitation, vital to enable sanctions contravention, remains a staple aspect of Wagner's efforts within the C.A.R. and also in Mali. Other Russian efforts to develop a geostrategic posture within Sudan undermine SLOC security in the vicinity of a strategic maritime chokepoint, the Bab al-Mandab. These efforts come at a time when Russia heavily flouts ideas of sovereignty and territorial integrity, as demonstrated most clearly in its decades-long activity in Ukraine. The persistent erosion of Western influence throughout the sub-Saharan region is partly the result of the actions of another Prigozhin entity, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which conducts focused

disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda campaigns (Saini Fasanotti, 2022).

Not only does the IRA amplify Western failure and painful colonial legacies of the French especially, but it also frames the Wagner Group's (and will reasonably begin doing so with Africa Corps) efforts as being altruistic by providing regional countries the freedom to choose their partners—a nod to African agency in its security decision-making. These efforts are even more successful when exploiting instances of perceived colonial actions by Western powers, demonstrated by French President Emmanuel Macron's 'neocolonial summoning of clients' to address executive messaging concerns with the G5 Sahel leadership in early 2020 (Powell, 2022). The false dichotomy of security partner preference is reminiscent of a Cold War mentality in the application of hard and soft power from Western players to including the U.S., France, and the E.U. (Sany, 2023). Mali, the C.A.R., and Sudan are varied and demonstrative of the issues discussed above, with countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad essential for further analysis to determine potential Wagner OAI as they are of interest to Russia and also at-risk to its malign influence.

Mali

The Wagner Group's OAI in Mali succeeded parallel Russian influence efforts with a demonstrated priority of securing access to natural resources. The Wagner Group in Mali received Russian state influence support prior to Mali's August 2020 military *coup* and before the deployment of Wagner forces and subsequent departure of 5,000 French and E.U. forces (Siegle, 2023). The Wagner Group currently facilitates the Malian military junta's control of both the government and gold mines (Siegle, 2022). Between late 2023 and early 2024, amidst Russian influence efforts, the Malian military junta modified the mining code, bringing those resources under tighter control of the junta, and reducing general access for other parties (Inwood and Tacchi, 2024). Furthermore, the Kremlin signed an agreement in November 2023 to build what would be Mali's largest gold refinery within the next four years (Diallo, 2023). In addition to Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Western

interests and seeking to degrade Western influence in the region, local communities in Mali are also suffering high levels of violence at the hands of their own government and the Wagner Group, including at least six massacres of civilians as well as extrajudicial killings, leading to mass internal displacement (Siegle, 2022).

Political Violence Involving the Wagner Group and Other Actors in Mali

December 2021 - June 2023

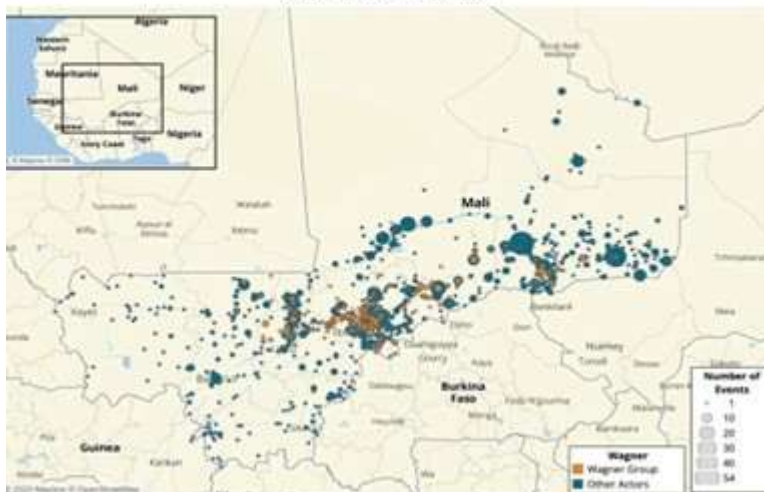


Figure 3: Political Violence Involving the Wagner Group and Other Actors in Mali (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2023, p.26).

Ironically, the Wagner Group's efforts in Mali appeared to mirror some of the French failings that originally led to a Malian information environment susceptible to Russian influence in the first place with social backlashes to French anti-jihadist efforts (Powell, 2022). More generally, the Wagner Group's overall failure to address Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS-SP) primarily operating within central Mali only exacerbated the extremist threat in the country through both targeting of civilians and a general lack of capacity to support the irregular

warfare threat (Nasr, 2022). Both the French and Russian counterterrorism efforts provide critical lessons learned for any other security effort aimed at reducing the acute security threat in Mali as well as the cumulative societal conditions that perpetuate it.³ These include the incidence of indiscriminate violence against civilians from Russian efforts and neocolonial perceptions of French forces' 'patronizing approach...trying to apply templates that weren't suited to [Mali]' (King, 2023). With the somewhat confusing command and control structure handed over to Africa Corps in Mali, amplification of failures in fighting Tuareg separatists such as the July 2024 ambush of Russian fighters near the northern Mali border presents a complicated addition to the jihadist threat with ethno-nationalist conflict (Lechner, Eledinov, and Sandor, 2024).

Central African Republic (C.A.R.)

The C.A.R. presents the longest running test bed of Wagner Group OAs within the sub-Saharan region and its most integrated operations enabling natural resource extraction with minimal handover to the Africa Corps. Beginning with military advisors in 2017 and acting as a presidential guard, Wagner eventually morphed into 'one of the dominant agents of political violence in C.A.R.' (Bergengruen, 2023). The initial Wagner Group deployment resulted in Wagner subsidiaries being awarded mining licenses for diamonds and gold in addition to control of the Ndassima Gold Mine and unrestricted logging rights (Saoni Fasanotti, 2023; also see Rampe, 2023). The establishment and integration of Wagner-controlled shell companies enables the extraction of diamonds, gold, and even timber from the Congo basin (Sany, 2023). Moreover, the use of these shell companies (e.g. Meroe Gold, Lobaye Invest, and Diamville) provides illicit economic flows that enable sanctions contravention with the United Arab Emirates as a potential intermediary (Faulkner, Parens, and Plitchta, 2023). As of late 2022, the roughly 2300-strong Wagner Group contingent in the C.A.R. has 'been accused of extrajudicial killings, attacks on civilians, torture, and rape' (Siegle,

³ In this context, acute security threat is focused on the activities of violent extremist organisations within the listed sub-Saharan countries as opposed to the cumulative and long-term security threats such as poor governance and lack of services provided to the populace. The cumulative threats generally provide fertile ground for the acute threat to arise.

2022). Thus, Wagner Group OAI in the C.A.R. are associated with two of the three negative impacts for natural resource extraction and instability inducing activities. Furthermore, there are indications of Russia's effort to establish potential ABO in-roads between 2023 and 2024 (see Blank 2024; see Mednick, 2024). Discussions with the C.A.R. government resulted in a January 2024 announcement by the republic's presidential advisor that the country will be preparing for a Russian base on its territory, one that is being refurbished approximately 80 kilometres from the capital Bangui (Blank, 2024; also see Mednick, 2024).



Figure 2: Organised Political Violence Events in the Central African Republic (Serwat et al., 2022). © 2022 Mapbox and OpenStreetMap

Sudan

Russia's paramilitary efforts in Sudan, another mainstay of the Wagner Group's OAIs, have also focused on access to gold as a natural resource, but more importantly for securing ABO in efforts to provide a potential Red Sea

naval base (Doxsee, 2023). The Wagner Group began operations in Sudan in 2017 coinciding with a gold mining concession granted to M-Invest, which was associated with both Prigozhin and Wagner, the month prior to its deployment there (Doxsee, 2023). Operating through Meroe Gold and a local subsidiary, al-Solag, Wagner OAI's capitalise on this parallel funding to manage their operations while also reducing the impact of Western sanctions in response to the Russo-Ukrainian War (Doxsee, 2023). The Wagner Group's presence persisted through *coups* in both 2019 and 2021, in an effort to provide the Kremlin with access to a Red Sea naval base at Port Sudan, which is a significant ABO opportunity adjacent to a strategic maritime chokepoint – the Bab al-Mandab Strait (Doxsee, 2023). The Kremlin pursued efforts in formalising an agreement for development of such a base despite the standing conflict in Sudan and concerns over an agreement with one faction being rejected by another (McGregor, 2023). The Wagner Group's role in Sudan may actually hinder the Kremlin's strategic objectives due to its support of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) over the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (McGregor, 2023). More recently, beginning in early 2024, Russia is exercising formal state channels via the Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to provide military aid, potential future expertise, and forces on the ground, to the SAF (Rickett and Amin, 2024). Russia is effectively hedging its bets by letting the Wagner Group support the RSF while providing formal Russian state support to the SAF, enabling an effective negotiating position to reinvigorate Red Sea naval base talks upon conclusion of the current civil war. Regardless of the precarious strategic decision-making situation the Kremlin finds itself in, Russia's paramilitary efforts in Sudan directly support its objectives for natural resource extraction and advantageous ABO opportunities.

While specific country context is critical in the study of Russian paramilitary OAI's within sub-Saharan Africa, regional context is equally crucial in formulating effective policy options addressing both Russian activities and the acute security issue of transnational terrorism. In September 2023, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso announced the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (A.E.S.) with an accompanying security alliance in July 2024 (Ford, 2024). The

creation of the A.E.S. amidst each country's withdrawal from ECOWAS has an ostensible purpose of collective defence and mutual assistance as described by a former Ambassador of Burkina Faso (Kenn Klomegh, 2024). The withdrawal complicates the current regional dynamics for a common approach to resolving transnational security issues in west Africa. Arguably, it creates similar complications for central Africa countries due to the regional borders and the likes of Russian activities in the C.A.R. facing similar transnational terrorism issues.



Figure 3: Territorial Control of Carious Sudanese Forces as of October 2023
 © 2024 PolGeoNow.com and OpenStreetMap

Policy Options

The U.S. has two strategic lines of effort with two substantial policy options available for countering Russian paramilitary OAs within the sub-Saharan region. The first line of effort is countering Russian influence with Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) designation as the tangible policy option. The second line of effort is expanding USSOF presence and partnerships with the tangible policy option of expanding the USSOF footprint within the sub-Saharan region.

Countering Russian Influence

The U.S. has the tools and justification to designate the Wagner Group and one of its successors, the Russian 'Expeditionary Corps', as a United States' Department of State (DoS) FTO. For efforts in Africa specifically, this would also require designation of the Africa Corps as an FTO. The United Kingdom's Parliament designated the Wagner Group as a proscribed terrorist group in September 2023 (United Kingdom Home Office, 2023). Under Section 219 of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, the Wagner Group meets the criteria for a group perpetrating terrorist acts throughout its African operations (U.S. Department of State, 2025a). Additional provisions related to FTO designation would impact material support to Wagner Group and other PMCs, a mainstay of operations in Africa focused on resource extraction as previously discussed (Petrila and Wasielewski, 2023). Associates of the Wagner Group in particular, or the use of Russian PMCs in Africa in general, provide an additional strategic messaging opportunity to the Organisation of African Unity Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa (United Nations and Organisation of African Unity Convention, 1977). This is especially applicable to Wagner Group's participation in the Sudanese Civil War in direct contrast to, arguably, internal defence efforts supporting Mali and the C.A.R. governments. Furthermore, the recent collapse in December 2024 of the Assad regime in Syria as Russia's principal client in the Middle East is a significant narrative to amplify as warning to those considering establishing or expanding Russian paramilitary support in their own country

(Trudolyubov and White, 2024). Designation provides a broad pool of material for potential DoS-level information operations through any entity that would be similar to the recently closed DoS-managed Global Engagement Center (GEC). While the GEC was closed in December 2024, identifying a viable entity to facilitate focused strategic messaging will be critical to maximising the reputational cost of FTO designation. This will be contingent on the willingness of foreign policy leaders within the second Trump administration to seek to re-establish or expand elements within the foreign policy apparatus to this end.

FTO designation will provide a host of additional benefits to the U.S. national security apparatus. First, it provides the initial benefit of focus for intelligence collection and analysis from elements across the Intelligence Community (IC) both within the Department of Defense and across the entirety of the Executive Branch. Secondly, designation will enable the Department of Treasury to utilise financial interdiction and counter threat finance actions facilitated by U.S. Special Operations Command that are separate from individual rounds of sanctions targeting key leaders with external resource flows. Lastly, designation will be another stain on Russia's already severely frayed international reputation and will come at a time when it is hemorrhaging diplomatic influence in many parts of the world. However, this is not necessarily the case with countries of the Global South due to their complicated history with Russia and a preference towards non-alignment and neutrality to avoid being positioned between Russia and the United States alongside the E.U. (Seshadri, 2023). The preference for neutrality presages the potential for influence with the reality of illuminating malign Russian activity instead of the false dichotomy for Western preferences. More importantly, within the context of strategic competition, while Russia mires itself in the Russo-Ukrainian War, its activities on another continent would be amplified for exacerbating issues in an exploitative way in the same colonialist manner that it denigrates the U.S., France, and the E.U. Designation as an FTO would not be a *coup de grâce* for Russian paramilitary OAs within the sub-Saharan

region, but it does dissuade other nations, including those in the sub-Saharan region, from expanding this relationship if not for tangible consequences, then for soft power accrual in various international fora. FTO designation becomes the first step, and a prerequisite for some subsequent steps, on a sliding scale of options to counter Russian paramilitary OAI's which have consistently progressed in the region and are left unchecked by a more coordinated counterstrategy.

The critical consideration of FTO designation of the Africa Corps in this context will be its formal association to the Russian MoD and potential implication of designation of Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism (SST) due to documented activities in Ukraine (Petrila and Wasielewski, 2023). Formal association to a state government does not preclude such designation; however, it does create additional policy baggage for state-sponsorship of a terrorist entity. FTO designation of the Africa Corps matches the similar precedent of the April 2019 designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF) as a part of the Trump administration's 'Maximum Pressure' campaign (U.S. Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, 2019; also see Thomas et al, 2020). While FTO designation of the IRGC-QF did not necessarily reduce its activities in conflict areas around the Arabian Peninsula and Levant, it preceded the more tangible and escalatory action of targeting of the IRGC-QF commander General Qassem Soleimani the following year in January 2020. Considering the current context of the Russo-Ukrainian War and expansive use of PMCs across the African continent with documented humanitarian violations, the U.S. foreign policy and intelligence apparatus has enough material to effectively communicate and designate these entities in conjunction with parallel ally designations.

Designation of Russia as an SST may be politically unpalatable; however, designation of an organ once or twice removed from formal political decision-making processes may be a nuanced narrative escalation with material impacts in multiple theatres of competition, with primary impact in Europe and Africa. That is not to say or advocate for direct targeting of those individuals; however, it maximises the flexibility to bring all aspects of national power to bear on the problem, directly or indirectly. The focus on illumination and

documentation of these actions (i.e. the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, torture, rape, and summary executions as previously described) also enables a future U.S. partnership posture for information and intelligence sharing agreements. These agreements would enable the exposition and clarification of malign Russian paramilitary activity for IGOs concerned with regional activities, or host nations without full detail of the depth or breadth of Russian paramilitary OAs. Leveraging FTO designation as an opportunity to employ a so-called 'name and shame' strategy reinforces African agency. This is especially so when done through a deliberate information or intelligence sharing framework where FTO designation provides the nucleus around which to build such a sharing relationship. Arguably, this would carry more weight and bolster African agency if those same nations or regional institutions had the policy mechanisms in place to do the same. Unfortunately, only six countries in sub-Saharan Africa have such designation mechanisms (Sterman et al., 2023). ECOWAS, on the other hand, may be uniquely postured to capitalise on the timing of recent events (to include the creation of A.E.S. and the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali) to strengthen the roles of ECOWAS Parliament (Sany, 2024). The Community Parliament could establish a regional designation for destabilising Russian paramilitary activities pursuant to its objective of contributing 'to the promotion of peace, security, and stability [in] the West African region' (ECOWAS Parliament, 2020). Strengthening the Community Parliament may also enable it to build an integrated and pan-regional security architecture, one that could be associated to the extant Accra Initiative since extremism is persistently a regional issue (Sany, 2024). These efforts and a formalised regional security architecture would go hand in hand with the second strategic line of effort.

Expanding USSOF Presence and Partnerships

The U.S. should expand USSOF presence and partnerships within the sub-Saharan region. This would likely be an expansion of the USSOF footprint via the Theatre Special Operations Command (TSOC), separate from Combined

Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa, for operations across the sub-Saharan region. USSOF activities would be granted under the U.S. Department of State Title 22 authorities in addition to its organic Title 10 and potentially Title 50 authorities. With persistent efforts to draw down the U.S. footprint in the Middle East and a resurgent VEO threat across this area together with a significantly expanding VEO threat across Africa, realignment of USSOF priorities with a focus on the above-described countries would provide a military solution to the expanding acute security issues. A significant consideration here is the recent closure of force redeployment of USSOF from Niger in September 2024 that began in May 2024 (U.S. Department of Defense and Department of National Defense of the Republic of Niger, 2024). The prescience of strategic competition with Russia via paramilitary OAs made that event much more significant amidst the Africa Corps' deployment the month before this decision in April 2024, exacerbating U.S.-Niger tensions (Karr, 2024). Africa Corps also made initial inroads with Burkina Faso in late January 2024 which the Wagner Group had been unsuccessful in doing (Africa Defense Forum Staff, 2024). Africa Corps' establishment within Burkina Faso indicates a potential new dynamic to Russia's security offerings to the region with a governmental organ vice PMC that may be received more favourably by different governments across sub-Saharan Africa. While Niger and Burkina Faso are the only countries that Russia has expanded its security offerings to in 2024 via the Africa Corps, there are indications that Chad could be on the shortlist for future deployments, not least of all due to its similarity in governance situation with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Karr and Gianitsos, 2024). From an intergovernmental perspective, these trends are now ossifying around the mutual defence agreement of the Alliance for Sahel States, formed in September 2023, with Russia as its de facto security guarantor, with diplomatic planning exploring the Confederation of Sahelian States in the future (Bassou, 2024; also see Karr and Gianitsos, 2024). Thus, the U.S. is increasingly left with limited options to maintain an effective posture for counterterrorism activities across the sub-Saharan region while ceding strategic competition space to Russia via its paramilitary OAs.

USSOF conducts irregular warfare (IW) that focuses on Counterterrorism (CT), Counterinsurgency (COIN), and Foreign Internal Defense (FID) (Armed Forces of the United States, 2020). Unilaterally or bilaterally (by, with, and through), USSOF can partner with both international organisations and components of national militaries to build partner capacity. Of potentially more benefit and directly related to the option described above, identifying options related to CT efforts within and in close proximity to these countries and maintaining relationships provides a key benefit of maintaining operational and strategic situational awareness. USSOF organisations would also place varying levels of intelligence capabilities in those areas where the placement and access of tactical intelligence capabilities can unquestionably answer operational-level and strategic-level intelligence requirements. USSOF deploys with organic tactical intelligence capabilities premised on greater IC functional management across multiple intelligence disciplines – specifically Human Intelligence, Signals Intelligence, Geospatial Intelligence, and Open-Source Intelligence. With these organic capabilities, they can access the panoply of national intelligence requirements and generally satisfy them through tactical intelligence means by virtue of persistent placement and access during the conduct of operations. The presence of USSOF within the region brings additional organic capabilities, in conjunction with its core activities, for information operations – leveraging both military information support operations and civil affairs that can provide a broad spectrum of positive influence options. Organic elements such as these provide a more culturally adept look at the resonance, or lack of resonance, of narratives with the local population. These organic elements help to incorporate those previously discussed lessons learned from the neo-colonialist perceptions of French forces in the region and Mali in particular. Furthermore, with USSOF's routine close relationship with diplomatic elements in general and U.S. Country Teams in particular, this is a prime method for partnering with DoS platforms like the former GEC that sought to '[expose] and [counter] foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts' (Presl, 2024). The ability to conduct these focused information campaigns with contextual

intelligence from in-country operations would enable positive feedback loops in depicting the lack of effectiveness of Russian paramilitary OAs as demonstrated in Mali and the C.A.R. while countering Russian disinformation regarding western neo-colonial tendencies. Due to the sensitivities associated with Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso regime types (e.g. *coups* or military juntas), the U.S. will likely need to focus on an indirect approach by buttressing its military relationship with partners in both western and central Africa providing a geographic pivot point within the region (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

Current U.S. legal constraints prohibit it from working with leaders who have come to power through a military coup; however, that constraint is limited to a formal designation of a *coup* in a specific country, which is not consistently applied (Matthews, 2023). As referenced above, the biggest impact this has is with the Balkanisation of the African IGOs through the creation of the A.E.S. by the post-*coup* governments of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The constraints are included within Section 7008 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which recently incorporated a waiver in 2023 allowing for an administration to review potential sanctions while still designating a *coup* event (Matthews, 2023). Employing this waiver may be a viable vehicle to leverage the use of U.S.-based PMCs in lieu of USSOF activities. In the aftermath of the Prigozhin mutiny, the U.S. has a limited window to capitalise on African efforts at security diversification, understanding that the only U.S.-based PMC to try and compete regionally was Bancroft Global Development in the C.A.R. starting in late 2023 but has been unsuccessful to date (McGregor, 2024; also see Abdul, 2024). Bancroft is already active on the continent as the principal U.S. PMC contracted for security efforts in Somalia (Gutierrez, 2024).

Sidestepping this legal constraint presents a practical – albeit morally hazardous – alternative solution. The U.S. government instituted the meteoric rise of PMCs throughout the Global War on Terror, of which activities across Africa have taken part. PMC flexibility and variety of services offered enable specific application to cover niche or nuanced problems from food service support to intelligence collection and analysis to SOF-like combat capabilities.

PMCs have their role to play in the 21st century security environment alongside the global importance of multinational corporations. Based on this experience, the U.S. can effectively facilitate the potential for leveraging U.S.-based PMCs to address transnational security issues if it can orchestrate African sponsorship to do so, focusing on the current threat of expanding transnational terrorism across sub-Saharan Africa. Should the U.S. government seek an avenue to apply U.S.-based PMCs to address those security issues, it must do so in a transparent manner and demonstrate PMC adherence to international legal and human rights conventions so that it avoids the hypocritical justification of merely swapping a Russian PMC for an American one. Strategic messaging is critical in this aspect in reinforcing the U.S., in addition to France and the E.U., as signatories to the Montreux Document with separate U.S. participation in the International Code of Conduct Association focused on standardisation and conventions for responsible use of PMCs (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2023; also see The Responsible Security Association, n.d.).

The geographic disposition of any USSOF will be key for effective access across the region to directly address persistent issues. As implied with the country case studies above, this includes both the Liptako-Gourma Region of the central Sahel as well as the C.A.R. for the primary area within central Africa with indications throughout 2024 of possible elevation of the Russian relationship with the Democratic Republic of Congo after Wagner's presence in previous years (Rigoli, 2024). Realistic disposition would include forces arrayed in both west and central Africa, with nations like Benin, Nigeria, and Cameroon providing potential areas as a base of operations. These three countries are generally strong partners in current security cooperation activities or have similar security challenges that USSOF activities could help mitigate. Opportunities for advancing the security relationship with Nigeria abound with common efforts through ECOWAS, the Multinational Joint Task Force, and the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS, albeit this would likely lead to a review of the current Status of Forces Agreement (U.S.

Department of State, 2025b). For Benin specifically, this would also support current assistance efforts under the U.S. Global Fragility Act (Arieff and Martin, 2024). Lastly, for Cameroon, this could be examined and advocated under the current U.S. Integrated Country Strategy for Cameroon and the mission goal to ‘enhance national security to contribute to regional stability’ (U.S. Department of State, 2024, pp.8-9).

The Way Forward

Expanding USSOF presence and partnerships by an increased USSOF footprint as the U.S. primary policy option is a high payoff effort with tangible outcomes for its regional west and central African strategies to counter the Wagner Group vestiges, the new Africa Corps, and other Russian paramilitary OAI within the sub-Saharan region. Countering Russian influence through FTO designation, but not necessarily SST designation, would provide broader whole-of-government opportunities in a Russian counterstrategy complementary of possible USSOF activities in the region. Due to the nature of SOF, applying this solution to the Russian paramilitary problem set provides asymmetric benefits in its strategic fusion of all aspects of national power. Efforts to counter Russian paramilitary OAIs in sub-Saharan Africa would provide strategic disruption opportunities to delay, degrade, or deny their ability to achieve core interests in the region through the preferred use of paramilitary organisations (Robinson et al., 2023, p.5). The operational-level application of capabilities and authorities from the DoS under U.S. Code Title 22; the Department of Defense for its traditional military application of combat power under Title 10; and the IC for application of its various elements under Title 50 provides a range of capability against Russian grey zone activities. The ideal USSOF construct would be a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) (Armed Forces of the United States, 2020). A JSOTF provides a joint task force (JTF)-capable organisation at an O6-level that could direct multiple Special Operations Task Forces with units from multiple SOF components and services across U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Marine Special Operations Command, and Naval Special Warfare Command (Armed Forces of the United States, 2020). Due to the sheer size

and ‘tyranny of distance’ that the sub-Saharan region presents, the command-and-control organisation must be able to effectively support forces throughout the Joint Special Operations Area with an anticipated dependency on aviation support. Through both public and private efforts, a concerted military solution to treat this proximate security issue enables follow-on diplomatic (through DoS), developmental (through USAID), and economic opportunities to achieve progress in underlying social-political issues. Thus, USSOF will be able to impact Russia’s ‘strategic or operational design by introducing new barriers in time, resources, or operational feasibility that complicate [its] ability to achieve [its] objectives through their preferred course of action’ (Robinson et al., 2023, p.11).

As the U.S. seeks to effectively counter Russian paramilitary OAI within the region in conjunction with African partners, the question of how other international stakeholders reassert themselves as effective, and moreover responsible stakeholders, warrants further analysis and is beyond the scope of the current discussion. While France specifically and the E.U. holistically were generally ineffective in addressing its colonialist legacies in the region, they can and should have a future role to play in regional security cooperation. The acute security issue of transnational terrorism does not respect borders. France and the E.U. must clearly delineate respective decision spaces for combatting terrorism alongside partners in the region and emphasising African agency in the process. A reinvigorated U.S. approach to the regional strategy may be able to initiate a greater reset in regional security cooperation opportunities. However, it must demonstrate the optimal application of CT forces while working by, with, and through African partners and IGOs reinforcing the current construct threatened by rogue actors or regimes adrift. Overarching solutions must be threefold in addressing specific threats from transnational terrorist organisations, providing more attractive alternatives to Russian paramilitary offerings, and mitigating the negative effects of Russian paramilitary OAI across the region. Neither the United States, western IGOs, nor African IGOs can allow for this complex multifaceted issue to persist.

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