

A Game of Shadows:

Russian, American, and Chinese Private Military and Security Companies



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Over the sands of the Libyan desert, through the forests of the Central African Republic, up the Iraqi mountains, and on the Indian Ocean's waves off the coast of Somalia,¹ private military and security companies (PMSCs)² continue to operate more or less overtly by selling their services to governments, firms, and individuals. Staffed in large part by personnel with a military and/or intelligence background, these modern-day mercenary companies protect oil fields, fight alongside their host country's military, train local militias, provide personal and logistics security, among others. In the current state of affairs, PMSCs' actions are not regulated by any binding international treaty.³ They supposedly answer to the national laws of the host

¹ To name just a few PMSCs' operational theatres around the world.

² This Op-ed does not make a distinction between private military and private security companies for ease of understanding and because distinctions between the two are often blurred.

³ The [International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers \(ICoC\)](#) is a non-binding tool requiring members to 'commit to the responsible provision of Security Services so as to support the rule of law, respect the human rights/humanitarian law, and protect the interests of their clients.'

country, if these are present. PMSCs thus work in a grey area, which offers them a certain degree of impunity. The latter is often exploited by state governments to carry out unofficial, unsanctioned operations which can be quickly disavowed and/or publicly denied. There are thousands of PMSCs worldwide but Russian, American, and Chinese ones have the most significant ‘bootprint’ on the ground and presence at sea for obvious geopolitical and geoeconomic reasons.

The Wagner Group is undoubtedly Russia’s most infamous mercenary organization. Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Venezuela are only some of the countries where it is operational. With strong connections to both Russian oligarchs and the GRU (Russia’s CIA),⁴ the Wagner Group undertakes security and military actions aligned, more often than not, with the Kremlin’s own interests. It is not hard to picture President Vladimir Putin pulling the strings behind the scenes. For example, it is not a coincidence that Russia’s renewed interest in Africa – epitomized by the first ever Russia-Africa summit held in Soči in October 2019 – has been shored up by a substantial increase in the Wagner Group’s presence on the continent. Its services reportedly come at a cheaper price and proffered deals often include equipment for the local governments’ security forces free of charge.⁵ Russia is no stranger to using proxies to carry out its bidding, and indirectly employing mercenaries to further its aims is definitely a page out of its foreign policy playbook. The same can be said for its star-spangled rival on the other side of the Pacific, albeit with some notable differences.

American PMSCs, as well as other Western ones, are in fact largely autonomous and, to a certain degree, have to abide by transparency and accountability standards. American PMSCs’ heyday began with the launch of the US-led ‘War on Terror’ in 2001. On the Middle East strategic chessboard, it materialized with their government-authorized deployment alongside US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Whether in active combat zones or in the rear, setting up and looking after logistics, American private military and security contractors’ units have become an integral part of the war effort. They surpass American soldiers both in numbers in the field and amount of casualties sustained.⁶ Since PMSCs’ services apparently cost less than deploying US armed forces,⁷ a plan was even proposed to completely privatize the Afghan war under the presidency of Donald Trump. This plan was hatched by Erik Prince, founder of the US private military company ‘Blackwater’ (now ‘Academi’).⁸ Implicated in war crimes in Afghanistan in 2007, a person of interest in special counsel Robert Mueller’s report on Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential Election, and also involved in violating

⁴ Glavnoje Razvedyvatel'noje Upravlenije (GRU) or Main Intelligence Directorate.

⁵ Palmas, F. (2021), ‘[Il ritorno russo in Africa: basi, contractor, diplomazia, affari \[Russia’s comeback in Africa: bases, contractors, diplomacy, business\]](#)’, Panorama Difesa, no. 406, April edition.

⁶ Horton, A. and Gregg, A. (2020), ‘[Use of military contractors shrouds true costs of war. Washington wants it that way, study says](#)’, The Washington Post, 30 June; Loesche, D. (2016), ‘[Contracted Security](#)’, Statista, 2 March.

⁷ US Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2010), ‘[Warfighter Support: A Cost Comparison of Using State Department Employees versus Contractors for Security Services in Iraq](#)’, Report, 4 March.

⁸ Kirsch, N. (2018), ‘[Blackwater’s Dark Prince Returns](#)’, Forbes, 4 April.

the UN arms embargo on Libya in 2019, Prince has— until April 2021— helped the Chinese government secure its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) via its now former chairmanship of Frontier Services Group (FSG).^{9,10}

[FSG](#) is “a leading provider of integrated security, logistics, insurance and infrastructure services for clients operating in frontier markets”, and is one of the top global Chinese PMSCs. Like their Russian and American counterparts, Chinese PMSCs’ growth and overseas reach have benefitted from national foreign policy decisions. Beijing’s ambitious strategy to reshape the global order via the BRI has resulted in an expansion of the security needs of its ever growing infrastructural and economic networks over land and sea. However, there is one fundamental difference between Chinese PMSCs and Russian and American ones. Chinese PMSCs’ personnel are prohibited by Chinese law from carrying weapons overseas, with the exception of maritime security services.¹¹ Accordingly, for the time being, Chinese contractors mainly offer passive security services, including civilian staff training, security systems’ installation and management, intelligence collection, and surveillance, among others. The non-militarized nature of Chinese PMSCs is likely part of China’s effort to maintain a less menacing stance abroad in order to allay fears among BRI partner countries of a hostile global takeover.¹² Nevertheless, that might change under Xi Jinping’s more assertive turn with regard to China’s ambitions and actions both domestically – e.g. in Xinjiang and Hong Kong – and abroad – e.g. towards Taiwan and in the South China Sea. Ultimately, the BRI is the Chinese Communist Party’s lifeline. Since Beijing is not new to underhanded and unconventional tactics to get its way – like the use of its fishing flotilla in the disputed South China Sea waters –¹³, it is plausible to predict an upcoming increase in Chinese PMSCs’ international activities, pursuing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) directives in a way disturbingly similar to the Russian Wagner Group’s.

PSMCs based in democratic countries have to abide by stricter regulations than those with strong ties to authoritarian regimes, like Russia’s and China’s. If Russian PMSCs’ dealings have long been under the spotlight thanks to government and public scrutiny – e.g. via [Bellingcat](#)’s investigative citizens journalism –, Chinese PMSCs have yet to be followed as closely. It might be because they do not currently possess the expertise and capabilities of their competitors. It is also true that until the CCP allows for a relaxation in overseas gun use, their strategic importance will not be as marked.

⁹ Horton, C. (2017), ‘[The American mercenary behind Blackwater is helping China establish the new Silk Road](#)’, Quartz, 18 April.

¹⁰ Chapleau, P. (2021), ‘[Erik Prince, le fondateur de l'ex-Blackwater, a démissionné de Frontier Services Group Limited \[Erik Prince, founder of the ex-Blackwater group, resigns from Frontier Services Group Limited\]](#)’, Lignes de défense, 16 April.

¹¹ Friedrich, J. and Masuhr, N. (2020), ‘[Mercenaries in the Service of Authoritarian States](#)’, Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), 4 November.

¹² Nantulya, P. (2020), ‘[Chinese Security Contractors in Africa](#)’, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, 8 October.

¹³ Martinson, R.D. and Erickson, A.S. (2021), ‘[Manila’s Images Are Revealing the Secrets of China’s Maritime Militia](#)’, Foreign Policy, 19 April.

Nevertheless, Chinese PMSCs should not be discounted as irrelevant nor should they be allowed to thrive under the radar, since they could turn out to be the next spear point in the CCP's push towards its undemocratic world vision. In this sense, the work of the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on PMSCs to draft a [‘Convention on Private Military and Security Companies’](#) and additional international regulations is fundamental. Hopefully, these will be approved sooner rather than later and create binding international standards. The more grey areas surrounding global PMSCs' actions are removed, the less manoeuvring space there will be for malicious actors, thus spelling the end of this game of shadows.

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