



Far too loud, for far too long, writes Euan Grant

The recent flurry - or rather flood- of multiple source allegations of Russia's Wagner Group's complicity in atrocities against civilians in the Central African Republic should surely mean that it is well time to compose a Western response to its presence in conflict ravaged countries which, not so coincidentally, contain large deposits of old and new economy natural resources. "Old" are 20th century minerals such as gold, iron ore, copper and diamonds. "New" are 21st century rare earths and metals crucial for renewable energy programmes and electronic vehicle batteries. The distinctions between old and new are not rigid, with copper and aluminium having relevance across the board, and gold and diamonds being the long favoured alternative currencies of kleptocrats and warlords, especially in the new era of ever so slowly improving law enforcement efforts against illicit financial flows.

WHO?

The Wagner Group has long been known as a – rather the – Russian "Private Military Company" reportedly run by Yevgeny Prigozhin ("Putin's Chef" whose links with the Russian President go back to the pre- Kremlin days of 1990s St. Petersburg, connections shared with many others in the present or recent inner circles). He has been indicted by US authorities for alleged interference in the 2016 US Presidential election and claimed use of information warfare

through the St. Petersburg based Internet Research Agency.

While the group only gained widespread prominence in the West following heavy losses it incurred in Syria in February 2018 at the hands of the US Air Force while supporting the Assad regime, this attention largely reflects western preoccupation with counter insurgency in the post 9/11 world, and the resulting slow response to the return of overt Great Power competition. The Group had made extensive use of former and most likely serving Russian military personnel bloodied in the conflict in Ukraine's Donbass from 2014. The speed of its post Syrian redeployment to sub-Saharan Africa should have come as no surprise, as it was a reinforcement, a point made by this writer to a prominent Russia watcher several weeks before the July 2018 murder of three Russian investigative journalists in the Central African Republic. These killings were extensively researched by CNN Europe and Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Dossier Center.

HOW?

The rapidity of Wagner's emergence into the open in sub-Saharan Africa reflects that their reception committees have long been there, especially in oil, gas and above all mining operations, reflecting old – sometimes very old – contacts from Cold War days and the nature of Russia's resources-based economy. In large regions with often limited transport infrastructures, air transport and helicopter assets were and are crucial to operations. The armaments and military logistics in for precious metals and diamonds out model goes back a long way, and is well described in Matt Potter's "Outlaws Inc" (2011), and in the career of Viktor Bout and his successors following his 2008 arrest and subsequent continuing imprisonment in the USA for weapons linked drugs trafficking - see Damien Lewis' "Operation Man Hunt" (2017). Bout is not the only Russian arms trafficker held by the USA, and the Kremlin has hinted openly of getting them back in return for Americans jailed in Russia.

That there has been such a welcoming committee is demonstrated by the sheer scale of Wagner's presence in conflict zones and – invariably- in areas of lucrative mining facilities. The most recent coverage by CNN, in cooperation with the US anti-corruption NGO The Sentry (established by George Clooney and John Prendergast), has in its coverage of the alleged atrocities committed by Wagner in the CAR, identified a growing number of locations, going far beyond the well-publicised presences in Venezuela in support of the Maduro regime; Sudan to support the survival of the military elements of the post Bashir government; and the huge involvement in support of Haftar in Libya, this latter involving Sudanese auxiliaries.

What is encouraging for those who would seek to formulate western responses is that these reporting organisations have recently highlighted that the sheer scale of these operations means their cost must be enormous. The logical inferences they have made is that they are largely self-financing, from the proceeds of mining operations and security contracts for vulnerable regimes. These commodities can easily be bartered on international markets in ways that make banking oversight almost impossible, especially if transactions involve banks and traders based in strategic locations such as Dubai. In the case of Venezuela, gold, timber, and

precious stones are funding vehicles alongside legitimate and smuggled oil and gas products and, of course, cocaine.

WHERE?

The sheer number of confirmed or suspected locations where Wagner operates depends on who is counting. A recent estimate by Seth Jones of the US Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) was 26 countries, mainly in Africa. This writer came up with 22, but CSIS certainly has the sources, having recently hosted an online conference with the EU Delegation in Washington on future transatlantic defence cooperation. Within the space of 15 minutes the Portuguese Defence Minister, the head of US Africa Command and the Director General of the EU's Military Staff all mentioned Wagner and - equally significantly - its funding model. The Defence Minister and Gen. Townsend mentioned the forthcoming US and EU military training commitments to Mozambique following the insurgents' attack on in Cabo Delgado province, which forced the suspension of Total's operations there. Wagner, of course, had previously been brought in, albeit on a small scale (Libyan overstretch?) and unsuccessfully.

Their deployment to Mozambique was wholly predictable, given Cold War links and that Igor Sechin, CEO of Rosneft, served in the country in the 1980s, doubtless in many more roles than his official one of interpreter. Sechin signed production cooperation agreements with Mozambique at the time of Wagner's 2019 deployment. Vice Admiral Herve Biejean pulled no punches, describing his visit to CAR earlier in June, saying "they are everywhere", a clear warning about a situation which has not just happened overnight.

While Wagner's combat operations in Mozambique seem to have been overstretch, the sheer number of identified countries does support the theory of the presences of extensive local collaborators, both armed and purely commercial.

The potential for human rights abuses in conflict zones is naturally likely to attract the greatest attention, including from the UN, whose investigators' report on the CAR allegations has recently been discussed in the Security Council, with the allegations being predictably denied by Russia. However, the distinctions between combat operations and resource exploitations are very narrow indeed, so active consideration should be given to looking hard at transport companies (particularly fixed wing and helicopter operators). A key point in the CNN/ The Sentry reports in June 2021 is the reference to forced labour in artisanal mining operations, and the noticeable reluctance of charitable organisations to mention the Russian involvement. This writer has noticed the same, first-hand.

While the growing importance of crucial metals for electronic vehicle batteries and rare earths for vital electronic devices have long been noted, the lists may be larger than sometimes publicised, and transit countries need to be considered too. Examples include Chile, Brazil, and Argentina for lithium from the Bolivian lithium salt flats, and East African Community coastal states for cobalt and copper from DR Congo. More recently, Russian security personnel have been identified in Guinea (Conakry), familiar from Cold War days and home to the huge

Simandou deposits of iron and aluminium ore, the latter another EV metal. The exploitation rights have been the subject of much dispute and finally led to a Swiss court jailing the French – Israeli magnate earlier this year, the ruling currently being appealed.

The longstanding Soviet and Russian presence in Angola with its oil and diamond production warrants attention to the whole of Portuguese speaking Africa and to neighbouring oil rich and Spanish speaking Equatorial Guinea. Seaport security is likely to see Russian interest, not least to keep a close watch on Chinese mercantile and naval interests.

WHAT NEXT?

While much has been made in recent years of the "soft power" of nations and regional groupings, particularly those of democratic nations, some cautious voices urged that attention be given to the fusion of this with hard power, to form "smart" power

The arrival of Russian government linked PMCs, alone and with their proxies, is an issue which warrants the mobilisation of Western smart power, utilising the commercial and especially financial sectors alongside the major humanitarian organisations operating in conflict prone and vulnerable states, in order to minimise the risks of human rights abuses, work in cooperation against terrorism and its causes, and provide support envisaged in the 2021 G7 proposals for alternatives to China's Belt and Road. Full blooded diplomatic support for major international charities would enhance the ability to expose wrongdoings which smaller organisations are too vulnerable to highlight. At least some steps can be taken to ensure that the revenues raised from natural resources exploitation are properly taxed, something which may be attractive given that national elites know that behind Russia lies China.

Obvious examples of such organisations are Medecins sans Frontieres and the Save the Children fund, and above all the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Western media companies should consider cooperating on shared cost multilingual documentaries with major Western banks and natural resources providers to highlight how they are making a difference in ensuring properly accounted supply chain procedures and the elimination of forced labour and related abuses. Given the obvious challenges UN bodies may face in confronting Russian interests, approaches to UN organisations should ideally be done en bloc by consortia of western nations diplomatic services, taking into account the reluctance of some UN linked entities to engage with military and security actors.

There is likely to be a particular dilemma in relation to corruption in host nation and transit states regarding natural resources exploitation. Local elites may well welcome the prospects of the rents from these activities being retained domestically, or returned if expropriated, but only up to a point. There may well be a need to turn a blind eye to a degree of corruption by politically linked persons and kleptocrats, in return for secure access to crucial commodities. That will not be an easy proposition to sell to some media and advocacy groups, but it is highly likely to be an unavoidable choice.

Given the increasingly frequently warnings about the possibility of confrontations between

western forces and near peer proxy forces such as Wagner (the Sahel is an obvious region, and the warnings are clear from such as General Tonwnsend and Admiral Bejean and their UK equivalents, not least General Sir Nick Carter, the current Chief of the Defence Staff) there is also likely to be a need to prepare deconfliction by working ever more closely with host nations' forces. This is clearly seen in the new UK Integrated Security Review. One potentially controversial opportunity for enhancing cooperation, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is with the considerable Israeli security across the region. Little discussed, Western military observers privately recognise how widespread these links are, above all in cyber security (widely defined) and in the protection of key political figures and transport infrastructures.

These networks have existed for a long time now, and the commercial opportunities were openly cited during then Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's tour of East Africa in July 2016 (the timing was not coincidental). Israeli nationals or dual nationals have been and are prominent in many mining organisations operating in countries where Wagner are active. In addition to Benny Steinmetz, the controversial activities of Dan Gertler in DRC have led to the US imposing financial sanctions on him. And, not least, a considerable number of oligarchs from Russia and other ex-Soviet states have Israeli citizenship.

Hybrid organisations such as Wagner - and, over the horizon potential Chinese "Wolf Warrior" equivalents - can only be confronted in an equivalent manner. That won't be easy, but before it is too late in the new technologies world of the 2020s and 2030s, hard and soft power need to become truly smart.

Which will require a lot of effort, and compromises, by all parties. The time to start is now.

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