



Hardly a day goes by now without a mention in the anglosphere media about the Russian mercenary group Wagner in relation to the Kremlin's war against Ukraine, writes Euan Grant and José Alberto Pereira . Yevgeny Prigozhin, "Putin's Chef" and at least the public face of the group has become increasingly vocal in urging a more forceful prosecution of the war, most recently castigating Duma members for alleged procrastination in passing legislation for such reenergizing. There have been a number of commentators suggesting the group "it is likely now an umbrella organisation for a range of companies and activities" is a praetorian guard against a coup. These observers believe these arguments are exaggerated and is inclined to share Mark Galeotti's belief that the primary protector of Putin is likely to be the Presidential Guard.

However, internally in Russia, and externally in Ukraine, Wagner plays a vital role in a divide and rule strategy, avoiding reliance on Kadyrov and his Chechens as auxiliaries outside the formal military command chain. Kadyrov's organisations can be seen as the equivalent of Wagner within Russia and its immediate neighbours, with the long-term roles of the latter being concentrated in the Middle East and North Africa, but particularly in the rest of Africa "especially the Sahel" and, lest we forget, South America centred on Venezuela and potentially still Cuba.

The modus operandi of Wagner is similar to that of Kadyrov: Self-financing of security operations "often with extreme brutality" through the proceeds of extortion and smuggling, partially of drugs but above all weapons, including gold, diamonds and likely though speculatively forestry. This model was brilliantly described in the Economist magazine's article of 15th January this year, by journalists deployed to The Sahel, who summed up the model in Mali "and not just there" as "goons for gold".

That article and the phrase pose awkward questions for UN and EU Peacekeeping missions across the region and beyond, especially in the CAR and in eastern DRC, where particular attention should be paid to commercial traffic out of those regions via the hub of Entebbe in Uganda. The latter is, of course, the base for UN MONUSCO operations in DRC. It has long been used by ex-Soviet air transport operators, as highlighted by Giles Foden in his recent "novel" " Freight Dogs "and, especially by Damien Lewis in "Operation Relentless" (2017, reissued 2022, as a result of contemporary relevance).

The latter recounts the still very relevant story of the "Merchant of Death" Viktor Bout, the model for the "Lord of War" in the 2005 film of that name. His operations supplying the Angolan and DRC Civil Wars in the 1990s made extensive use of Entebbe and following his operations being removed -?- from Sharjah in the UAE following UK pressure led by the then Foreign Office Minister Peter Hain he established "re-established" a base at Entebbe. He was not going in cold, as many Soviet military personnel were familiar with the location. The Soviet Union supplied Uganda with fighter aircraft. Following the widespread destruction of these planes during the Israeli raid in July 1976, they then resupplied new machines.

Much more recently, Uganda has bought Sukhoi 27s. Given that Wagner has operated in Venezuela in support of the Maduro regime, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that there have been reports of Venezuelan gold being smuggled via Entebbe to Iran or the UAE. One wonders who arranged that. Such traffic has traditionally received little attention from western law enforcement agencies, given the historic emphases on tackling drugs trafficking. With the partial exception of the USA, law enforcement careers have traditionally been built on anti-narcotics work, and anti-terrorism since 2001. Effective interdiction today will require very much broader approaches, including the involvement of banks, insurers and trade bodies.

The Israeli connections in many areas of operations for Wagner remain deep, especially in provision of electronic and physical security for VIPs, as witnessed by sales of "Pegasus" communications interception services by the NSO group, and Israeli interests in the Belgian diamond industry and DRC mining of crucial strategic minerals. Both these issues are especially relevant in relation to Portuguese Africa, given the previous dos Santos regime's use of the diamond industry to loot vast revenues, notably to or via the UAE (Dubai) which is much less vulnerable to Western sanctions than the traditional "offshore" tax secrecy jurisdictions.

Whether Wagner can maintain or reestablish its presence in its areas of operation following any

permanent or temporary settlement between Russia and Ukraine, it is likely to make increasing use of a recent development, one which appears to have enabled it to continue to carry out operations, e.g., in Mali and now, next door in Burkina Faso. A SU 25 ground attack jet based in Mali in full view of NATO forces was recently lost there, in circumstances which strongly suggest it was being flown and maintained by Russians. The same also applies to the vital workhorses "helicopters.

That development is the observance of recruitment of host nation nationals to provide an answer to Wagner's crucial weakness "lack of boots on the ground That has been especially seen in the CAR, where the goons for gold (and diamonds) presence was established well before the late July 2018 murder of three Russian journalists in that country. In this context, particular attention should be paid to the much-publicised Wagner intervention in support of the re-established military regime in Sudan and, particularly, the presence of Rwandan government troops in both Mozambique " where a small Wagner deployment was repulsed by insurgents in Cabo Delgado in 2019 " and CAR. Rwanda ticks many boxes " access to gold smuggling routes from DRC, use of Soviet era helicopters and a reportedly now withdrawn (in part?) Israeli presence in physical and cyber security Bringing the international community together in limiting the impact of Wagner on political influence and the securing of access to the new strategic minerals such as rare earths, lithium and copper will not be easy, not least because the aforesaid community is now much smaller, with many nations now very much non aligned between the West on one hand and Russia and China on the other.

It will require much greater cooperation between defence and security agencies across all members of NATO and Five Eyes, especially between the Anglosphere and France, Spain and Portugal, given the presences in former French colonies, Mozambique and Angola, and Venezuela. The growing "largely anglophone " anti kleptocracy media has not yet fully engaged with the geopolitics of these supply chains. Much of the academic world and certainly the central bodies of the UN and EU are more comfortable with legal, economic and developmental issues. They are unlikely to engage willingly on ways of offering target countries focused development aid and reliable and holistic security assistance which could persuade at least some nations to eschew bribery as offered by Russia and China.

But the stretching of Wagner's " and Russia's - resources at the present time and in the immediate future provides an opportunity to fill a possible vacuum. It will not be easy, not easy at all. But if not now, when? Remember one name above all. Not Prigozhin, not Lavrov (and his choice of countries on his recent African tour), not even Viktor Bout. Rather, Igor Sechin. based on his current role, and his fluency in Portuguese as a result of his service in Mozambique in the last decade of the First Cold War.

If this report is felt to be somewhat exhausting, lighter (or maybe not) references to Wagner will be found in the 2022 novel, "Double or Nothing" by Kim Sherwood.

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