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**Russia's Selling, But Who's Buying?
A Framework for Assessing Vulnerability
to Russian PMCs in Africa**

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May 2024

Approved for public release;
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IDA Product 3002388

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About This Publication

This work was conducted under the IDA Systems and Analyses Center Central Research Program, project C55CB, “Russian PMCs — Small Wars Journal.” The views, opinions, and findings should not be construed as representing the official position of either the Department of Defense or the sponsoring organization.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Dorina A. Bekoe and Keith A. Detwiler of the IDA Systems and Analyses Center, who served as technical reviewers on this report.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several years, Russian state-linked private military companies (PMCs) have established a foothold in the force-for-hire market in Africa. Despite a demonstrated inability to degrade security threats; a litany of egregious human rights violations; and increasing sanctions against their founders, facilitators, and clients, Russian PMCs continue to find customers among conflict-ridden states and authoritarian-leaning leaders. In this report, we provide a preliminary analysis of the factors that might make an African government more receptive to security service overtures from a Russian PMC, like Africa Corps. Using qualitative case studies of 4 countries where Russian PMCs are (or were) confirmed to be active and 2 where they have not, we identify 12 characteristics associated with a state being both attractive and receptive to Russian PMC intervention. We then propose and apply a potential framework for identifying countries that could solicit or accept Russian PMCs in the future.

Russian PMCs operate in concert with the Kremlin and Russian state-owned enterprises to offer security services in exchange for deals in strategic fields like energy, hydrocarbons, and precious metals; military basing options; and bidirectional geopolitical influence and support. There are a handful of Russian PMCs operating in Africa, the most famous of which was the Wagner Group. Wagner gained notoriety for its role in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its subsequent participation in conflicts in Syria and Libya. Wagner exemplified a Russian PMC that rapidly deployed armed personnel to challenge and influence events on the ground. The Syria deployment was an early example of a Wagner combat mission that was executed in direct coordination with, and received the support of, the Russian military. In Syria, its parastatal force structure and combat capabilities set it apart from other Russian PMCs.¹ In 2018, Wagner made

¹ In October 2017, Wagner personnel reportedly totaled 6,000, of whom 2,500 were serving in Syria. By March 2018, Wagner personnel in Syria reportedly totaled 4,840. Russian military aircraft transported Wagner personnel to Syria, and large Russian navy amphibious ships delivered Wagner artillerymen together with howitzers, mortars, and air defense weapons obtained from army depots in Russia. Wagner personnel reportedly received their combat missions from Russian army officers. Wagner casualties in Syria were medically evacuated on military aircraft to Russia, where they received treatment at four Ministry of Defense hospitals. See: Sukhankin, “War, Business and ‘Hybrid’ Warfare: The Case of the Wagner Private Military Company (Part Two),” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, issue 61 (April 23, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-hybrid-warfare-the-case-of-the-wagner-private-military-company-part-two/>; E. Murtazin, “Их просто нет. Расследование” [“They are simply not there. Investigation”], October 9, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/10/09/74125-ih-prosto-net>; M. Tsvetkova, “Russian Toll in Syria Battle was 300 Killed and Wounded: Sources,” Reuters, February 16, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualty/russian-toll-in-syria-battle-was-300-killed-and-wounded-sources-idUKKCN1FZ2EI>; H. Meyer and S. Kravchenko, “Mercenaries Hurt in U.S. Syria Strikes Treated at Russian Defense Hospitals,” Bloomberg, February 14, 2018, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-14/kremlin-stays-alooft-as-army-treats-wounded-in-u-s-syria-airstrike.

headlines following the assassination of Russian journalists in the Central African Republic (CAR), who were reporting on the group’s activities in that country. From 2018 to 2023, Wagner accumulated a number of additional African clients for its security services, such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Sudan.

While Wagner operated as a private company, it functioned as a state proxy, offering the Russian government a veneer of deniability for pursuing its unofficial agenda in Africa. Wagner’s successful accrual of clients in Africa resulted in influence on the continent and wealth for the group, its leaders, and to some extent the Russian state—which has utilized Wagner gains from Africa to fund its war in Ukraine.² Wagner also played a pivotal operational role in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which solidified the PMC’s domestic position. But the group’s growing influence—particularly that of founder Yevgeny Prigozhin—became a liability when he began publicly denouncing the Russian Minister of Defense and Army Chief in early and mid-2023. In June 2023, the Ministry of Defense sought to curtail Wagner’s independence by mandating all PMCs sign contracts with the Ministry. Prigozhin refused to acquiesce and led a mutiny against the Russian government on June 23, when several thousand Wagner mercenaries left western Ukraine and took over Rostov-on-Don, in southeastern Russia. From there, a Wagner convoy advanced to within 124 miles of Moscow, before reaching an agreement to end the uprising on June 24.³

The terms of the agreement precluded prosecution for Prigozhin, but remanded him to Belarus, although he returned to Russia several days later to meet with military leadership.⁴ He was also photographed participating in sideline meetings at the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg in late July.⁵ Following the mutiny, Wagner fighters in Russia and Ukraine were integrated into National Guard units or otherwise subordinated within official state forces.⁶ However, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov was quick to assert that Russian security assistance to African partners, including that provided through Wagner, would continue without

² Scott Detrow, Emma Klein, and Tinbete Ermyas, “How ‘Blood Gold’ from Africa is Funding Russia’s War on Ukraine,” *All Things Considered*, December 27, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/27/1221318890/russia-ukraine-wagner-group-putin-africa-blood-gold>.

³ Andrew Osborn, “Putin Backs Push for Mercenary Groups to Sign Contracts Despite Wagner’s Refusal,” Reuters, June 13, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-backs-push-mercenary-groups-sign-contracts-despite-wagners-refusal-2023-06-13/>; Luke Harding, “The Wagner Uprising: 24 Hours that Shook Russia,” *The Guardian*, June 25, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/25/prigozhins-march-on-moscow-chronology-of-an-attempted-coup>.

⁴ Kevin Shalvey, “Russian Rebellion Timeline: How the Wagner Uprising Against Putin Unfolded and Where Prigozhin is Now,” *ABC News*, July 10, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wagner-groups-rebellion-putin-unfolded/story?id=100373557>.

⁵ “Prigozhin: Wagner Boss Spotted in Russia During Africa Summit,” *BBC*, July 28, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66333403>.

⁶ @DefenceHQ, “Latest Defence Intelligence Update on the Situation in Ukraine – 01 February 2024,” X, February 1, 2024, 3:43 a.m., <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1752975835710046472>.

disruption.⁷ On August 22, 2023, Wagner posted a video to Telegram, in which Prigozhin appeared to be in Mali as he announced that Wagner would focus on its activities in Africa, and in so doing make, “Russia even greater on all continents, and Africa even more free.”⁸ The following day—exactly 2 months after the mutiny—Prigozhin and his co-founder Dmitry Utkin died in a plane crash in Russia. While there is little confirmed information about the cause of the crash, early U.S. intelligence assessments pointed toward an on-board explosion, with widespread speculation that the Russian state orchestrated the crash.⁹

Following its founders’ deaths, Wagner’s Africa portfolio was brought under the jurisdiction of the Russian Ministry of Defense and renamed the Africa Corps.¹⁰ Despite its recent formalization as an instrument of the Russian state, Africa Corps’ mission remains the same: secure influence and resources—preferably at the expense of Western powers, like France and the United States. There is less research, however, into the demand for these companies and services.

With the ongoing spread and lethality of violent extremism across the continent and both entrenched and emerging sub-state conflicts, the need for effective security assistance to Africa has never been greater. Despite their sales pitch, Russian PMCs’ track record combatting terrorism in Africa is dismal. In fact, they have worsened human security, exacerbated economic inequality and corruption, undermined democratic contests, shored up and accelerated authoritarianism, and subverted traditional multi- and bilateral security assistance.¹¹ With such destabilizing first and

⁷ Jason Burke, “Wagner Mercenaries will not be Withdrawn from Africa, says Russia,” *The Guardian*, June 26, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/26/wagner-soldiers-will-not-be-withdrawn-from-africa-says-russia-foreign-minister>.

⁸ Pjotr Sauer, “Wagner Making ‘Africa Even More Free,’ Says Prigozhin in First Post-Rebellion Video,” *The Guardian*, August 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/22/wagner-prigozhin-recruiting-post-russia-rebellion-video-africa-putin>.

⁹ “Kremlin says Prigozhin Plane may have been Downed on Purpose,” Reuters, August 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-prigozhin-plane-crash-may-have-been-caused-deliberately-2023-08-30/>; Emma Burrows and Aamer Madhani, “US Intelligence says an Intentional Explosion brought down Wagner Chief Prigozhin’s Plane,” AP, August 24, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-wagner-prigozhin-jet-crash-382515214f691e47daa2e3635d64e612#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20AP%29%20E2%80%94%20A%20preliminary%20U.S.%20intelligence%20assessment,Russian%20president%20was%20the%20architect%20of%20the%20assassination>.

¹⁰ Note: In case studies, we refer to the group in time-appropriate names, using Wagner for activities preceding August 2023, and Africa Corps for activities after August 2023. John Lechner, “Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?” *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/07/africa-corps-wagner-group-russia-africa-burkina-faso/>.

¹¹ “Mali: New Atrocities by Malian Army, Apparent Wagner Fighters,” Human Rights Watch, July 24, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/mali-new-atrocities-malian-army-apparent-wagner-fighters>; Philip Obaji Jr., “This Is How Russia is Pulling Off a Free-for-All Murderous Rampage,” *Daily Beast*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/this-is-how-russia-is-pulling-off-a-free-for-all-murderous-rampage-in-central-african-republic>; Kyran Goodison, “Russia in the Central African Republic: Exploitation Under the Guise of Intervention,” *Philologia* 11, no. 1 (2019): 34–42; Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, “Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali,” ACLED (website), August 30, 2022, Key Trends section, <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/>; Peter Fabricius, “Wagner Is Being

second order effects, identifying where Russian PMCs may establish a foothold next can shape U.S. and other nations' approaches to supporting African security needs in the near term.

In this report, we provide a preliminary analysis of the factors that might make an African government more receptive to overtures from a Russian PMC, like Africa Corps. Using qualitative case studies of 4 countries where Russian PMCs are (or were) confirmed to be active and 2 where they have not, we identify 12 characteristics associated with a state being both attractive and receptive to Russian PMC intervention. We then propose and apply a potential framework for identifying countries that could solicit or accept Russian PMCs in the future. Although we recommend the development of a more sophisticated model, our tentative findings suggest that countries exhibiting these characteristics, and therefore falling into an at-risk category include Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan—many of which have been longtime U.S. partners in security. Russia's successful leveraging of PMCs and the parallel benefits they offer to woo once-stalwart U.S. partners, such as Niger, to its hybridized model of security support should generate concern and caution, rather than confidence, about other U.S. partnerships in the region.¹²

Used in Africa as a Proxy to Target Civilians,” Institute for Security Studies, September 16, 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/wagner-is-being-used-in-africa-as-a-proxy-to-target-civilians>; Sarah Daly, “Russia’s Influence in Africa: A Security Perspective,” Atlantic Council, February 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Daly_Russias-influence-in-Africa-a-security-perspective.pdf; Anton Troianovski, Declan Walsh, Eric Schmitt, Vivian Yee, and Julian Barnes, “After Prigozhin’s Death, a High States Scramble for His Empire,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-africa.html>; Carol Valade, “In Africa, the Death of Wagner’s Boss is Expected to Weaken the Group in Africa,” *Le Monde*, August 27, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/08/27/in-africa-the-death-of-wagner-s-boss-isn-t-expected-to-weaken-the-group_6110792_124.html.

¹² Chris Ewokor and Kathryn Armstrong, “Russian Troops Arrive in Niger as Military Agreement Begins,” *BBC*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68796359>

2. Demand for Russian PMCs in Africa

The private military and security sector in Africa is diverse, and includes companies based in the United States, UK, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, Hong Kong, and Russia. PMCs offering combat and operational support recruit from all over the world, and they deploy in support of foreign governments, as contractors to non-governmental organizations, and as site and personnel protection units for private companies. In Africa, the return of PMCs to combat zones has followed the rise in Islamist-linked insurgencies across the continent. Budgetary and capacity shortfalls have rendered militaries under-resourced and, in some cases, under-prepared to address threats posed by sub-state conflict. For the last two decades, most security cooperation and support has come from Western countries, such as the United States and France. Following political and security failures in recent years, the West is facing pushback on the means and conditions of its security cooperation and aid from African partners. While multilateral bodies, such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS), have deployed regional forces to some success, formidable security challenges remain. PMCs bridge capability gaps, as, for example, the South-Africa-based STTEP, which deployed successfully in 2015 against Boko Haram in Nigeria.¹³ PMCs are potentially quicker to field and more controllable than multilateral forces and have historically been more amenable to payment in kind for cash-strapped governments. But the increased privatization of the security sector has generated risks that new demands for regulation, transparency, and accountability at the United Nations (UN) and the AU are trying to mitigate.¹⁴

¹³ STTEP, a successor of the now-defunct PMC Executive Outcomes, deployed to Nigeria beginning in December 2014 and facilitated the coordination of doctrine, training, and equipment for Nigerian forces in areas of operation against Boko Haram. Two hundred and fifty contractors provided operational planning and coordination, as well as combat and close air support. While the deployment was cut short at the request of Western donors, during its 3 months in Nigeria, STTEP helped Nigerian forces re-establish control over large swaths of territory and reduce Boko Haram's ability to carry out attacks. *See*: Christopher Kinsey and Andreas Krieg, "Assembling a Force to Defeat Boko Haram: How Nigeria Integrated the Market into its Counterinsurgency Strategy," *Defense & Security Analysis* 37, no. 2 (2021); and Caroline Varin, "Turning the Tides of War: The Impact of Private Military and Security Companies on Nigeria's Counterinsurgency Against Boko Haram," *African Security Review*, July 20, 2018.

¹⁴ "Mercenaries, Private Military Contractors Can Destabilize Rule of Law, Expert Tells Third Committee, amid Calls to End Racism, Respect Migrant Rights," United Nations, GA/SHC/4246, October 30, 2018, <https://press.un.org/en/2018/gashc4246.doc.htm>; Molly Bodurtha, "An Obligation to Regulate: How Private Military Companies Embolden Conflict with Impunity from the Middle East to Central Africa," *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.jtl.columbia.edu/bulletin-blog/an-obligation-to-regulate-how-private-military-companies-embolden-conflict-with-impunity-from-the-middle-east-to-central-africa>; Jelena Aparac, "'PMSC Treaty'—Why We Need an International Legally Binding Instrument to Regulate Private Military and Security Companies," Cambridge Core Blog, May 30, 2023,

The risks associated with Russian PMCs are specific and acute. Unlike fully privatized security contractors, Russian PMCs operate in close coordination with the state. While Russian PMCs provide security and military training and assistance to client states, they also establish and manage a collection of companies to provide secondary services for African government clients, such as electioneering and political consultation, information operations, resource extraction, and facilitating deals for Russian state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in other sectors.¹⁵ Many of these services are especially designed to enrich vested parties or shore up leaders and regimes by undermining democratic processes and insulating them from the effects of sanctions. In addition, Russian PMCs may be attractive to client states because they facilitate broader bilateral relations with Russia. They also provide security services without the strings that so often accompany multilateral or Western assistance. These services indicate that there are specific characteristics that make certain states appealing clients for Russian PMCs, and vice versa.

We hypothesize that some of the factors that make a country more attractive to Russian PMCs include: the presence of extractive and strategic industries or lootable resources and the possibility for diplomatic alignment. We borrow the term “lootability” from the political-economy literature to refer to a characteristic of high-value commodities with low or few barriers to market entry. For example, alluvial diamonds are more “lootable” than oil.¹⁶ The lootability of a specific country’s resources may also relate to market regulations and corruption. On the demand side, the factors that might increase a government’s receptivity include: active conflict or the presence of physical threats, regime insecurity, corruption, and weak or weakening bilateral and multilateral engagements. Russia may seek to prime states to these conditions using information campaigns—in fact, research indicates that Russia is specifically targeting countries receiving U.S., French, or UN security aid with propaganda.¹⁷ States without pressing security needs and where there are high levels of transparency and regulation around extractive and other strategic industries, active civil society, and strong international security partnerships are less likely to seek out PMC support in general—let alone from Russia.

To better identify trends in the characteristics of client states, we analyzed four countries with confirmed Russian PMC presence (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan) and two countries without (Botswana and Kenya). We collected data around four factors hypothesized to

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/blog/2023/05/30/pmsc-treaty-why-we-need-an-international-legally-binding-instrument-to-regulate-private-military-and-security-companies/>.

¹⁵ Miriam Roday and Sarah Daly, “Information Operations: An Understudied Facet of Russian Influence in Africa,” *Foreign Policy News*, December 25, 2021, <https://foreignpolicynews.org/2021/12/25/information-operations-an-understudied-facet-of-russian-influence-in-africa/>; David Patrikarakos, “Russia’s Hunger War,” *The Atlantic*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/russian-disinformation-africa-food-crisis/670570/>.

¹⁶ R. Snyder, “Does Lootable Wealth Breed Disorder?: A Political Economy of Extraction Framework,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 39(8), 2006: 943–968, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006288724>.

¹⁷ “Mapping a Surge of Misinformation in Africa,” The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 13, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>.

impact a government’s receptiveness to Russian PMCs: governance, presence of active conflict, resource lootability, and foreign relations, assessed in a simplified, baseline framework relying on 11 indicators (outlined in the table below). We pulled some of these data from existing annual indices, such as those released by the Global Terrorism Index, Freedom House, Transparency International, and Afrobarometer. Other indicators, notably those associated with foreign relations, required targeted open-source research.¹⁸ An overview of these data in relation to our four positive case studies for the year in which they received Russian PMCs is presented below.

RECEPTIVE COUNTRIES		B. Faso (2023)	Mali (2021)	Mozambique (2019)	Sudan (2017)
Governance	Freedom House Designation	Not Free	Not Free	Partly Free	Not Free
	Regime Type	Autocracy	Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy	Autocracy
	Criminality Impact on State Institutions	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant
	Corruption	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Active Conflict	Annual fatalities	8474	4478*	324*	927*
	Terrorism threat	High	High	High	None
Lootable Resources	Mineral Rents (% of GDP)	15.5%	16.2%	0.1%	0.7%
	Extractive Industries	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Posture toward Russia	Non-Russian Security Assistance Rejected/Withdrawn	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Security Agreement with Russia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Sanctions	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Russian Info-Ops	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

¹⁸ See sources for indicators in Appendix A: Methodology.

While each of the receptive country cases is unique, there are some similarities: all are classified as autocratic regimes, rank high on the state fragility index, and are designated as not or partially free in terms of political freedoms and civil liberties. All four countries have extractive industries and rank high in terms of criminality and corruption. Of note, the changes in key indicators over time are also consistent—all four countries have experienced a decrease in democratic indicators over the past 5 years and positive, often significant, increases in mineral rents.¹⁹ All face active internal conflict, with three combatting violent extremist groups, and one engaged in civil war. As their conflicts intensified, Burkina Faso and Mali exited multilateral security bodies and rejected longstanding French and U.S. security assistance. Similarly, Mozambique resisted multilateral interventions and foreign security assistance at the outset of its insurgency, and only allowed a bilateral intervention from Rwanda, followed by a multilateral intervention from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) after multiple PMC contracts failed to improve security. Notably, Mozambique scores higher in terms of democracy and freedom, and lower in lootability—and it is the only contemporary case in Africa where a state terminated its contract with Wagner following the PMC’s poor performance. The Mozambique case may indicate that higher freedom scores and lower lootability provide some resilience against full receptivity toward or dependence upon Russian PMCs. We also see a significant contrast with the unreceptive country case studies.

Our negative test cases, Botswana and Kenya—selected because neither has solicited nor received Russian PMC support, but also because they differ qualitatively from positive cases and from each other—demonstrate varying degrees of resilience (see table below). Botswana has little use for a PMC during peacetime, and it scores high in democracy, freedom, and peace indicators. Kenya also ranks higher than our four receptive case countries in democracy and freedom, but lower than Botswana. Kenya also faces an ongoing threat from the Al-Shabaab violent extremist organization internally as well as at and across the border in Somalia. These factors suggest that Kenya may be more vulnerable than Botswana to Russian PMC solicitation, but overall, much less vulnerable than countries with more pronounced shortfalls in democracy, peace, public accountability, and transparency.

¹⁹ Mineral rents refer to the difference between the cost of producing minerals and the total value that these minerals yield, and is expressed as a percentage of GDP. Essentially, the mineral rents are the profit value of the minerals—the higher the percentage, the more a country relies on their extraction for revenue.

UNRECEPTIVE COUNTRIES		Botswana (2024)	Kenya (2024)
Governance	Freedom House Designation	Free	Partly Free
	Regime Type	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
	Corruption	Moderate	Low
	Criminality Impact on State Institutions	Little/Moderate	Significant
Active Conflict	Annual fatalities	6	893
	Terrorism threat	None	High
Lootable Resources	Mineral Rents (% of GDP)	24.2%	0.6%
	Extractive Industries	Yes	No
Posture toward Russia	Non-Russian Security Asst. Rejected or Withdrawn	No	No
	Security Agreement with Russia	No	No
	Sanctions	No	No
	Russian Info-Ops	No	No

3. Comparative Analysis

A. Sudan

Around 2017, Wagner began establishing a presence in Sudan as part of a Russian Federation effort to win support from then-President Omar al-Bashir for the development of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan and the approval of gold mining licenses.²⁰ Wagner's entrée into Sudan corresponded to increased diplomatic and military ties between Khartoum and Moscow. Russian paramilitaries and affiliated companies executed mixed media information operations to discredit protests against President al-Bashir in 2018 and 2019, and they advised the President's government on responses to the demonstrations.²¹ Wagner then came under scrutiny for its support (and alleged advocacy) for the government's violent crackdown on protestors. This resulted in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarifying that PMCs were operating in Sudan to conduct security force training and denying links between PMC activities in Sudan and official Russian military activities.²² Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Security Service has alleged that Russian military Tu-154M aircraft transported Wagner members to Sudan.²³

Despite al-Bashir's eventual ouster in 2019 and Sudan's persistent political unrest, Wagner continued to forge inroads, securing and operating gold mining sites, as well as maneuvering forces through bases in Sudan's Darfur region to conduct operations and activities in neighboring countries.²⁴ Wagner's presence in Sudan has sparked concern over violations of human rights as

²⁰ Miriam Roday and Sarah Daly, "Information Operations: An Understudied Facet of Russian Influence in Africa," *Foreign Policy News*, December 25, 2021, <https://foreignpolicynews.org/2021/12/25/information-operations-an-understudied-facet-of-russian-influence-in-africa/>; Declan Walsh, "'From Russia with Love': A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>.

²¹ Samuel Ramani, "Moscow's Hand in Sudan's Future," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 11, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79488>; Roman Popkov, "'Public Executions of Marauders and Other Spectacular Events': Advice from Prigozhin's People to the Deposed Dictator," MBK News, April 25, 2019, <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/rassled/soveti-ludej-prigozhina/>.

²² "Russian Contractors are Training the Army in Sudan, Says Moscow," Reuters, January 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-sudan-contractors/russian-contractors-are-training-the-army-in-sudan-says-moscow-idUSKCN1PH23T>.

²³ A. McGregor, "Russian Mercenaries and the Survival of the Sudanese Regime," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, issue 15 (February 6, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-mercenaries-and-the-survival-of-the-sudanese-regime/>.

²⁴ Declan Walsh, "'From Russia with Love': A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>; "Wagner Mercenaries Terrorizing Sudanese Gold Miners," *Africa Defense Forum* magazine, July 19, 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/07/wagner-group-terrorizing-sudanese-gold-miners/>; Oscar Rickett, "Russia's Wagner Group 'Getting Rich in Sudan' from Gold Mines and Government," *Middle East Eye*, June 7,

well as international sanctions. In 2022, Wagner became increasingly associated with Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which provided security in mining areas and border security across multiple illicit shipment routes.²⁵ Following the outbreak of civil conflict between Sudan's ruling junta and the RSF in mid-2023, reports indicated that Wagner was supplying RSF with equipment, including through its bases in Libya.²⁶ Notwithstanding Wagner's close alliance with the RSF, both of Sudan's warring parties have longstanding ties to Russia. The current leader of the military government in Sudan and the leader of the RSF had both previously funneled Sudanese gold into Russia's war chests in support of its war against Ukraine.²⁷ As of March 2024, Russian PMC involvement in Sudan is ongoing and has even lured Ukraine into the fight in Sudan.²⁸

Sudan's extensive history of sanctions and the absence of U.S. security cooperation and financial support has left it vulnerable to offers of support from Russian PMCs. Sudan's non-participation in international financial institutions and the absence of internal transparency mechanisms makes it difficult to confirm the extent of its military spending or the true amount of its trade relationship with Russia, although Russia and Sudan signed a bilateral security cooperation agreement in 2019 at the Sochi Russia-Africa Summit, which they renewed in February 2022. Sudan also has extensive natural resources, notably oil and gold. Russian state media reported in 2023 that state-owned oil entities Rosneft and Zarubezhneft were in talks with Sudan, and that "several Russian firms are already operating in Sudan's oil and gas sector."²⁹ Wagner and affiliated parastatal organizations, like Meroe Gold and M Invest, are well-established in Sudan's gold sector. These two intermediaries were sanctioned by the U.S. Department of State in 2023 for "terror financing, money laundering activities, sanctions evasion, human rights and labor rights abuses and environmental degradation," and they reportedly enjoyed close ties to

2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-russia-wagner-group-getting-rich-gold-mines-government-partnership>; Ahmed Elbassoussy, "The Growing Russian Role in Sub-Saharan Africa: Interests, Opportunities and Limitations," *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences*, April 6, 2021, accessed via: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JHASS-11-2020-0210/full/html>.

²⁵ "Russian Mercenaries in Sudan: What is the Wagner Group's Role?" *Aljazeera*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/17/what-is-the-wagner-groups-role-in-sudan>.

²⁶ Nima Elbagir, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Tamara Qiblawi, and Barbara Arvanitidis, "Evidence Emerges of Russia's Wagner Arming Militia Leader Battling Sudan's Army," CNN, April 21, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/20/africa/wagner-sudan-russia-libya-intl/index.html>; "US Accuses Wagner Group of Supplying Missiles to Sudan's RSF," *Aljazeera*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/25/us-accuses-wagner-group-of-supplying-missiles-to-sudans-rsf>.

²⁷ Jessica Berlin, David Clement, Lanre Peter Elufisan, Zoltan Kesz, and Elizabeth Hicks, "The Blood Gold Report," December 2023, <https://bloodgoldreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/The-Blood-Gold-Report-2023-December.pdf>.

²⁸ Ian Lovett and Nicholas Bariyo, "Ukraine is Now Fighting Russia in Sudan," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/ukraine-is-now-fighting-russia-in-sudan-87caf1d8>.

²⁹ "Sudan to Enhance Cooperation with Russia in Oil Production, Energy Ministry Says," Sputnik International, March 3, 2023, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20230303/sudan-to-enhance-cooperation-with-russia-in-oil-production-energy-ministry-says-1107986406.html>; "Sudan Boosting Energy Ties with Moscow," *RT*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.rt.com/africa/572389-sudan-russia-oil-production-cooperation/>.

Sudanese Military Intelligence.³⁰ Wagner’s activity in other extractive industries, such as diamonds and uranium, is also widely reported.

The extent of Sudan’s national debt—128% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2023—dwarfs all the other countries in this study and points to clear vulnerability to the illicit fundraising offered by Russian PMC models of mutual exploitation. Correspondingly, Sudan’s mineral rents as a percentage of GDP have been steadily rising since 2019—from 2.7% to 6.6% in 2021.³¹ They are likely to be higher now that the demand for easily laundered funds from the mining sector is pressing for both Sudanese and Russian security forces.

B. Mali

Wagner launched in Mali in December 2021 with an official remit to train Malian security forces. Reporting indicates that in addition to security training, Wagner provided combat support, assisting Mali’s battle against Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The group’s subsequent activities, however, included fomenting anti-French sentiment and site securitization for gold mining projects.³² As in Sudan, Wagner’s activities in Mali resulted in international condemnation based on reports of extensive human rights violations and sanctions for weapons trafficking.³³

In August 2022, France completed its withdrawal from Mali to end Operation Barkhane—a counterterrorism effort that began in 2013 but struggled to reduce violence or establish peace. Malian resentment over France’s failures, inflamed by Russian propaganda, led to dissension between Bamako and Paris.³⁴ This was compounded by back-to-back coups in Mali in August 2020 and May 2021. One month after Wagner arrived in Mali in December 2021, the interim junta demanded that French troops leave the country. In June 2023, Mali also ordered the UN Mission

³⁰ “Africa Gold Advisory,” U.S. Department of State, June 27, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/africa-gold-advisory/>; Khadija Sharife, Lara Dihmis, Erin Klazar, et al., “Documents Reveal Wagner’s Golden Ties to Sudanese Military Companies,” OCCRP, November 2, 2022, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/documents-reveal-wagners-golden-ties-to-sudanese-military-companies>.

³¹ “Mineral Rents (% of GDP)—Sudan,” World Bank, Updated 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MINR.RT.ZS?locations=SD>.

³² Benjamin Roger, “Au Mali, la Rueé vers L’Ors des Mercenaires de Wagner,” *Jeune Afrique*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1451811/politique/au-mali-la-ruee-vers-lor-des-mercenaires-de-wagner/>; Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee, and Joseph Bermudez Jr., “Tracking the Arrival of Russia’s Wagner Group in Mali,” CSIS, February 2, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>.

³³ Nima Elbagir and Eve Brennan, “US Sanctions Wagner in Mali, Confirms CNN Investigation on Support to Sudan Paramilitaries,” CNN, May 26, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/26/africa/us-wagner-sanctions-mali-intl/index.html>; Zane Irwin and Sam Mednick, “Mali’s Army and Suspected Russia-Linked Mercenaries Committed ‘New Atrocities,’ Rights Group Says,” *AP*, July 24, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-human-rights-abuses-wagner-military-fulani-19a045521448453dd9ecb5b464941955>.

³⁴ Beverly Ochieng, “Lavrov in Africa: Have Wanger Mercenaries Helped Mali’s Fight Against Jihadists?” *BBC News*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64555169>.

in Mali (MINUSMA) to vacate. And in early 2024, Mali announced (alongside Niger and Burkina Faso) that it would be exiting ECOWAS.³⁵

This shift also corresponded to increased formal bilateral arrangements between Russia and Mali. The two countries signed official security cooperation agreements in 2019 and 2022, and in February 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Bamako. Russian arms exports to Mali have also sharply increased since 2019, from \$12 million to \$41 million in 2022.³⁶ Since at least 2014, Russia's Nordgold has had a formal stake in Mali's mining sector, with other companies and actors heavily involved across Mali's extractive industries, including in illicit mining and smuggling schemes.³⁷ The extent of Russian entanglement in Mali's critical sectors is highly concerning in light of Mali's reliance on the extractive industry and its poor ranking on indices for corruption and governance—pointing to a significant degree of lootability.

Mali has significant natural resource wealth, and its mineral rents as a percentage of GDP have jumped precipitously from 5.7% in 2019 to 16.2% in 2021, suggesting a non-sustainable pattern of use that could rapidly deplete extractive resources and outpace efforts to regulate.³⁸ High levels of corruption indicate weak and deteriorating governance.³⁹ According to the Global Organized Crime Index, arms trafficking is rife in Mali, and it appears that Russia may be exploiting this vulnerability to funnel weapons through PMCs in Mali to its front in Ukraine.⁴⁰ All of these factors have contributed to state fragility and poor security. The country's current position, excluded and criticized by West African institutions and resistant to calls to restore civilian governance, mean it will likely continue to rely on Russian PMCs for support of all kinds.⁴¹

C. Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso has also been battling al-Qaida and Islamic State (IS)-linked insurgencies for almost a decade. In the past few years, however, violence has escalated, and in 2023, Burkina Faso

³⁵ "Proposed ECOWAS Exits Leave West Africa at a Crossroads," Institute for Security Studies, February 8, 2024, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/proposed-ecowas-exits-leave-west-africa-at-a-crossroads>.

³⁶ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

³⁷ Samuel Ramani, "Why Russia is a Geopolitical Winner in Mali's Coup," Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 16, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/why-russia-is-a-geopolitical-winner-in-malis-coup/>

³⁸ "Mineral Rents (% of GDP)," World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MINR.RT.ZS>.

³⁹ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*, 2023, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/mli>.

⁴⁰ Nima Elbagir and Eve Brennan, "US Sanctions Wagner in Mali, Confirms CNN Investigation on Support to Sudan Paramilitaries," CNN, May 26, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/26/africa/us-wagner-sanctions-mali-intl/index.html>.

⁴¹ DW, "West African Leaders Agree on Sanctions After Mali Coup," November 1, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/mali-west-african-leaders-agree-on-sanctions-after-coup/a-60374148#:~:text=Leaders%20of%20the%20Economic%20Community%20of%20West%20African,all%20land%20and%20air%20borders%20with%20the%20country.>

topped the Global Terrorism Index with over 258 incidents and 1,907 confirmed fatalities.⁴² Despite the worsening security situation, Burkina Faso’s military junta, in power since January 2022, demanded the withdrawal of French counter-terrorism troops in early 2023. Around this time, a slurry of Russian information operations targeted Sahelian audiences with pro-Russia messaging and pro-Russia and anti-France signs and slogans cropped up at protests in Ouagadougou.⁴³

These developments prompted conjecture that Russian PMCs would soon arrive. Burkina Faso denied the existence of any such plans until May 2023, when the junta’s executive secretary acknowledged that Russian instructors were training Burkinabé forces—although did not specify whether this was through formal bilateral military cooperation or a PMC.⁴⁴ Then, in January 2024, 100 “military specialists” from the newly constituted Africa Corps arrived in Ouagadougou “with weapons and equipment” to conduct training and patrols as well as to provide personal protection for junta leader Captain Ibrahim Traoré, with plans to deploy 200 more in the near future.⁴⁵ Burkina Faso’s receptivity to this development was heralded by weak governance, warm bilateral relations with Russia, lootability, and a track record of security out-sourcing.

After successive coups in 2022, Burkina Faso’s regime is characterized as a closed autocracy, and governance is further hindered by high degrees of corruption, criminality, and state fragility. Russia and Burkina Faso signed a bilateral security cooperation agreement in 2018, and Russian media touted good relations with transitional leaders in Burkina Faso following both coups.⁴⁶ Russia has also provided training and weapons to Burkinabé forces by way of its support to the G5 Sahel Force.⁴⁷ In 2023, Russia-owned Rosatom signed an agreement with Burkina Faso to cooperate on nuclear energy.⁴⁸ Russian companies have long played a role in Burkina Faso’s

⁴² “Global Terrorism Index,” Vision of Humanity, Updated 2024, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>.

⁴³ Heni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, “Oil on the Jihadi Fire: The Repercussions of a Wagner Group Deployment to Burkina Faso,” *CTC Sentinel* 16, no.1 (January 2023), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/oil-on-the-jihadi-fire-the-repercussions-of-a-wagner-group-deployment-to-burkina-faso/>.

⁴⁴ “With France Out, Analysts Expect Wagner Mercenaries to Move into Burkina Faso,” *ADF*, May 9, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/05/with-france-out-analysts-expect-wagner-mercenaries-to-move-into-burkina-faso/>.

⁴⁵ “Burkina Faso Opens Door for Russia’s Africa Corps,” *Africa Defense Forum*, February 20, 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/02/burkina-faso-opens-door-for-russias-africa-corps/>.

⁴⁶ “Nataliya Bugayova, Jack Ulses, and Chase Johnson, “The Kremlin’s Campaign in Africa,” Institute for the Study of War, October 18, 2018, https://www.iswresearch.org/2018/10/the-kremlins-campaign-in-africa_18.html; “Burkina Faso Prioritizes Defense Cooperation with Russia,” *Sputnik International*, March 22, 2023, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20230322/burkina-faso-prioritizes-defense-cooperation-with-russia-1108678346.html>.

⁴⁷ “Russia to Support G5 Sahel Group by Providing Weapons, Training, Peacekeepers –Lavrov,” *TASS*, December 7, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1371879>.

⁴⁸ “Burkina Faso Signs Agreement with Russia for Nuclear Power Plant,” *France24*, October 13, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20231013-burkina-faso-signs-agreement-with-russia-for-nuclear-power-plant>.

extractive sector, particularly in gold. There are several worrying signs that Burkina Faso has a high “lootability” factor that would make it an attractive target for predatory Russian PMCs. Burkina Faso’s extractive sector provides significant portions of the country’s wealth, and as in Mali, Burkinabè mineral rents as percentage of GDP rose substantially from 3.4% in 2019 to 15.5% in 2021.

Russian company Nordgold shut down a mine in Taparko in 2022 due to insecurity and pressure from U.S. sanctions, but it continues to operate two other gold mines in the country.⁴⁹ Insecurity at mines and logistical sites in 2022 prompted calls to hire PMCs to provide personnel and facility security for mining enterprises.⁵⁰ Although the Burkinabé junta denies asking Russian PMCs to provide mixed security services in connection to Russian gold holdings, Ghanaian officials asserted that Wagner took charge of a mine in southern Burkina Faso as payment for its services to the military junta in 2022, though Ghana later rescinded these allegations.⁵¹ In the past, Burkina Faso has relied on security and combat support from other PMC firms based in Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Romania.⁵² Given the current situation of escalating violence and instability, and its recent decision to withdraw from ECOWAS, it seems likely that the Burkinabé junta will increase its partnerships with Africa Corps and other Russian parastatal organizations to retain and project a semblance of control domestically.

D. Mozambique

In 2019, several hundred Wagner troops arrived in Mozambique to assist the Mozambican Army (FADM) in its battle against an IS-linked insurgency in the northern Cabo Delgado region. The deployment was short-lived, largely due to a lack of operational success and Wagner’s inability to effectively train or integrate with FADM partners. Nevertheless, Wagner’s arrival in Mozambique corresponded to a number of bilateral agreements and other types of collaboration between the Mozambican state and Russian PMCs. At this time, Mozambique was also dealing with intermittent armed resistance from opposition groups, straining the capacity of its military and contributing to political unrest in the country.

⁴⁹ “Burkina Faso Denies Paying Russian Mercenaries with Gold Mine Rights Granted to Nordgold,” *The North Africa Post*, February 6, 2023, <https://northafricapost.com/65017-burkina-faso-denies-paying-russian-mercenaries-with-gold-mine-rights-granted-to-nordgold.html>.

⁵⁰ Heni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, “Oil on the Jihadi Fire: The Repercussions of a Wagner Group Deployment to Burkina Faso,” *CTC Sentinel* 16, no.1 (January 2023), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/oil-on-the-jihadi-fire-the-repercussions-of-a-wagner-group-deployment-to-burkina-faso/>.

⁵¹ David Pilling and Aanu Adeoye, “Burkina Faso Latest to ‘Hire Russian Mercenaries,’ Ghana Alleges,” *Financial Times*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/8ff6b17e-a782-4345-9f0f-853d037fe63c>; Josef Skrdlik, “Burkina Faso Denies Hiring Wagner Mercenaries,” OCCRP, December 23, 2022, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/17204-burkina-faso-denies-hiring-wagner-mercenaries>.

⁵² Heni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, “Oil on the Jihadi Fire: The Repercussions of a Wagner Group Deployment to Burkina Faso,” *CTC Sentinel* 16, no.1 (January 2023), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/oil-on-the-jihadi-fire-the-repercussions-of-a-wagner-group-deployment-to-burkina-faso/>.

Mozambique has longstanding diplomatic, trade, and security relations with Moscow.⁵³ Russia's re-emergence in Africa in the mid-to-late 2010s coincided with the 2017 emergence of a violent insurgent group Al-Sunnah wa Jamo (ASWJ) in Cabo Delgado. Mozambique launched a counter-offensive against ASWJ in May 2018, which was unsuccessful and plagued by concerns over indiscriminate violence against local populations.⁵⁴ Mozambique solicited PMC bids sometime around summer 2019, and appears to have sought specific assistance in aerial tactical support, intelligence gathering, and transport capabilities—likely due to capability and capacity gaps in Mozambique's modest air force.

The contract was awarded to Wagner in late August 2019.⁵⁵ Local media reports indicate that between 150 and 200 soldiers (likely a mix of Russian military and Wagner personnel) were on the ground by September. The Kremlin emphatically denied that Russian military were operating in Mozambique, and characterized its defense support as non-operational “consultations.”⁵⁶ While Russian military support in Cabo Delgado was—at least officially—limited to advising roles, Wagner PMC forces were hired for and participated in kinetic operations in Cabo Delgado. In Mozambique, Wagner soldiers struggled to overcome their unfamiliarity with the local terrain as well as language and cultural barriers. Fighters were killed in ambushes and skirmishes in the following month, and suffered additional casualties as a result of friendly fire incidents involving

⁵³ Vladimir Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2008): 128–129; Central Intelligence Agency, “The Soviets in Mozambique: Is the Payoff Worth the Price?” February 1988, Declassified and released October 23, 2012, 1.

⁵⁴ “At Least 10 Beheaded in Mozambique Attack: State Radio,” Reuters, May 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mozambique-attack/at-least-10-beheaded-in-mozambique-attack-state-radio-idUSKCN1IU1L5>; Joseph Hanlon, “Mozambique: Security Forces and Rebels Attack Pundandar, Cabo Delgado,” All Africa, August 27, 2018, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201808270486.html>; Dorina Bekoe, Stephanie Burchard, and Sarah Daly, “Interpreting Group Tactics and the Role of the Government's Response in the Crisis in Cabo Delgado,” D-13155 (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2020): 12.

⁵⁵ “Russian Military Hardware Delivered to Mozambique,” DefenceWeb, September 27, 2019, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/russian-military-hardware-delivered-to-mozambique/>; “Unmarked Gazelle Helicopters Spotted in Mozambique,” DefenceWeb, August 12, 2019, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/aerospace/military-helicopters/unmarked-gazelle-helicopters-spotted-in-mozambique/>.

⁵⁶ “Russian Military Hardware Delivered to Mozambique,” DefenceWeb, September 27, 2019, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/russian-military-hardware-delivered-to-mozambique/>.

FADM forces.⁵⁷ Wagner fell back to its main base further south in Nacala in November, and it pulled out of Cabo Delgado altogether in March 2020.⁵⁸

In the intervening years, Mozambique engaged other PMCs from southern Africa to assist in its counter-terrorism operations in Cabo Delgado before capitulating to international pressure to allow for training, advising, and combat missions from a regional composite force from SADC, as well as from other external partners, such as Rwanda and France. Wagner was originally selected during a time of increased cooperation between Moscow and Maputo. Russia and Mozambique signed official bilateral defense cooperation agreements in 2015 and 2018.⁵⁹ In 2019, additional security and energy agreements, including docking permission for Russian military vessels at Mozambican ports, debt forgiveness, security advisory services, licensed liquified natural gas (LNG) exploration for Rosneft, and agreements for geological surveys by Alrosa, were signed after President Filipe Nyusi made an official state visit to Russia in August, and his subsequent attendance of the inaugural Russia-Africa Summit in October 2019.⁶⁰ In addition to these public deals, Wagner-linked firms appeared to provide political strategy consultations, security, and influence campaigns ahead of Nyusi's re-election in 2019.⁶¹

⁵⁷ “Insurgentes Emboscaram e Mataram 20 membros das FDS e Cinco Russos,” Carta da Moçambique, October 29, 2020, <https://cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/3469-insurgentes-emboscaram-e-mataram-20-membros-das-fds-e-cinco-russos>; Pjotr Sauer, “7 Kremlin-Linked Mercenaries Killed in Mozambique in October- Military Sources,” *The Moscow Times*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/31/7-kremlin-linked-mercenaries-killed-in-mozambique-in-october-sources-a67996>; Jane Flanagan, “Bloodshed and Retreat from Mozambique for Putin’s Private Army the Wagner Group,” *The Times*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bloodshed-and-retreat-from-mozambique-for-putin-s-private-army-the-wagner-group-696tnpzqh>.

⁵⁸ Peter Fabricius, “Wagner Private Military Force Licks Wounds in Northern Mozambique,” *Daily Maverick*, November 29, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-11-29-wagner-private-military-force-licks-wounds-in-northern-mozambique/>; Steve Balestrieri, “Wagner Group: Russian Mercenaries Still Floundering in Africa,” *SOFREP*, April 19, 2020, <https://sofrep.com/news/wagner-group-russian-mercenaries-still-floundering-in-africa/>; “Private Military Contractors Appear to be Active in Mozambique,” *DefenceWeb*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/private-military-contractors-appear-to-be-active-in-mozambique>.

⁵⁹ Sergey Sukhankin, “Russia Prepares a Foothold in Mozambique: Risks and Opportunities,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 142, October 15, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-prepares-a-foothold-in-mozambique-risks-and-opportunities/>.

⁶⁰ Sergey Sukhankin, “Russian Private Military Contractors in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strengths, Limitations and Implications,” *Notes de L’Ifri: Russie NeiVisions* 120, September 2020, 22, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/sukhankin_russian_private_military_contractors_africa_2020.pdf; “Mozambique, Russia Sign Energy, Security Deals,” *Outlook India*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/mozambique-russia-sign-energy-security-deals/1602542>; “Russian Military Hardware Delivered to Mozambique,” *DefenceWeb*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/russian-military-hardware-delivered-to-mozambique/>; Fernando Lima, “Understanding Current Mozambique-Russia Relations,” *Zitamar News*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.zitamar.com/understanding-current-mozambique-russia-relations/>.

⁶¹ Sergey Sukhankin, “Russian Private Military Contractors in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strengths, Limitations and Implications,” *Notes de L’Ifri: Russie NeiVisions* 120, September 2020, 22, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/sukhankin_russian_private_military_contractors_africa_2020.pdf; Dércio Tsanzana, “Has Russia Influenced the General Elections in Mozambique?” *Global Voices AdVox*, December 24, 2019, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/12/24/has-russia-influenced-the-general-elections-in->

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian-Mozambican relations have remained strong. Mozambique has abstained from UN votes condemning the invasion, and endorsed Russia's intent to cooperate with Mozambique during its 2023–2024 term on the UN Security Council. Mozambique hosted two high-level visits from Russia in 2023, including from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in May and from the Secretary of the Russian Security Council (Nikolai Patrushev) in July.⁶² Russian state media coverage of Lavrov's visit indicated that Russia was "prepared to supply" Mozambique with materiel and equipment for its ongoing war against ASWJ.⁶³ President Nyusi attended the second Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg in October 2023, where existing agreements for military-technical cooperation and trade relations in "geological projects" were highlighted.⁶⁴

Mozambique may be more receptive to Russian overtures in all sectors because it is classified as an electoral autocracy. President Nyusi's position, and that of the ruling party FRELIMO, has been somewhat precarious prior to and following contentious elections in 2019. The government's initial resistance to external assistance in its fight against ASWJ reflected the leadership's desire to rebuff possible perceptions of weakness.⁶⁵ Compounding this precarity was an enormous amount of state debt, which stood at 106.7% in 2018, following a hidden debt scandal in 2016.⁶⁶ In 2013 and 2014, the Mozambican state solicited \$2 billion in illicit loans, including \$535 million from Russian bank VTB. Reporting in 2019 indicated that Russia had forgiven some 95% of Mozambican debt. However, court filings indicate that in November 2019, Mozambique still owed \$817.5 million, and in 2020, VTB Capital sued the Mozambican government for \$670 million.⁶⁷

mozambique/; Piotr Sauer, "In Push for Africa, Russia's Wagner Mercenaries are 'Out of their Depth' in Mozambique," *The Moscow Times*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/19/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-a68220>.

⁶² "Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Visit to Mozambique," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, May 31, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1873439/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab2000c6fa83dff41bca25bcb9af1c973e29b1ac44e0f59215801e96e9d8eddc79b408683afa18143000d5d289988eb07d077d4a152da87f5cf78888949ea443c01a60bdc2468561147f3936976976e0969ed6938a563251d3d; "Meeting with President of Mozambique Filipe Jacinto Nyusi," President of Russia, July 27, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71815>.

⁶³ "Lavrov Highlights Russia's Readiness to Provide Mozambique with Military Supplies," *TASS*, May 31, 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1625869>.

⁶⁴ "Meeting with President of Mozambique Filipe Jacinto Nyusi," President of Russia, July 27, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71815>.

⁶⁵ Dorina Bekoe, Stephanie Burchard, and Sarah Daly, "Extremism in Mozambique: Interpreting Group Tactics and the Role of the Government's Response in the Crisis in Cabo Delgado," D-13156 (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2020).

⁶⁶ "Central Government Debt as Percent of GDP," IMF, Updated 2023, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/CG_DEBT_GDP@GDD/SWE/MOZ.

⁶⁷ Andrew McGregor, "Why Mozambique is Outsourcing Counter-Insurgency to Russia: Hidden Loans and Naval Bases," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 153, November 4, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/why-mozambique-is-outsourcing-counter-insurgency-to-russia-hidden-loans-and-naval-bases/>; "Mozambique and the

Mozambique is rich in natural resources, including hydrocarbons as well as more lootable resources, such as precious stones, minerals, and timber.⁶⁸ There is significant external investment and interest in these lucrative markets, although illicit trade abounds.

In light of this, it is unsurprising that Wagner secured cross-pollinating contracts with the Mozambican government in 2019. It was well-placed to work in tandem with official Russian state channels to offer Mozambique the exact array of services that it needed in 2019. Given the ongoing concerns posed by Mozambique’s level of debt, crime, corruption, and conflict, as well as Russia’s renewed vigor in maintaining defense and diplomatic ties, Russian PMC involvement—particularly in the political arena and information environment—remains a concern. However, given Wagner’s failures in 2019 and Mozambique’s engagement with SADC, Rwanda, and Western partners on security, it is unlikely that Wagner/Africa Corps or other Russian PMCs will make a reappearance in combat support capacities in Cabo Delgado.

E. Botswana

In sharp contrast, Botswana appears unlikely to be receptive to Russian PMC intervention. Russia has no active security cooperation programs with Botswana; Botswana’s military sources its weapons and materiel from France and the United States. Mining comprises some 16% of Botswana’s GDP.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Botswana’s mineral rents have actually declined over the last decade, from 1.35% in 2012 to 0.24% in 2021. While Botswana’s mined wealth includes diamonds and precious metals, mineral resource management is comparatively less corrupt than in other countries. A Russian-owned diamond mining project was bought out by public company Botswana Diamond in 2018, making this one of Africa’s most lucrative mining sectors to remain untapped by Russia. Botswana’s categorization as an electoral democracy, alongside low levels of corruption and criminality, help to insulate the country against lootability. Botswana does not currently face territorial or political threats. With a well-regulated border and the lack of hot conflict in immediately neighboring states, this peace is likely to continue. Botswana is the only case studied with no recorded violent extremist activity. According to the framework, Botswana is highly unlikely to be vulnerable to Russian PMC activities. Although it has tempting natural resources, it is also well-governed, peaceful and internally well-governed.

“Tuna Bond’ Scandal,” Spotlight on Corruption, February 9, 2021, <https://www.spotlightcorruption.org/mozambique-and-the-tuna-bond-scandal/>.

⁶⁸ Data from World Bank, <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/adjusted-net-savings/Series/NY.GDP.MINR.RT.ZS>.

⁶⁹ “Gross Domestic Product: Second Quarter of 2022,” Statistics Botswana, September 2022, <https://www.statsbots.org.bw/sites/default/files/publications/Gross%20Domestic%20Product%20Q2%202022.pdf>.

F. Kenya

At first glance, Kenya seems to be an unlikely candidate for predatory Russian PMC activities, but this analysis indicates potential vulnerabilities. Currently, there are no Russian PMC groups present in Kenya. In early 2024, Kenyan government officials decried a Russian Ministry of Defense allegation that Kenyans were fighting as mercenaries with Ukraine, emphasizing Kenya's commitment to AU restrictions against mercenaryism.⁷⁰ Russian-Kenyan cooperation exists primarily in energy sectors, as Russian SOEs have engaged with projects related to LNG pipelines, nuclear energy education, and power station development. In the absence of security cooperation or weapons sales, this bilateral cooperation does not generate concern.

Kenya has few extractive industries and is classified as an electoral democracy. Established democracies are usually poor candidates for predatory PMCs, but Kenya has significant national debt at 67.83% of GDP and has high, albeit improving, levels of corruption and criminality. The regional strain caused by conflicts in neighboring Somalia, Ethiopia, and South Sudan also render Kenya vulnerable to violent extremist attacks and border permeability pressures. Kenyan Defense Forces are deployed in Somalia, although they are due to withdraw by the end of 2024. Due to its role in combatting al-Shabaab in Somalia, Kenya has suffered high levels of terrorist activity for over a decade. While currently less acute than in the Sahel, the threat of terrorist attacks and recruitment in Kenya generates pressure on the government to address security concerns.

In sum, Kenya's electoral democracy and lack of lootable resources indicate a degree of resilience to PMC engagement, despite security challenges. Nonetheless, there are signs of vulnerability in its high levels of debt, corruption, and regional volatility. The appearance of information operations surrounding an election or the rejection of bilateral security partnerships, however, would signal a possible shift. Nevertheless, it appears that Russia will not utilize PMC actors to forge inroads in Kenya in the near term.

⁷⁰ Nick Mwangi, "Russia Claims 5 Kenyans are Fighting for Ukraine," *Nairobi Wire*, March 15, 2024, <https://nairobiwire.com/2024/03/russia-claims-5-kenyans-are-fighting-for-ukraine.html>.

4. Discussion

Based upon this analysis, we find that there are trends in the characteristics of countries that solicit or support Russian PMC interventions. Participation in active conflict or the presence of an invasive threat is a significant, but not the only, driver of demand for PMC services in Africa—Russian PMCs generally go where the conflict is. Governments facing pressing security threats are more likely to seek out security assistance from a range of sources, and therefore may be more amenable to the overtures of groups like Wagner, now Africa Corps. Conflict can include civil and substate conflicts, as well as political violence.

Over the last decade, violent extremism has spread across the continent and poses significant threats to human security and political stability. According to the Global Terrorism Index, Sub-Saharan Africa “recorded the most deaths of any region for the seventh consecutive year, with an increase of 21 per cent compared to 2022” and 5 of the top 10 most afflicted countries in the Sahel.⁷¹ Given the rapid and deadly escalation of VEO activity in the Sahel, the need for military assistance in the region is pronounced. Russian PMCs have rushed to provide this assistance, orchestrating anti-French propaganda campaigns to hasten the exit of French, AU, U.S., and UN-led counter-terrorism forces. It’s therefore no surprise that we see Russian PMC involvement in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and now Niger, as well as countries embroiled in civil war, like CAR, Libya, and Sudan.⁷² Other countries in sub-Saharan Africa currently facing territorial and human security threats from civil conflict and VEOs include: Benin, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, the DRC, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Togo, and Uganda. Our methodology suggests that the presence of active conflicts makes these countries more vulnerable to the appeal of Russian PMCs.

Other characteristics shared by our receptive cases include poor governance indicators, such as democratic backsliding, state fragility, and corruption. And while Kenya shared many of these characteristics, it lacks a quickly growing, highly lootable sector like mining to facilitate payment in kind. Countries and leaders facing international sanctions—for example, in response to a coup—are also more likely to engage a Russian PMC, both as a means to secure Russian diplomatic support against sanctions and to circumvent restrictions on weapons deliveries and funding. Countries likely to engage a Russian PMC also tend to have multi-sector bilateral ties to Russia. There also appear to be some warning signs that a country is *already* engaging with Russian PMCs,

⁷¹ Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2024,” February 2024, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>.

⁷² Elliot Smith, “Wagner Group Expands into Africa’s Sahel with a New Brand,” CNBC, February 12, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/02/12/russias-wagner-group-expands-into-africas-sahel-with-a-new-brand.html>.

such as the presence of propaganda campaigns or information operations and withdrawal from or rejection of pre-existing security partnerships.

Based upon these findings, we apply a tentative framework to the other countries in Africa in order to assess their likelihood of PMC receptivity. Countries that are at highest risk have higher numbers of the identified risk indicators present. With the caveat that these results are based on the application of a tentative framework, we assess that Somalia and the DRC are most vulnerable to Russian PMC solicitations, followed by countries including Cameroon, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and South Sudan.

The DRC, for example, is engaged in a protracted civil war, ranks high in state fragility and corruption, and has a robust lootable extractive sector. The Congo asked the UN mission (MONUSCO) and an associated East African force assisting in its fight against rebels to leave the country by the end of 2024, after 20 years. While Congolese officials deny that Russian security arrangements will replace these multilateral forces, Russian media reported that Moscow and Kinshasa are already developing a cooperation arrangement.⁷³ Coupled with the presence of ongoing Russian information operation campaigns, the DRC is exhibiting all the warning signs that PMC operatives are already there and at work.

Other high-risk countries indicated by this framework, notably Cameroon, Chad, and Somalia, maintain security relations with the United States, France, and other international partners, like Turkey. While strong foreign security relations have previously served as a bulwark against Russian PMC incursion, regional trends indicate that governments may turn to Russian PMCs for more than just security assistance—for bolstering their domestic political position and establishing non-traditional models for exploiting natural and mineral wealth. Furthermore, Russia’s success in enticing long-standing U.S. partners into opaque, hybridized security arrangements poses a significant threat, particularly in the Sahel, where countries have one-by-one replaced multilateral or Western-backed security arrangements with contracts with Wagner, now Africa Corps. In light of the Russian PMCs’ inability to degrade threats or establish peace, human security and democracy are eroding across the region. This domino effect makes the recent announcement that the U.S. would execute a partial withdrawal from Chad, while the country undergoes a review of security cooperation, alarming.⁷⁴

In Chad, mixed indicators for governance and a historically strong U.S. security relationship correspond to some resilience. However, high levels of state fragility and democratic backsliding

⁷³ Lenin Ndebele, “After Reported Deal, DRC Confirms it Asked for Russian Military Help –25 Years Ago,” *News 24*, March 8, 2024, <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/after-reported-deal-drc-confirms-it-asked-for-russian-military-help-25-years-ago-20240308>; “UN Sets December Deadline for its Peacekeepers in Congo to Completely Withdraw,” *AP*, January 13, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/congo-un-peacekeeping-force-monusco-withdrawal-deadline-0f78c80422429cc0f6c233dd75e48366>.

⁷⁴ “US Will Withdraw Some Troops from Chad, says Pentagon,” *Le Monde*, April 26, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/04/26/us-will-withdraw-some-troops-from-chad-says-pentagon_6669606_4.html

are inauspicious. While Chad currently has an under-developed mining sector, it does have strategic minerals, like gold and uranium, and a lucrative hydrocarbon sector.⁷⁵ Russian SOEs are well-placed to assist Chad in developing the sector to harness and exploit these resources, particularly to the benefit of the Chadian and Russian states—both of which face mounting pressure from the international community. The current head of Chad’s Transitional Military Council, Mahamat Déby (son of the former President), is demonstrating openness to Russian collaboration, including by attending a high-level meeting with Putin in January 2024 while resisting pressure to return the country to democratic rule.⁷⁶

Outlets are already tracking Russian information operations in Chad, and with elections scheduled for late spring 2024, we expect to derive more data from the types of Russian narratives that crop up. Reports indicate that Wagner operatives based in CAR may have supported a 2023 coup plot against Déby in an effort to gain Chadian support of its agenda in CAR—although U.S. intelligence’s support to Chad in identifying this threat may engender goodwill.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Déby may be motivated to co-opt Russian PMC support to his own cause in an effort to coup-proof his regime, to hedge against the risk of Russian PMCs funding or training Chadian rebels, or to more firmly establish political power and grow his personal wealth.⁷⁸ A permanent or complete U.S. withdrawal announcement would almost certainly portend the imminent arrival of Africa Corps.

Countries at moderate risk, as indicated in the tentative framework, include Ethiopia. Ethiopia is engaged in multiple civil conflicts, which have intermittently resulted in sanctions and monitoring from international bodies over the last 4 years. Russian PMCs may provide a means of securing weapons, equipment, and other restricted resources. In 2021, while other countries were pressuring leadership in Addis to allow for humanitarian assistance to enter Tigray, Russia signed a bilateral agreement with Ethiopia for cooperation in intelligence and security.⁷⁹ In 2019, prior to

⁷⁵ Harry Verhoeven and Théopile Pouget-Abadie, “(No) Power to the People: Oil and the Politics of Energy Access in Chad,” Columbia Center on Global Energy Policy, February 5, 2024, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/publications/no-power-to-the-people-oil-and-the-politics-of-energy-access-in-chad/>.

⁷⁶ Agence France Press, “Leader of France-Allied Chad Hails Ties With Putin,” *Barrons*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.barrons.com/news/leader-of-france-allied-chad-hails-ties-with-putin-in-moscow-adf49145>.

⁷⁷ Rachel Chason, “As Russians Plot Against Chad, Concerns Mount over Important U.S. Ally,” *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/23/chad-wagner-russia-leaked-documents/>.

⁷⁸ Erin Banco and Anastasiia Carrier, “To Counter Russia in Africa, Biden Deploys a Favored Strategy,” *Politico*, May 7, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/07/wagner-russia-africa-00095572>.

⁷⁹ “Ethiopia and Russian [sic] Agreed to Enhance Cooperation in the Field of Intelligence and Security...” *New Business Ethiopia*, June 9, 2021, <https://newbusinessethiopia.com/politics/ethiopia-russia-agree-to-enhance-cooperation-in-intelligence-security/#:~:text=Ethiopian%20and%20Russian%20agreed%20to%20enhance%20cooperation%20in,Tiruneh%20and%20Russian%20Ambassador%20to%20Ethiopia%20Yevgeny%20Terekhin>.

the outbreak of its civil war, Ethiopia imported some 69 weapons from Russia.⁸⁰ Ethiopia has also experienced democratic backsliding under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who has pulled back from the West and rekindled bilateral relations with Russia—for example, by attending the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit.⁸¹ Confusing reports of Ethiopian veterans lining up to volunteer to fight for Russia in Ukraine in 2022 also signal the possibility that Ethiopians are open to working with and for Russian paramilitaries.⁸² Furthermore, Ethiopia’s mineral sector is anchored in gold mining. It is currently under-developed, meaning that while mineral rents are low, there is significant potential for exploitation.⁸³ Nevertheless, lower levels of corruption and a relatively robust civil society and diaspora may incentivize Ethiopia to resist further or more targeted overtures by Russian PMCs.

Due to the proliferation of conflict and insecurity in Africa, there are a number of countries that are seemingly in need of external military support. Through an understanding of both the attractiveness of PMC partnership from a host country standpoint, and the factors that make a country more or less resistant to PMC overtures, the international community is better positioned to support vulnerable countries and prevent further Russian PMC predation. Addressing the vulnerabilities to Russian PMC expansion not only will lead to better outcomes for peace in conflict-afflicted regions, it will also cut off unmonitored sources of income to Russia. While our six case studies relied on both quantitative indicators and in-depth qualitative contextual research, our application of the tentative framework indicates that a more fine-tuned quantitative assessment of the variables associated with receptivity to Russian PMCs for countries at high or moderate risk is possible, and could allow the United States and our allies to identify specific domains and modes of support to our partners in Africa—and other regions—to increase their resilience, before they open the door to Russian PMCs.

⁸⁰ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

⁸¹ Alexandra Button, “COVID Pandemic and Democratic Backsliding in Ethiopia,” *Democratic Erosion*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/04/22/covid-pandemic-and-democratic-backsliding-in-ethiopia/>; “Ethiopia-Russia Relations Continues on its Upward Trajectory: Ambassador,” *Fana*, January 1, 2024, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopia-russia-relations-continues-on-its-upward-trajectory-ambassador/>.

⁸² Dawit Endeshaw, “Ethiopians Queue up to Volunteer for Russia’s Fight in Ukraine,” *Reuters*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ethiopians-queue-up-volunteer-russias-fight-ukraine-2022-04-21/>.

⁸³ World Bank Group and Ministry of Mines Ethiopia, “Strategic Assessment of the Ethiopian Mineral Sector,” 2014, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/9e70ed04-a850-54c2-8723-c83f56839950/content>; JP Casey, “A New Golden Age: Inside Ethiopian Mining,” *Mining Technology*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.mining-technology.com/features/ethiopia-gold-mining/?cf-view>.

Appendix A. Tentative Framework Applied

CATEGORY	INDICATOR	SOURCE
Governance	Freedom House Designation	Freedom House, Freedom in the World Report
	Regime Type	Afrobarometer
	Corruption	Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index
	Criminality Impact on State Institutions	ENACT Africa Organised Crime Index
Active Conflict	Annual Fatalities	ACLED
	Terrorism threat	Vision for Humanity's Global Terrorism Index
Lootable Resources	Mineral Rents (as % of GDP)	World Bank
	Extractive Sector (as % of Government Revenue)	World Bank
Posture toward Russia	Non-Russian Security Assistance Rejected or Withdrawn	Open-source research
	Security Agreement with Russia	Open-source research
	Sanctions	Open-source research
	Russian Information Operations	ACSS Publication (2024)

Additional indicators referenced:

- National Debt (as % of GDP)
- State Fragility Score
- Positive Peace
- USSR relations
- United States security assistance and cooperation
- Defense institutional capacity
- Russian SOE activities

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

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1. REPORT DATE May 2024		2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From-To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Russia's Selling, But Who's Buying? A Framework for Assessing Vulnerability to Russian PMCs in Africa				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER HQ0034-14-D-0001	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Daly, Sarah A. Burchard, Stephanie M. Bishai, Linda S.				5d. PROJECT NUMBER C55CB	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Institute for Defense Analyses Systems and Analyses Center 730 East Glebe Road Alexandria, VA 22305-3086				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER IDA Product 3002388	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Institute for Defense Analyses Systems and Analyses Center 730 East Glebe Road Alexandria, VA 22305-3086				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) IDA	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited (9 July 2024).					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT This report provides a preliminary analysis of the factors that might make an African government more receptive to overtures from a Russian PMC. Using qualitative case studies of four countries where Russian PMCs are (or were) confirmed to be actively providing security services and two where they have not, we identify eleven characteristics associated with a state being both attractive and receptive to Russian PMC intervention. We then propose and apply a potential framework for identifying countries that could solicit or accept Russian PMCs in the future. Although we recommend the development of a more sophisticated model, our tentative findings suggest that countries exhibiting these characteristics, and therefore falling into an at-risk category include Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Africa; private military companies (PMCs); Russia					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT SAR	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 27	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Marrs, James R.
a. REPORT Uncl.	b. ABSTRACT Uncl.	c. THIS PAGE Uncl.			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 703-845-6993