



# NIAS Area Studies

## AFRICA WEEKLY



Discourses | Trajectories | Forecasts

NIAS Africa Studies  
Africa Weekly #42, Vol. 1, No. 42  
13 December 2022



© ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP

### IN FOCUS

## The Wagner Group, exploitation of conflicts and increased dependency on Russia

### AFRICA IN BRIEF

Regional | Economy | Gender | Climate Change | Migration | Peace and Conflict | International | Sports



## COMMENTARY

## The Wagner Group, exploitation of conflicts and increased dependency on Russia

*Russia, a late entrant into the 21st Century Scramble for Africa, with the United States and China already involved in a geopolitical tug-of-war, has employed the idea of hybrid warfare involving mercenaries of the Wagner Group and an intense disinformation campaign to turn its foreign policy ambitions in Africa into reality.*

Devjyoti Saha



Image source: AFP, DW

In the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his desire to reinstate Russia's Cold-War era influence in the African continent, which has waned over the years. Russia, a late entrant to the 21st century Scramble for Africa, with the United States and China already involved in a geopolitical tug-of-war, has employed the idea of hybrid warfare involving mercenaries of the Wagner Group backed by an intense disinformation campaign by the St. Petersburg based Internet Research Agency (IRA) to turn its foreign policy ambitions in Africa into reality.

### Who are the "Shadow Warriors" of the Wagner Group?

The present-day Wagner Group originated from the now-defunct Slavonic Corps deployed in the Syrian conflict in 2013. The failure of the Slavonic Group mercenaries in Syria and its monumental defeat in the combat mission in Deir-al-Zour led to the disbandment of the Private Security Company (PSC).

Dmitry Utkin founded the Wagner Group in 2014. Utkin, a GRU veteran and a member of the now-disbanded Slavonic Corps, has experience working in state and non-state security forces. That experience and the old linkages with the Russian special combat unit allowed him to establish a covert organization with the state's strong support.

The Russian Constitution clearly states all matters pertaining to defence and security are strictly under the ambit of the state. But on the ground, the oligarchs have close links with the state. Oligarchs like Yevgeny Prigozhin, infamously known as "Putin's Chef", changed his fortunes from a simple caterer to becoming the chief financier and manager of the Wagner Group and the troll network IRA by exploiting his links with the Kremlin and his bonhomie with Putin.

### Wagner Group's involvement in Africa's conflicts

The Wagner Group started its covert mission in Africa, led and monitored by Prigozhin. Chronologically, its missions are as follows:

1. In 2017, the Group was involved in quelling the local uprisings against Sudan's dictator Omar al-Bashir.
2. In 2018, the Group got involved with the weak government of President Faustin-Archange Touadera of the Central African Republic (CAR) to ensure that Touadera stayed in power by eliminating

threats emerging from the civil society and local militias.

3. In 2019, Russia cleverly employed the Group in the Libyan conflict to strengthen its position in the Mediterranean. The Wagner Group supported the local warlord Khalifa Haftar and his forces in the onslaught on Tripoli.

4. In 2019, Mozambique's President hired the Wagner Group to assist the local forces in counterinsurgency operations.

5. In 2021, the Group carried its latest deployment in Mali, a country that has been a victim of Islamic terror organizations like Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Musalmin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS). The 2022 French decision to withdraw France's counter-terrorism forces deployed in Mali since 2013, has left the country and its people at the mercy of the mercenaries.

### **Wagner's four-tiered approach towards creating African dependencies**

First, in the 2019 summit, Russia initiated a narrative where the Kremlin portrayed Russia as Africa's liberator from the neo-colonial West, which is creating African dependencies and filling their treasuries by taking undue advantage of the African countries. Reiterating its historical position against colonisation and racism, Russia tried to project itself as a partner and proposed a mutually beneficial partnership between Africa and the Kremlin. Since then, Prigozhin's widespread trolling agencies initiated a disinformation campaign falsely projecting Western countries like the French involvement in the Sahel region as a neo-colonial practice. Through these disinformation campaigns, Prigozhin created a support base for the entry of Russian mercenaries by propping up false images of locals waving Russian flags and

disapproving French forces as they did in the case of Mali. The disinformation campaign was highly organised, and in 2019 Facebook closed around 300 such sites that were targeting African countries.

Second, before sending mercenaries in large numbers, Prigozhin created a cycle of dependency in African countries on Russian military aid. It started with covert political support through political advisors and a few mercenaries in the form of private security guards for the head of the state. Around 170 political advisors were sent to the Central African Republic, whose main motive was to gain insights into the inner functioning of the political environment and conduct phoney election monitoring to declare the elections and elected leader as the legitimate head of state. Through political support, the advisors gradually established a rapport and gained mutually beneficial influence for both Wagner and the Kremlin. The influence over the head of state led to deepening defence engagements with the Russian State and permission to the Wagner Group to send their forces.

Third, the mercenaries entered the countries under the garb of fighting insurgency and local militias, but in reality, they became private security guards of autocratic leaders. From conflict resolution, their main aim converted into conflict prolongation by suppressing civil society uprisings, carrying out blatant human rights violations and protecting the state's supremacy at all costs. The disinformation campaign continued its attempts to defend the actions of the mercenaries by targeting the legitimacy of the protests and portraying victims of human rights abuses as insurgents and terrorists. In the process, the mercenaries further fueled the state-society conflict, making the leaders dependent on the Wagner Group to provide security and protect them from the wrath of the members of society.

Fourth, Prigozhin, a notorious opportunist, taking advantage of this dependency, sought exclusive mining rights over oil fields and minerals in these resource-rich African countries. On the one hand, the Wagner Group provides private security to the leaders. On the other hand, Prigozhin's affiliate corporations, Lobaye Invest and Meroe Gold, drain these countries of their resources. Moreover, the mercenaries who entered the countries to protect the locals from decades of violence are now inflicting violence on the civilians to secure the mines located in the civilian areas and indigenous forestlands for Prigozhin's mining projects. As the Wagner Group is a non-state organization, it is a self-financed organization, and these mines are a source of long-term revenue. Hence, now the main motive of the mercenaries is to let the conflict continue so that, under the pretext of conflict resolution, they can continue their private economic interests. At the same time, the Kremlin enjoys deeper military engagements and hefty weapon contracts from African countries.

**Kremlin-Wagner's symbiotic relationship to reassert Russian dominance in Africa**

The new Russian foreign policy approach of hybrid warfare in Africa is primarily based on its learning from the failures and shortcomings of the USSR's foreign policy initiatives in Africa. USSR failed to maintain its once-dominant position in the continent due to unstable political regimes in

African countries that changed alliances from USSR to China or the US and domestic economic decline that did not allow the State to fulfil the commitments to their African partners. Hence, Putin has learned from history that the state cannot manage it all, especially when Russia does not have deep pockets like China and the US. Moreover, Russia has already been involved in constant warfare with Ukraine since the 2014 Crimean crisis and the present all-out war; the Kremlin cannot afford to lose its soldiers in other countries' battles. Hence, PSC, like the Wagner Group, is the best alternative as mercenaries are banned in Russia, so the Kremlin does not have to maintain a book of lives lost or keep track of their activities. That makes it easy for the Russian state to deny human rights abuses, disinformation campaigns and other notorious activities carried out by Prigozhin's companies, while at the same time maintaining its covert influence on the African countries. By influencing the national leaders to deepen their defence and military engagements with the Kremlin, Russian oligarch Prigozhin gets the State's backing to exploit the conflict zones for his private commercial interests freely. Hence, the mutually beneficial relationship between the State and the oligarch pushes Africa towards a new era of Russian dependency.

*(\*This commentary was previously published in NIAS-IPRI-KAS Conflict Weekly 150th issue)*

---

## AFRICA IN BRIEF

6 December - 12 December

By Apoorva Sudhakar and Anu Maria Joseph

---

### SUDAN

#### UN hopeful about recently-signed political framework

On 7 December, the head of the UN mission in the country UNITAMS told the UNSC that signing a political framework could help Sudan out of the “uncertainty and insecurity sparked by the October 2021 coup.” The Special Representative said the framework could help Sudanese citizens realise their aspirations. The representative said once a political agreement that leads to a civilian government is arrived at, the latter “should pave the way towards building a democratic State based on human rights, rule of law and gender equality, and provide a future for the young men and women of Sudan.” (“[New political deal ‘offers a path’ to realizing Sudanese aspirations](#),” *UN News*, 7 December 2022)

### SOUTH SUDAN

#### Over 9,000 flee violence in Upper Nile, says UN

On 7 December, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said over 9,100 people had fled the latest violence between armed groups in the Upper Nile state. The OCHA said rape, murder and kidnapping had taken place in the state and 75 per cent of those displaced were women and children. The president's office said: “Despite the complexity, the president is determined to do whatever it takes to end this violence in Upper Nile and other regions of South Sudan.” Meanwhile, the UNHCR figures say over 20,000 people have fled the violence since August, including 3,000 who crossed to Sudan. (“[More than 9,000 flee violence in South](#)

[Sudan’s Upper Nile: UN](#),” *Al Jazeera*, 8 December 2022)

#### 40,000 people displaced in Upper Nile, says UN

On 12 December, the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Ocha) said that nearly 40,000 people have been displaced following the renewed fighting in Upper Nile state. It added that the increase in violence is further hampering humanitarian response in the region while thousands are living in dire conditions and are in need of urgent assistance. The fighting between the national army and the Maiwut opposition forces resumed in mid-november. There are also reports of fighting in the Fashoda region between various ethnic groups. (“[Fresh fighting displaces 40,000 in South Sudan - UN](#),” *BBC*, 12 December 2022)

### ETHIOPIA

#### Federal troops deployed in Oromia to contain violence

On 6 December, BBC reported that federal troops have been redeployed in the Oromia region to contain the repetitive attacks by armed groups. Amhara militants are blamed for the recent attacks that killed dozens and displaced thousands in Anger Gute and Kiramu border towns in Oromia region. However, the Amhara community who are a minority in the region blamed Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) rebels for the attacks. Residents have been blaming the government for failing to protect them as violence in Oromia has been overshadowed by the conflict in Tigray. Besides, local authorities say that there is an urgent need

for humanitarian aid as the roadblocks put up by the armed groups are hampering movement in the region. ("[Ethiopia sends troops to troubled Oromia region](#)," *BBC*, 6 December 2022)

### Government to investigate the deaths of migrants in Zambia

On 12 December, the Ethiopian government said that it will begin an expert investigation on the reports of bodies of 27 Ethiopian nationals found dumped roadside in Zambia the previous week. The bodies found were men all aged between 20 and 38 thought to have suffocated while trying to reach South Africa. In October, the bodies of 25 Ethiopian nationals were found in neighbouring Malawi. ("[Ethiopia to investigate death of migrants in Zambia](#)," *BBC*, 12 December 2022)

### ERITREA

#### Kenyan President visits capital Asmara

On 9 December, Kenyan President William Ruto began his two-day official visit to Eritrea. The visit comes following Eritrea's foreign minister's visit to Kenya the previous week; Eritrea's ministry of information said following the visit that Ruto had "expressed the need for countries in the region to work jointly for realising peace and stability as well as political and economic developments." Ruto's unexpected visit to Eritrea seeks to strengthen relations between the two countries which were stranded in the past. Meanwhile, Eritrea faces international criticism for its human rights atrocities and involvement in Ethiopia's Tigray conflict. ("[Kenya president flies to Eritrea in unannounced trip](#)," *BBC*, 9 December 2022)

### CHAD

#### Hundreds sentenced to jail for anti-government protests

On 5 December, 262 people were sentenced to two or three years in jail for the anti-government protests in October which witnessed over 50 casualties. The developments come after a mass trial held in the Koro Toro prison held on 2 December. *Al Jazeera* reported that the defendants were sentenced on charges of "unauthorised gathering, destroying belongings, arson and disturbing public order." The public prosecutor said that apart from the 262 people, 80 were given suspended terms and 59 were cleared of all charges; 83 minors will be tried later in a special juvenile court. Meanwhile, several lawyers criticised the mass trial with the defence lawyers terming it "illegal" and others boycotted the proceedings. The Chad Bar Association labelled the trial a "parody of justice." ("[Chad jails more than 260 people after mass trial over protests](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 6 December 2022)

### DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

#### M23 ready to withdraw, says spokesperson

On 6 December, the M23 spokesperson announced the armed group's willingness to disengage and withdraw from the territories it controlled in eastern DRC. The spokesperson said the M23 would also support the regional attempts at establishing peace in the east. The development came alongside the conclusion of week-long talks between former Kenyan President and mediator Uhuru Kenyatta and almost 50 armed groups operating in the DRC; M23 did not participate in the talks. The M23 spokesperson instead requested a meeting with the East African Community and Kenyatta. ("[M23 says ready to 'withdraw' in eastern DRC, yet clashes reported](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 7 December 2022)

### **M23 calls for meeting with Kenyatta, Tshisekedi**

On 7 December, News24 reported that the M23 rebel group had called on mediator and former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta to discuss “matters of concern.” The M23 spokesperson also called on the DRC president Felix Tshisekedi and said: “The M23 reiterates its readiness to the direct dialogue with the DRC government in order to find a lasting solution to the root causes of the conflict in the eastern DRC.” (Lenin Ndebele, “[M23 rebels insist on meeting DRC President Felix Tshisekedi, EAC facilitator Uhuru Kenyatta,](#)” *News24*, 7 December 2022)

### **NIGERIA**

#### **Reuters reports forced abortions of Boko Haram victims; military denies claims**

On 7 December, Reuters released an investigative report claiming that since 2013 Nigeria’s military “conducted a secret, systematic and illegal abortion programme in the country’s northeast, ending at least 10,000 pregnancies among women and girls.” The report said the abortions were carried out without consent on women and girls impregnated by Boko Haram militants and those who resisted the abortion could have gotten “beaten, held at gunpoint or drugged into compliance.” However, the

army has dismissed the report terming it “a body of insults on the Nigerian peoples and culture,” adding, “[The] Nigerian military will not, therefore, contemplate such evil of running a systematic and illegal abortion programme anywhere and anytime, and surely not on our own soil.” (“[Nigeria denies mass ‘abortion programme’ of Boko Haram victims,](#)” *Al Jazeera*, 8 December 2022)

### **REGIONAL**

#### **Over 95 per cent malaria infections and deaths recorded in Africa in 2021**

On 8 December, the World Health Organization (WHO) released the World Malaria Report 2022 outlining that the number of deaths from malaria in 2022 had risen by 63,000 against the pre-pandemic figure; in 2020 and 2021, 625,000 and 619,000 deaths were recorded respectively. Similarly, the number of infections also increased, at a slow pace, from 232 million cases in 2019 to 245 million in 2020 and 247 million in 2021. Africa accounted for over 95 per cent of the infections and deaths in 2021 and Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger and Tanzania recorded over half of global malaria casualties. (“[COVID disruptions led to 63,000 more malaria deaths: WHO,](#)” *Al Jazeera*, 8 December 2022)

---

#### About the authors

Devjyoti Saha is a Postgraduate Scholar at the Department of Political and International Studies, Pondicherry University. Apoorva Sudhakar is a Research Associate at the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. Anu Maria Joseph is a Research Assistant at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.



### About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

---

### About the team

#### *Apoorva Sudhakar*

Apoorva Sudhakar is a Project Associate at the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies. Her areas of interest include peace and conflict in Africa and South Asia. She has previously worked on the conflict over the Nile Dam and the abductions in Nigeria.

#### *Anu Maria Joseph*

Anu Maria Joseph is a Research Assistant at the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies. Her areas of interest include peace and conflict in Africa, Afro-European and Afro-China relations.

#### *Poulomi Mondal*

Poulomi Mondal is a postgraduate scholar at the South Asian Studies Centre at the Pondicherry University. Her interests include governance in the Sahel, Eastern and Central Africa, and issues related to maritime governance and non-traditional security.

---

©NIAS Africa Studies

Editor: D. Suba Chandran

Assistant Editors: Apoorva Sudhakar and Anu Maria Joseph

