



Writer Euan Grant has previously highlighted in Defence Viewpoints the rapidly growing activities of the Russian mercenary group - "Wagner" - in Africa, and no longer just in North Africa (Libya) where its presence in the Libyan civil war has been long documented, not least by very brave Russian and Libyan journalists. In reality, the organisation itself - and its crucially important logistical and political enablers - has been in sub Saharan Africa in various forms long before it suffered losses in Syria in early 2018. The three Russian journalists killed in the Central African Republic (CAR) in late July of the same year were investigating a well established presence in that country, not a new one.

His July 2021 article, highlighted that the group's dramatic expansion could not be explained or sustained without it being based on strong foundations in "host" countries. The article also highlighted a commonly but not universally made point, the close correlation between the force's presence and mining operations in remote regions, requiring security. Follow the helicopters.

Read Euan's update on the next page.

More recently, these characteristics have been seen in Mali, where the government has been in negotiations with Wagner regarding security provision in the wake of reductions in French forces and their areas of operations, with inevitable impacts on the UN and EU Missions there. Mali has extensive mining operations, a remarkably unsurprising similarity with the CAR.

Perhaps the real significance is the speed of change, and how open it is. Organisations such as the US based CSIS (Center for Strategic & International Studies) and no less than the outgoing Chief of the Defence Staff in the UK and his French counterpart have all gone on record stating the numbers of countries in which the group has been identified. Figures of up to 30 have been offered. This writer calculated 22, not just in Africa and, in Latin America, including the very significant location of Venezuela.

How on earth can such an expansion have occurred, and how can it realistically be sustained? The welcoming parties role can be explained by the actions of diplomats, mining, weapons and energy and agricultural chemical and engineering companies. And not least legacy personnel from the Viktor Bout era air cargo fleets, willing to fly anywhere without asking questions. That era is not over, albeit run by others now, many of whom have had experience supporting UN, AU and indeed EU military missions in the region.

This still leaves a gap - foot soldiers on the ground, a weakness identified in early 2019 when a small Wagner contingent suffered significant fatalities against the "Islamist " insurgency in Cabo DelGado in far northern Mozambique, at a time when the group was heavily engaged in Libya. The suggestion is the Mozambique unit was not the "Champions League team", though such a deployment was wholly predictable and this writer did predict it six months before. It could have been expected given the very high and deep links between the Soviet Union and Portuguese speaking Africa, especially diamond rich Angola, connections which continued after 1991, not least through the Bout network's role in the Angolan Civil war.

The EU Observer report, which is corroborated by civil society observers on the ground in CAR, explains how the gap is being filled. This proxy force is now recruiting its own proxies from the regular forces, and doubtless militias, of the CAR. Equally concerning, this is not confined to that country but to the quite battle hardened irregular (and regular?) forces involved in the Chadian civil war and which have links to activities in Libya in proximity, and probably in cooperation with, Wagner. Courageous Chadian observers suspect links with gold trafficking, and who would bet against them. This all suggests there is the kernel of a Sahelian legion under Russian direction and with its support, and which can serve as a bargaining chip with the Chinese, whose economic clout in the competition to secure the new strategic minerals is far greater. Such a legion might well be expected to appear in the Western, French speaking, Sahel (or even south into Democratic Republic of the Congo), alongside a similar one for the East and the Horn of Africa manned by Sudanese paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and regular army forces. The mini coup in Khartoum in November 2021 appears to enhanced the position of the RSF and the army, and they already have a mercenary army standing by, following its deployment in support of Saudi forces in Yemen. Wagner, of course, were prominent in Sudan during the turmoil which ousted Bashir in April 2019, and the speed of their arrival indicated that they needed no prior introductions.

All this poses a lot of questions, and if the lack of foot soldiers issue is indeed being addressed, there is not going to be much time for Western countries to start making serious counter offers to governments across Africa, with particular attention to coastal states given the need to safeguard the all important Canal and Cape routes. None of that will be easy, not least because it will mean turning a blind eye to kleptocratic contracts in the usual suspect sectors of mining, energy and armaments. Much of that would offend significant segments of the western public, but there is unlikely to be any alternative.

Tough situations require hard decisions. Good luck to those who have to make them.