

# Mercenaries in the Service of Authoritarian States

By using mercenaries and ostensibly private security services, China and Russia project power and protect their interests abroad without openly deploying their armed forces. However, in doing so, the two countries follow two very different paths.

By Julia Friedrich and Niklas Masuhr

In a European context, the privatization of military tasks is often associated with the use of Western private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, there are increasing reports of other state actors turning to private military services. Outsourcing the government's security functions to private providers, or creating new security tasks for nominally private security providers, is thus not only a Western phenomenon.

When considering the use of private contractors by non-democratic states, China and Russia particularly stand out. Officially, the latter is a “managed” democracy that has increasingly developed into an authoritarian state over the last two decades. In the recent past, both powers have resorted to methods that exploit legal grey areas in their respective regional contexts. These approaches include the growing use of nominally private military and security services beyond their borders to enforce and safeguard national interests. At the same time, Beijing and Moscow take entirely different approaches to deploying these services. While the basic conditions may seem quite similar at first glance, the practical application of private contractors differs widely between Russia and China. To understand their respective configuration and use of private groups, it is impor-



Foreign security guards stand guard at the scene of a bomb attack in Baghdad, 3 October 2007. *Ceerwan Aziz / Reuters*

tant to grapple with the individual contexts in which they operate.

The services provided by private military and security contractors can be divided into two categories: support services such as logistics, military and intelligence assistance, training and advising of local forces, as well as protection and combat missions. However, this distinction can sometimes

be difficult to discern: providing field training can effectively lead to combat missions, regardless of the original intention. Therefore, the term “Private Military and Security Contractor” (PMSC) is used to represent the full spectrum of private services in the security and defense sector. For the purposes of this analysis, we use the term “military contractors” when combat operations are an explicit part of a private group’s

mandate. For security companies, such a mission would represent an extreme, and likely unintended, scenario.

Russia and China's individual use of security services demonstrate the diversity of private security and military actors. While the Kremlin and Russia's oligarchical elite deploy private military companies both in the national interest and for their own personal gain, Beijing uses Chinese security services to protect its growing global infrastructure network – known since 2013 as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

### Moscow's Useful Tool

Russia's use of private contractors has generated major international interest, particularly due to their deployment in the war in Ukraine starting in 2014. However, there has been little in the way of concrete facts on the subject. Both Russian and international investigative outlets, such as *Fontanka* and *Proekt Media*, have focused their investigations on the Wagner Group, a nominally private military company with confirmed deployments in Ukraine and Syria. The investigative collective Bellingcat counted up to 2,500 Wagner mercenaries in Syria in 2015 alone, though the exact size of the Group remains unclear. The Wagner Group, which functions as a *de facto* special operations force, may be the most well-known Russian military service provider – but it is by no means the only one.

## The practical application of private contractors differs widely between Russia and China.

Despite the fact that the Wagner Group has never been registered as an official company in Russia, Russian President Vladimir Putin himself mentioned the group during a press conference in 2018. In his speech, Putin stressed that the group could pursue its business interests in any part of the world, as long as it did not break any Russian laws. Such statements intentionally send mixed signals – Moscow aims to divulge enough information about these groups to illustrate its supposed global influence, but without giving away precise details, such as the names of individual mercenaries or operational practices. As a result of this policy, the Wagner Group has become a catch-all term to describe the activities of private Russian military contractors rather than referring to a clearly-defined organizational structure.

### Wagner Group

The now infamous Wagner Group emerged from the *Moran Security Group*, a private security company in Russia. The Wagner Group itself was founded in 2014 during the Russian intervention in Ukraine under the command of former Spetsnaz officer Dmitry Utkin. His ideological proximity to the Third Reich earned him the *nom de guerre* “Wagner”, which was integrated into the group's name. The Wagner Group has long been considered unique in its proximity to the GRU. It remains disputed as to whether and to what extent other Russian contractors, such as *Shield* and *Patriot*, have supplemented or replaced Wagner as the *de facto* special operations element under the direction of Russian intelligence services.

The Wagner Group is also part of a network of business and resulting security interests created by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman and long-time ally of President Putin. While the group primarily supported or accompanied the Russian military (first in Ukraine and then in Syria), the frequency and scope of its activities on the African continent have increased since 2018. The group has been spotted in Mozambique, Madagascar, Sudan, as well as in Libya, for which Prigozhin was recently put on an EU sanctions list. Observers suspect that these actions are executed with the aim of propping up Prigozhin himself, although they do not directly contradict the Kremlin's interests. Among other activities, Wagner performs security, training, guard, and combat services as part of Prigozhin's ecosystem of oligarchical interests. A typical example of how the Wagner Group operates was documented by CNN in the Central African Republic: In this location, Wagner personnel train local security forces, while Prigozhin's resource exploitation companies have received exclusive mining rights to a gold mine.

It is also crucial to note that the term “private” does not translate to “independent of the state” in the Russian context. Instead, these contractors are deployed to serve both oligarchical and state interests, which are often difficult to distinguish. This practice is underscored within the Wagner Group, which maintains close proximity to the Russian military intelligence agency (GRU), as well as to business people with a clear interest in personal financial gain (see text box). Even though private contractors are not always acting on direct orders from the Russian state and its agencies, they never act in ways that run counter to Moscow's interests.

In this way, the extent to which an operation is directly controlled by the Kremlin varies, and can rarely be established unambiguously.

### An Increasing Liability?

In addition to Russia's ambiguous information policy on contractors, the use of private security companies also fulfills domestic priorities, as they allow the government to minimize losses of regular military personnel in war zones. However, these private entities also pose a significant challenge for the Russian administration.

First, the increasing documentation of the Wagner Group's operations by national and international outlets is becoming a problem for Moscow – not only does it damage Russia's international reputation, but it also reveals specific

information about personnel and deployment patterns that Moscow would prefer to keep secret.

Secondly, the relationship between the Russian administration and private armed groups is ambivalent. An example of this is the legal situation of private military contractors. While it is legal in Russia to operate a private security company, private military companies that provide military services using mercenaries are prohibited according to the Russian criminal code. At the same time, it is widely known that private Russian military contractors are in operation. This paradoxical situation benefits the Russian state authorities, as they can exercise more control over private military contractors precisely because they are illegal. Because these operations are technically against the law, Russian authorities are able to make arbitrary decisions on a case-by-case basis that best serve the interest of the state. On the one hand, state authorities chose, for no apparent reason, to imprison two members of the *Slavonic Corps* private unit for three years due to illegal mercenary activities on their return to

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Russia in 2013, even though they had completed a mission in Syria on behalf of the FSB, the Russian domestic intelligence service. However, mercenaries from the

Wagner Group received military awards from Russian authorities just a few years later.

The full extent of this ambiguity is clearly depicted by an incident in eastern Syria in 2018, when Wagner units attempted to carry out a surprise attack on an oil field guarded by US forces near Deir ez-Zor. It is unclear to what extent the group was acting on behalf of the Russian state or military authorities. Despite multiple requests from US commanders, the Russian general staff repeatedly denied that these troops were under Russian command. As a result, dozens of Russian mercenaries were killed in the resulting US air strikes. This example illustrates the problem posed by private armed groups in politically complex situations and highlights the complicated relationship between the Kremlin and these private groups. To avoid this kind of politically ambivalent scenario, China has opted for tighter control in its use of private contractors.

### A Security Gap Abroad?

Beijing's infrastructure projects within the BRI not only increase China's political and economic weight on a regional and global level (see CSS analyses no. 195, 249 and 254), but also cause security needs to grow considerably. This demand creates a lucrative market for Chinese, local and Western security companies. In particular, infrastructure such as docks, mining facilities, and refineries, as well as their Chinese personnel, must be guarded and protected in fragile regions, such as in East Africa and Central Asia. Still, China does not want to

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militarize the BRI, largely because the project is often viewed as an element of political influence and not just a benign expansion of trade routes. However, in its quest to avoid giving the impression of an imperialist foreign policy, problems and dilemmas arise for Beijing in terms of security.

China's increased need for security is not only the result of the constantly growing number of Chinese citizens working abroad, but also a consequence of Beijing's deliberately enhanced global profile. In this context, attacks on Chinese infrastructure

and hostage taking of personnel become more attractive to terrorists and criminal organizations. Furthermore, China's growing logistical and economic footprint may in itself become a destabilizing factor, which in turn requires an enhanced security approach. For example, if Chinese investment disturbs local power balances, this could lead to armed resistance against Beijing. At the same time, the Chinese government has so far been unwilling to use its armed forces to protect the BRI. The navy of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has become increasingly involved in anti-piracy missions. However, its ability to intervene on land is strictly limited to the coastal areas. While in 2015, roughly 900 Chinese and other foreign citizens were evacuated from Yemen via the Port of Aden due to a dramatically deteriorating security situation, such operations in the interior of the country are significantly more complex from a logistical and political point of view.

The November 2015 attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali, during which three managers of the China Railway Construction Corporation were killed, is a clear illustration of this issue. Chinese troops stationed in Mali were part of the United Nation's MINUSMA peacekeeping mission and thus could not be called into action. Even though the PLA has since expanded its contacts with African armed forces and opened a naval base in Djibouti in 2017, a security gap remains. While locally-recruited militias and security services would be a logical solution, Chinese companies have had negative experiences with this option. One example was in Zambia in 2010, when local security personnel fired at striking coal mine workers with live ammunition.

To address the security gap, China's ideal solution would be private Chinese contractors who could safeguard Beijing's interests abroad. Since 2009, security companies have been permitted in China. For these groups, China's growing political and economic weight abroad could provide a lucrative market. Surprisingly, however, only 20 of the 5,000 security companies registered in China made their services available abroad in 2018. The reasons behind this can be explained by the behavior of the Chinese government, which does not want to lose control over either the BRI's secu-

### Further reading

#### Russia:

Emmanuel Dreyfus, "Private Military Companies in Russia: Not so Quiet on the Eastern Front?", *IRSEM*, 12.08.2018.

Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35:3 (2019), pp. 181–204.

Ilya Rozhdestvensky/Roman Badanin, "Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa", *Proekt Media*, 14.03.2019.

#### China:

Alessandro Arduino, "The Footprint of Chinese Private Security Companies in Africa", *SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative Working Paper 35* (2020).

Andrea Ghiselli, "Market Opportunities and Political Responsibilities. The Difficult Development of Chinese Private Security Companies Abroad", *Armed Forces & Society* 46:1 (2020), pp. 25–45.

Helena Legarda/Meia Nouwens, "Guardians of the Belt and Road. The internationalization of China's private security companies", in: *MERICs China Monitor*, 16.08.2018.

ity or its image. As a result, even "private" Chinese security services are by no means "independent of the state".

### Disarming Conflicts of Interests

In this context, the political perception of the BRI is of crucial importance, as the use of armed mercenaries could also give the impression of an ostensible militarization of the project, which Beijing would like to avoid at all costs. Chinese security companies operating abroad are, therefore prohibited by law from carrying weapons. This limits their services to providing security training and analyses, as well as acting as tactical advisors to local forces on the ground. However, an exception to this rule are maritime protection services, which are allowed to defend themselves by force of arms while at sea. Beijing also stipulates that Chinese security companies abroad should only work for Chinese companies. However, this pressure from the Chinese government is exerted on both sides of the equation: Beijing also instructs state-owned companies involved in the BRI to use Chinese security providers abroad. So far, these companies preferred Western security companies with more operational experience, especially in high-risk zones.

In addition to the ban on weapons, Chinese security companies face another key disadvantage in comparison to Western contractors – the PLA does not provide them a pool of seasoned combat veterans for armed guard and escort missions. The pressure to work exclusively for Chinese state-owned companies means that private

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contractors cannot make up for this lack of operational experience by working for foreign clients. At the same time, Chinese security companies also lack local knowledge and contacts, which many smaller African companies already possess.

As long as the regulations mentioned above are not eased, particularly concerning the use of weapons, private Chinese security contractors will not be able to operate effectively in high-risk zones. Thus, it is currently unlikely that Chinese equivalents of the Wagner Group will take form. However, the Chinese leadership's first-and-foremost priority to avoid the impression of a militarized BRI may be contrary to its broader strategic interests in the medium term, since Beijing cannot currently fully guarantee the security of its foreign invest-

ments. For this reason, a selective shift of priorities towards a more military approach cannot be ruled out and makes monitoring the development of Chinese security contractors all the more important.

### “Private” Civil Servants

The differing use of private contractors by Russia and China stems from the countries' diverging strategic priorities: Moscow wants to appear as militarily effective and powerful as possible, and tries to exert influence by means of “covert” operations abroad. In contrast, Beijing wants to seem benevolent and, at least for the time being, seems intent on maintaining the impression that the BRI is a project with pragmatic economic priorities and without any security implications.

In practice, private military and security contractors in both Russia and China are subject to the rules of the authoritarian state, which either allows them to operate or actively controls their actions. This relationship leads to an inherent conflict of interest that is distinct for each country. In the case of Russia, military failures and public knowledge about the activities of private contractors is considered a liability for the Kremlin. Meanwhile, China is trying to tie its security industry so closely to the BRI that, in the end, neither the needs of the companies involved in the BRI nor the profitability of Chinese security providers are guaranteed.

The greatest similarity between Russia and China is the limited potential for independent action by the respective military or security contractors, which in both cases exists only at the edges of their state-defined range of tasks. In contrast to their Western equivalents, these contractors are above all “patriotic enterprises”, from which each government expects loyalty. While Western PMSCs, as private companies, may well act against the interests of the US or individual NATO member states, authoritarian security providers, such as Russia's Wagner Group or Chinese security companies would never work on behalf of another country for financial gain. Within their authoritarian contexts, it thus appears misleading to describe these contractors as “private” in a broader sense. Instead of applying a Western understanding of “private” as referring to “market economy”, PMSCs in Russia and China should each be considered, understood, and evaluated on their own terms.

For more on Military Doctrine and Arms Procurement, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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