



# Wagner Group's Geopolitical Effects in the Context of Russian Hybrid Warfare

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**Abstract:** Hybrid warfare, as a new form of modern conflict, reflects the complex changes in the international security environment. Within the framework of hybrid warfare, Russia's private military companies, particularly the Wagner Group, play a significant role in global conflicts. This paper employs post-positivist, deductive methodologies and literature review approaches to study the formation and development of the Wagner Group. It concludes that Wagner is an integral part of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy and reflects a shift in global military intervention strategies. By analyzing the organizational structure of the Wagner Group, the scope of its activities, and its specific actions in places such as Ukraine and Syria, this paper examines the group's indirect realization of the Russian government's geopolitical aims through military force and non-military means. In addition to this, the paper explores the legitimacy challenges faced by the Wagner Group in terms of international law and norms of international relations, particularly in terms of state sovereignty, international conflict intervention and the legitimacy of private military operations. Through this analysis, the paper aims to provide insights into understanding and responding to the new challenges in the era of hybrid warfare.

**Keywords:** Hybrid warfare; Wagner; Russia

## I. Introduction:

In exploring the current international relations and geopolitical landscape, private military groups under the Russian framework of hybrid warfare, particularly the Wagner Group, have become an unignorable factor. The concept of hybrid warfare, which has become increasingly prevalent in the early 21st century, refers to the simultaneous use of conventional and unconventional means in military conflicts, including cyber warfare, psychological warfare, and indirect military actions. In this context, private military companies (PMCs) like the Wagner Group have become a key instrument for Russia to achieve its geopolitical goals on the international stage.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon has sparked widespread discussion about the role and impact of private military forces in modern conflicts.

The Wagner Group, established in 2014 by the former Russian intelligence officer Dmitry Utkin, initially aimed to support the Syrian government but quickly expanded its operational scope to other regions such as Africa and the Middle East. The group's military activities and presence, especially in the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, not only demonstrate Russia's new strategy of utilizing private military forces but also challenge the existing norms of international law and international relations.

This paper aims to delve into the impact of private military groups like the Wagner Group under the Russian hybrid warfare framework on geopolitics. By analyzing the structure, strategy, and actions of the Wagner Group, as well as its role in global conflicts, we can better understand the role and impact of private military forces in modern international relations.

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Concept and Characteristics of Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare, as a new form of modern conflict, reflects the complex and diversified nature of the international security environment and has become a hot topic in the field of international security studies. This form of warfare, by integrating traditional and non-traditional elements of war, breaks the conventional boundaries between regular and irregular conflict. The definition of hybrid warfare encompasses both traditional military means and a comprehensive application of multidimensional forms of warfare including economic, informational, and socio-cultural aspects. The characteristics of hybrid warfare are its clandestine nature, multidimensionality, and indirect approach. Clandestinity is reflected in the difficulty for the victimized nation to immediately perceive or confirm aggressive actions; multidimensionality is evident

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in conflicts that extend beyond the military realm, permeating political, economic, informational, and socio-cultural spheres; and indirectness is manifested in states engaging through proxies, rather than direct military confrontation. The theoretical foundation of hybrid warfare not only provides a new perspective for understanding modern conflicts but also challenges the existing frameworks of international law and military strategy.

Since the 1960s, small-scale warfare has become the predominant form of global conflict. Over time, the form and content of such warfare have evolved, especially in the 21st century, with notable changes in scale and innovative tactics and strategies.

The initial description of hybrid warfare in the American military context can be traced back to the 1960s when small-scale warfare began to dominate international conflicts.<sup>2</sup> By the 21st century, with the blurring lines between “large-scale conventional warfare” and “small-scale unconventional warfare”, the concept of hybrid warfare has further developed and deepened. In 2005, American military theorists Mattis and Hoffmann proposed the theory of hybrid warfare, suggesting that future warfare would be a synthesis of traditional and unconventional means, including catastrophic and disruptive warfare.

Russian academia, building upon and innovating the American military’s definition of hybrid warfare, has gradually formed different viewpoints<sup>3</sup>, reflecting its adaptation and response to the international security environment.<sup>4</sup>

The first viewpoint sees hybrid warfare as an extension of traditional warfare, like Mahmut Gareev, former head of the Russian Military Science Academy, who considers hybrid warfare an effective means against hostile states without exceeding the bounds of traditional warfare, particularly against economically stronger adversaries. This viewpoint considers hybrid warfare as a complement to traditional nuclear deterrence strategies, initiating conflicts through color revolutions and localized wars.

The second viewpoint sees hybrid warfare as a completely new form of warfare, fundamentally different from traditional warfare in terms of the role of military power, public participation, and ideology. Russian scholars, represented by Konstantin Sivkov, focus on the dominant role of hybrid warfare in modern society, such as information warfare, economic sanctions, and political strategies. Sivkov’s analysis reveals the importance of “hearts and minds” and “ideological warfare” in hybrid warfare, emphasizing tactics like establishing “civilian armies” on enemy territory and controlling enemy strategies.

The third viewpoint is a synthesis of the first two, suggesting that modern conflict methods are shifting towards an integrated use of political, economic, informational, and other non-military measures based on military power. General Gerasimov Vasilyevich, a leader in the Russian military, represents this viewpoint. He believes that in modern military conflicts, especially with the involvement of private military companies like the Wagner Group, hybrid warfare achieves political objectives with minimal armed strikes by undermining enemy military and economic potential, creating informational and psychological pressure, actively supporting internal opposition in the enemy nation, and executing protests and sabotage activities.

Combining these viewpoints, the theoretical framework of hybrid warfare not only provides a theoretical basis for the actions of private military companies like the Wagner Group in the international security environment but also offers a multidimensional explanatory model for analyzing their impact on geopolitics. The development and application of these theories are reflected in the 2014 version of “The Russian Federation’s Military Doctrine”, which outlines the characteristics of modern military conflicts and hybrid warfare, namely the comprehensive use of military force and other measures such as political, economic, and informational, while extensively utilizing resident protest forces and special operation troops. Through the lens of hybrid warfare, we can more accurately grasp the actions of these companies on the international stage and their impact on the global security political landscape.

## 2.2. The Origin and Development of Private Military Companies

The evolution of private military companies (PMCs) reveals significant changes in the nature of modern conflicts. These entities, originating from mercenaries in the ancient Peloponnesian War to their current form as professional entities providing comprehensive military services, have undergone historical and functional transformations that are crucial to understanding the role of modern PMCs, such as the Wagner Group.

A Private Military Company (PMC) is defined as a company that provides military force and militarized services to governments or foreign military units. PMCs offer services such as developing military plans, conducting combat operations, providing technical assistance, and logistical support.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest origins of PMCs can be traced back to mercenaries during the Peloponnesian War, which lasted from 431 to 404 BC. The war, fought between the Delian League led by Athens and the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta, required a significant increase in the number of soldiers and military units, leading to the rapid development of mercenary forces.

With the rise of modern nation-states, private military forces gradually diminished, and states increasingly strengthened their military functions. However, private military forces never completely disappeared from the historical stage. Throughout history, their presence is still noticeable, for instance, in the American Revolutionary War and the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Following the end of the Cold War, as regional conflicts intensified, PMCs entered a phase of rapid development. During the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in 1995, Croatian militia forces, supported by the American PMC MPRI, defeated Serbian armed forces, reshaping the Balkans’ political landscape. With the onset of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the private military industry encountered new development opportunities. The scope of services offered by PMCs continued to

adjust and expand. Countries like the United States outsourced a significant amount of government work and services (such as translation, personal armed protection, facility security, etc.) to PMCs, for example, Blackwater Worldwide (originally Blackwater USA, now Academi), and Aegis Defence Services (later acquired by Garda World) from the UK.

### 2.3. The Role of the Private Military Company Wagner in Modern Conflicts

Australian scholar Mark Foren categorizes private military companies (PMCs) into four types: combat-offensive, combat-defensive, non-combat-offensive, and non-combat-defensive.<sup>6</sup> This classification reflects the diverse roles PMCs play in modern conflicts. For instance, the American company Blackwater (now Academi) displayed a “combat-defensive” role in its direct military actions during the Iraq War, while the British company Aegis Defence Services provided security and logistical support in multiple conflicts, exemplifying the “non-combat-defensive” type.

In contrast, the Wagner Group, as a well-known Russian PMC, holds a unique position in terms of its role and impact. Russian PMCs can generally be categorized into four types: military service companies, military consulting firms, military support companies, and private security companies. The Wagner Group, as a military service company, offers a range of services that include direct provision of military services and participation in related military operations and armed conflicts, somewhat akin to the “combat-defensive” type in Foren’s classification.

A notable distinction of the Wagner Group from other PMCs is its close ties with the Russian government. While all PMCs typically have close connections with their respective national military or intelligence institutions, the Wagner Group’s founders and core members, many being retired personnel from the Russian military or former high-level intelligence officers, align the group’s operations more closely with Russian national interests. Moreover, in providing military services, the Wagner Group is involved not only in direct combat operations but also in strategic planning and military consultancy, demonstrating its diversified capabilities in the military service sector.

Another characteristic of the Wagner Group is its active engagement in conflict zones, making it a crucial tool for Russia to pursue national interests without direct state involvement. This aspect differs from the operational models of PMCs in Western countries, which more often participate in national foreign strategies as market actors rather than directly reflecting the state policies of a particular nation.

PMCs also serve as important sources of foreign intelligence for nations. Leveraging its activities in conflict zones, the Wagner Group provides vital intelligence information for Russia. Compared to PMCs from other Western countries, the Wagner Group exhibits greater flexibility and adaptability in intelligence gathering and processing.

In summary, the Wagner Group plays a distinct role in modern conflicts compared to other private military companies. Its close ties with the Russian government, diversified military services, and capabilities in intelligence collection position the Wagner Group as a significant and unique participant in hybrid warfare. This not only profoundly impacts conflict regions but also presents new challenges for international security policies.

## III. Methodology

This article begins with a clear introduction to the context of hybrid warfare and delves into the development and role of Wagner as a private military company. Its primary aim is to analyze Wagner’s function within the broader framework of Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy. This is with the intent to understand how private military companies facilitate and shape the dynamics of modern conflicts.

Employing a post-positivist approach, the article acknowledges the complexity of modern warfare and the improbability of achieving complete objectivity in a field laden with political and ethical hues. Methodologically, the article adopts a deductive approach, starting from the broader theory of hybrid warfare to examine the specific case of Wagner, thereby testing and exploring these concepts. The research strategy is predominantly qualitative, relying on a comprehensive review of existing literature, reports, and qualitative data from news sources, military analyses, and expert opinions. This qualitative analysis aids in providing the reader with a closer understanding of the enigmatic Wagner. Moreover, the article utilizes secondary data collection methods, drawing from a wide array of existing sources including academic literature, news reports, and government documents. Through thematic analysis of the gathered data, the focus is on identifying patterns and themes related to the activities of the Wagner and their congruence with hybrid warfare strategies. However, given the secretive nature of Wagner and the political milieu of its operations, the methodology of this article may be constrained by the availability and reliability of information sources concerning the Wagner.

## IV. Results

By analyzing materials such as literature and news, this article comprehends the development and activities of Wagner’s military groups.

In May 2014, Wagner PMC, Wagner Group, founded by Dmitry Utkin, a former Russian intelligence officer, came to prominence. Utkin’s original intent was to support the Syrian regime in recovering oil and gas facilities under the control of the Islamic State, and the organization now focuses on a variety of military services. The Wagner Group’s membership consists mainly of veterans of the Russian army and its combat units, who have received rigorous military training and have volunteered for such work on a contractual basis.

The Wagner Group was founded in 2005 in the southwestern Russian city of Orel as the private security company “Antiterror-Orel”. Initially providing security services to Russian companies in Iraq, the company evolved into the Moran Security Group, which specializes in the protection of merchant ships from pirate attacks, and in 2013 two of its senior

executives established the Slavic Legion, a security company, outside Russia. In 2013, two senior executives of Moran Group founded the security company Slavic Legion outside Russia, which attracted a large number of veterans from the Commonwealth of Independent States and benefited from its competitive salary structure. However, in October of the same year, the Slavic Legion took part in an unauthorized military operation against Syrian opposition forces during the implementation of a contract to protect the oil fields of Dayr al-Zawr in Syria, and the Russian authorities subsequently indicted its principals for violations of the law. And after that, the organization disappeared into obscurity.

During the Crimean crisis in 2014, Utkin was present in Ukraine, especially in the eastern part of the country, with some of the former Slavic Legion members, fighting alongside the local anti-Kiev forces in Luhansk and taking part in virtually all major battles in the direction of Luhansk. In May 2014, Wagner's group was established and developed on the basis of the Slavic Legion, which was invested by the catering tycoon Prigozhin when Utkin was active in the Udon region.

In addition, Wagner has been active in the wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya and other wars and military operations. In the context of the positive attitude of the Russian political class towards private military companies, President Vladimir Putin has made it clear that private military companies have the right to promote their business interests worldwide, as long as they do not violate Russian law. Against this backdrop of government support, private military companies such as Wagner have gradually become a key tool for Russia to realize and defend its national interests.

Russia's Wagner Group, an internationally recognized private military entity, has rapidly expanded its activities and influence. Compared to Western PMCs such as Blackwater (Academi) in the United States or Aegis (Aegis) in the United Kingdom, the Wagner Group exhibits unique characteristics in its operations and organizational structure. WAGNER's services are not limited to traditional security or logistical support, but also involve more direct military operations, including combat engagement and battlefield strategy execution.

In terms of functional classification, WAGNER combines "combat-defense" and "non-combat-offense" characteristics. This means that it is involved in both direct military offense and support services such as strategic planning and military training. This makes the Wagner Group's activities more extensive and complex than those of companies such as Defense Science Laboratory or the U.S. Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI).

The Wagner Group has particularly close ties to Russian state institutions, which is rare among private military companies in the West. While companies like Blackwater also have close working relationships with the U.S. government, the Wagner Group appears to carry out its missions in a way that more directly reflects Russia's national interests and strategic goals. This model allows the Wagner Group to operate both as a tool for indirect military engagement by the Russian government and as a "volunteer" or "mercenary" internationally, reducing direct state responsibility and diplomatic risk.

In addition, the Wagner Group's presence in conflict zones not only provides Russia with military and intelligence support, but also serves as an important component of its foreign strategy. In contrast, Western PMCs have typically focused more on specific security missions or logistical support rather than direct military involvement. Kellogg Brown and Root, for example, focuses on non-combat military logistics tasks such as building barracks and transporting supplies.

## **V. Discussion**

In recent years, Western countries have been employing "hybrid warfare" against Russia for an extended period, posing comprehensive threats and challenges to Russia. In response, Sivkov posits that in "hybrid warfare", not only is the participation of the military necessary, but a synergistic use of political, economic, social, and cultural means is also essential for victory.<sup>7</sup> In this context, private military companies like Wagner play a significant role.

Firstly, Russian private military companies have expanded Russia's overseas interests, becoming a crucial link between Russia and other countries. According to reports, since 2019, about 400 Wagner employees have been stationed in Venezuela, responsible for protecting President Nicolás Maduro Moros and others. Wagner, along with other Russian military companies, provides military training to Venezuelan military and police forces, including special forces training and urban counterterrorism tactics. With the assistance of private military companies, an increasing amount of Russian-made weapons have entered the Venezuelan army's arsenal, making Venezuela a significant overseas market for Russian military equipment. Additionally, Wagner actively expands Russian interests in the Central African Republic by assisting government forces in combatting anti-government armed groups, protecting key facilities and political figures.<sup>8</sup> In this situation, many Russian energy companies have obtained qualifications to exploit oil and gas fields in the Central African Republic, with 80%–90% of the country's military equipment being purchased from Russian military-industrial enterprises. Secondly, under the premise of non-public government intervention, Russian private military companies have effectively assisted national diplomatic strategies. Following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Russia needed to help stabilize the battlefield situation for the Syrian government, while considering the opposition from the United States, Europe, and Turkey, and thus could not directly intervene in Syrian affairs. In this context, Russian private military companies like the Moran Security Group and the Slavonic Corps signed contracts with the Syrian government and deployed personnel to northern Syria to assist local government forces in defending oil fields and other key facilities. Four years later, with Russia's large-scale military deployment in Syria, Wagner gradually replaced the Moran Security Group and the Slavonic Corps, becoming a significant Russian military force in Syria.<sup>9</sup> Wagner's military personnel in Syria not only possess an independent intelligence system and a well-developed logistics system but are also equipped with tanks, grenade launchers, and other heavy weapons. They have effectively combated extremist organizations within Syria, maintained stability in the eastern part of the country, and expanded Russia's global influence.

In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Wagner's role has been particularly noticeable. In 2022, Wagner participated in the conflict and gradually became the main Russian force on the Bakhmut front. By the end of June 2023, Wagner launched an "unexpected coup" that directly challenged Moscow. However, two months later, nearly all of Wagner's top leadership perished in a plane crash.

Under the shadow of hybrid warfare, Wagner plays a mysterious and challenging role. Wagner's soldiers may be tools of political entities or operate to maintain the objectives of specific interest groups. The Wagner of the hybrid warfare era not only reveals the full spectrum of future warfare to us but also challenges our understanding and response to war. Faced with the new challenges of this era, we must remain vigilant and seek solutions. Only then can we find the path forward through the fog of hybrid warfare.

## VI. Conclusion

The emergence of a new military force like the Wagner Group presents fresh challenges and opportunities for international policy formulation and implementation. These challenges are not only a reevaluation of traditional state sovereignty and international military interventions but also pertain to the adaptability of international law and conflict norms. Here are some implications for international policy:

Firstly, the international community must reassess the role and status of private military companies (PMCs) in modern conflicts. Traditional international legal frameworks, particularly those involving armed conflicts, are predominantly based on state actors. However, the existence and operational models of PMCs like the Wagner Group challenge the integrity and efficacy of this framework. The international community needs to develop new legal tools and mechanisms to better regulate and constrain the actions of these non-state actors, ensuring their activities do not jeopardize international peace and security.

Secondly, the actions of PMCs like the Wagner Group should be subject to international human rights law and humanitarian law. This necessitates the international community to strengthen oversight of PMCs, ensuring these organizations adhere to international human rights standards and humanitarian principles in their military operations. Furthermore, exploring the establishment of an international certification system for private entities providing military and security services could enhance their transparency and accountability.

Additionally, states should exercise caution in utilizing PMCs. While PMCs like the Wagner Group offer flexibility and deniability, their actions can be perceived as proxy actions of the state, thereby affecting the state's international image and diplomatic relations. Therefore, states should carefully consider the potential international legal and political consequences when deciding whether and how to utilize these private military forces.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the international community needs to strengthen multilateral cooperation to jointly address the challenges posed by PMCs. This includes establishing common standards and norms for PMC behavior within international organizations like the United Nations, as well as enhancing information sharing and coordinated action through regional and bilateral mechanisms. Additionally, the international community should intensify its focus and intervention in conflict zones, using diplomatic and development aid to reduce the influence of PMCs in these areas.

In conclusion, the emergence and activities of PMCs like the Wagner Group pose new challenges for international policy, necessitating adjustments and responses from the international community in legal, human rights, state responsibility, and multilateral cooperation aspects. Only through such measures can the international community effectively address the complexities of the hybrid warfare era and maintain international peace and stability.

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