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THE WAGNER GROUP AND RUSSIA IN AFRICA ONE YEAR AFTER PRIGOZHIN'S DEATH

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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FELBAB-BROWN: Good morning, and thank you for joining us today for our conversation about the Wagner Group Africa Corps in Africa and beyond. I am Doctor Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. But I direct the Initiative on Non-State Actors, and I also co-direct the Africa Security Initiative.

Just about a year ago, the plane carrying Yevgeny Prigozhin, a well-known leader of the semi-private Russian security company, the Wagner Group, and the rest of its top leadership, died in an air crash. Well, the Russian government denied responsibility. Western intelligence believed also that the crash of the plane was Kremlin's assassination of the man and the group, that challenged visibly the establishment of Russian power like no one has done in a very long time. In June 2023, Prigozhin staged a daring rebellion using the units of his private, semi-private, security company linked to Russia, the Wagner Group, and that were meant for fighting in Ukraine to turn against the homeland and march on Moscow. And this march on Moscow demanded the resignation of the minister of defense of Russia, Shoigu, and the chief of general staff, Valery Gerasimov, blaming them for the incompetence of Russian forces in Ukraine and then for starving his partner groups of weapons and trying to roll them into, the, under much tighter control of the Russian Ministry of Defense. No, such a restructuring of the Wagner Group was meant to weaken his power and to show Prigozhin who the true master of the Wagner Group was, and that his illusion of autonomy, as well as its illusion of indispensability, were just that, illusions.

Nonetheless, Prigozhin took the daring decision to march on Moscow. In doing so, took over, Russian military bases there and even there in the march to end to challenge Russian military forces, supposedly, shooting down Russian aircraft and killing Russian soldiers. So the big question was, how much did this action threaten the Kremlin's hold on power and what was over for the Wagner Group? Few months later, Prigozhin and the top leadership, were killed in the plane crash. And since then, analysts have been, speculating, looking at how, the, assets of the Wagner Group in Africa, its military assets that provide counter-insurgency operations and pretorian guard operations, for a set of African countries would be restructured.

How its vast, sprawling economic assets, that feed, the Russian government as well as, the pockets of, actors associated with the Wagner Group, both its fighters and its masters in Moscow would be restructured. And what would happened to the, vast, information disinformation, misinformation operation that the Wagner Group has been, running in Moscow. And that has been running out of Moscow and out of Africa, across Africa and beyond. So we know one aspect of the restructuring, and that is that the assets of the Wagner Group in Africa today are no longer officially called the Wagner group, but rather Africa Corps, a daring name echoing, of course, German Nazi forces in Africa. But we are going to be looking with our, stellar panelists into many more details of what has happened with that restructuring and what's been happening with the performance of an activities that Africa Corps has been taking, across the continent.

I would just remind all of us that, the Wagner Group Africa Corps has been designated by the UK government as a terrorist organization and by the US government is a transnational organized crime group for its, role in brutality, massacres, rapes, tortures of civilians, as well as smuggling operations, all of which are part of the pro-regime pretorian guard services, and counter-insurgency counter-terrorism services it provides. So we give a brilliant set of speakers to look at many dimensions of the restructuring of the Wagner Group and the new controls in Moscow. They include, Angela Stent, who will speak about Putin's power today. Mark Galeotti, who will be reflecting on the balance of power and leadership within Moscow. John Lechner, who will be walking us through what's been happening in the Central African Republic, Mali and Sudan. And Chris Faulkner, who will bring us to the new places of this engagement, Niger and Burkina Faso.

I will then, make, few, comments and observations about new areas of Russian activity such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea Bissau and Sao Tome, as well as about, Russian policy in Africa more broadly. So, Angela, let me start with you. You are one of the preeminent experts on Russia, having served as the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia, the National Intelligence Council, previously in the Office of Policy Planning at the State Department, and having a most distinguished academic career. Currently you are professor emerita of government and foreign service at Georgetown University, a senior advisor to the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies, and, of course, my very valuable, and valued colleague in Brookings.

So in June 2023, when Prigozhin took the daring decision to march on Moscow, there was much speculation about how revealing that action was of Putin's vulnerability. Some analysts were envisioning the regime imploding, the elite defecting from Putin, perhaps because of the threat of Western sanctions. Where are we a year later? How strong or weak is Putin? And of course, that is a new difficulty, bitter pill to the August anniversary for him, and that's, Ukraine's incursion to Kursk. How does that also figure into Putin's power? Please, Angela.

STENT: Thank you, Vanda, for inviting me to speak on this panel. These are very important and difficult to answer questions. So if the question is how stable and powerful are Putin and his clique? That's the question you put to me. The shorter answer is that for now, the personalist dictatorship that Putin has created appears to be both stable and quite powerful, despite all the challenges that Putin faces. He's been able to further consolidate his regime since his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February '22, and he overcame the threat posed by Prigozhin's mutiny fairly rapidly.

So let's go back to the events you were describing. Prigozhin's brief takeover of Rostov, his attempted march on Moscow. What was particularly striking during those dramatic 24 hours, with the silence from the Kremlin and from the Russian elites. On Saturday, Putin made a brief television appearance, looking distraught. And then he disappeared. We eventually heard from Alexander Lukashenko. And the situation was ultimately defused when he worked out an agreement, of course, with Prigozhin to bring his troops to Belarus. And by Sunday, really, it was more or less over, but there was no resounding public support for Putin from any quarter until it was clear that the Kremlin have prevailed. So I think that should tell us something about how deep the support for this regime is, both among his political and military colleagues and among these Russian elites. Nevertheless, since the failed coup, the regime has rebounded. It appears to be resilient. General Surovikin who had supported Prigozhin was sidelined.

Prigozhin, as you mentioned, and most of his top Wagner colleagues fell from the sky a couple of months later. And interesting, interestingly, no cult of Prigozhin seems to have emerged since his death. Since his so-called reelection in March, Putin has reshuffled his cabinet. He replaced, of

course, Defense Minister Shoigu with Belousov as defense minister. Belousov is an economist. I would argue he's serving as a quartermaster for the Russian armed forces, trying to deal with, money, supplies, corruption. We'll see how he does. But, of course, Shoigu remains in the Kremlin as national security advisor. In the past few weeks, there, of course, have been arrests of high level and mid-level military officers on charges of corruption. But so far, we haven't seen any large scale purge of the armed forces in response to all of these Russian military failings, including what's been happening in Kursk. The chief of the general staff Gerasimov remains in place, even though Prigozhin of course, greatly criticized him. But there are constant rumors of his imminent firing. Certainly, if you look at the video, the expression on Putin's face when Gerasimov briefed him, I guess last week, about the Kursk incursion. And of course, Gerasimov lied and said that Russia pushed the Ukrainian forces back. The look on Putin's face was pretty hostile.

Since the Prigozhin revolt, domestic repression in Russia has increased. Russians who remain in the country and oppose the war have been largely silenced because the price one pays for public opposition is very high. And this is a regime that publicly embraces assassins who kill for the motherland. It's quite remarkable. I was struck when Putin greeted Vadim Krasikov, the hitman exchanged for American, European and Russian opposition figures in the prisoner exchange a few weeks ago. That Putin went to the tarmac, met Krasikov and embraced him publicly, what kind of message does this send? Well, we have your back as long as you're killing for the motherland. So come join the FSB. And don't think about defecting. Not even Stalin performed public acts of embracing assassins. So in this system, the FSB rules. And so far, it's helped keep Putin in power. The military clearly has major problems -- I'm sure we hear about that from Mark -- as we saw in Ukraine's ability to cross the border into Russia and occupy villages and encountering very little resistance a couple of weeks ago. Although Prigozhin railed against Shoigu and Gerasimov, they're both still in positions of power.

Putin has managed to prevail in a war that has cost hundreds of thousands of Russian lives. But he's also tightened his hold on power and he's managed to play an increasingly visible international role, particularly with the global South and, of course, China, just as the West has sought to sanction and isolate Russia since the war began. How's he able to do this? Well, domestic repression is one

answer. But as we know, the Russian economy is now booming. High growth rates, high employment rates. The economy is on a wartime footing. Contract soldiers are paid very high wages, I think Putin just raised them again, compared to anything that they might earn elsewhere, particularly they if they come from the kind of benighted provincial areas of Russia that are very poor. The public has largely tuned out of the war. Disinformation pervades the official media. It tells Russians that the West is to blame for the war, that the West wants to destroy Russia, that the Ukrainians are Nazis, and their fearless leader, Vladimir Putin, who, is, is repeating the feats of the USSR and the Great Patriotic War, and that Russia will win this war. That's what they hear every day. Those who publicly oppose Putin and his system, they're either in exile, in jail, or they are dead. Oligarchs like Oleg Deripaska can occasionally criticize the war publicly, as he did a couple of weeks ago, saying that it's too expensive, it's bad for Russia, but he doesn't really have any power in this system. And these oligarchs depend on Putin for their continued ability to survive and to continue to accumulate wealth.

And I think the majority of Russians just believe that there's no alternative to Putin. Moreover, although Putin has never named a successor, because he doesn't want to be a lame duck, we can see how he and his inner circle are already preparing a successor generation to them by promoting the sons and occasionally the daughters of Putin's top officials, of Putin's friends, of Putin's relatives, even his own daughters to positions of influence in various parts of the Russian system. So without going into detail, I'm just going to mention a few surnames of some of these young officials so that you'll get the picture. So the first surname is Putina, although she now uses the name Tsivileva. But she's in the Ministry of Defense. Patrushev, Kovalchuk, Shoigu, Vino, Rotenberg. These are all children of the people in the inner circle and they're all rising up in different parts of the system there. And this does not suggest the next generation of Russian leaders will have views that are very different from those currently in power. They are there to perpetuate the system and, of course, to protect their family's wealth.

So finally, how has the Ukraine invasion of Russia changed Putin's hold on power? Well, of course it's too early to say. It's only been a couple of weeks, but Putin was visibly rattled by it and by the inability of his armed forces to prevent the incursion. Mark Galeotti was quoted a couple of days in the Washington Post saying that Putin, as usual, is hiding from the crisis and not providing leadership.

He's tried to, tried to downplay the incursion. He said that they're conducting a counterterrorist operation, but people should be calm, even as they're evacuating, you know, many people from the area. It also turns out that these raw conscripts with very little military training were guarding the border in violation of Russia's own rules, which say that these young conscripts should not be sent into battle, that it should just be the contract soldiers into doing that. Now we have mothers petitioning Putin to let them know where their sons are. They know that many of them have been taken prisoner by the Ukrainians, the prisoners of war that are in Ukraine now. Again, you can see videos of them. And so there is obviously opposition among the people that live in those regions to what's been happening to their children. As there has been opposition among mothers of many soldiers who haven't come back when they were supposed to, even though, you know, the Kremlin tries to suppress it. So I think it remains to be seen in this context, how long Ukraine can hold on to the territory that it now occupies, and whether Russia will redeploy forces from the Donbas region to this region, which I think isn't completely clear yet. But I think the successful Ukrainian incursion has certainly given the Russians a very unwelcome dose of their own medicine, and it has embarrassed the Kremlin. But having said that, I would say conclude by saying that for now the system looks stable. But of course, all seasoned Russia watchers have to be very humble. Everything in Russia appears stable until it isn't. And Putin can sometimes be quite unpredictable.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much, Angela for those, terrific grounding comments that are so important for our understanding and analysis, what is happening with the Wagner Group as well. And your description of Putin embracing Krasikov right on the tarmac, blatantly, doing so, inviting those who want to kill for the motherland, to join is in some ways a good metaphor also for the restructuring of the Wagner Group becoming Africa Corps very visibly and officially, being rolled into, not even rolled, just being unveiled as part of the Russian system with all the need for plausible denial that characterized the early operations in 2015, 2016, 2017, haven't gone away. Because at the end of the day, Russia did not really pay, hasn't paid any significant price in Africa for embracing and supporting authoritarian governments or falling in beds with Iran and North Korea. And for, of course, engaging in that egregious invasion of Ukraine. So the veil is off, the kiss on the tarmac is a very visibly so also for Africa Corps and its closeness to the Russian military.

Mark, you know, you too, have been watching very closely, Russian intelligence operations, military, special operations forces for a very long time are widely recognized as one of the foremost experts on Russian politics, crime and security in your role as the executive director of Mayak Intelligence, a consultancy specializing in Russian affairs, as well as, as a senior fellow with RUSI and your academic career that's been not just very distinguished like Angela's, and like, Angela's, also very prolific, featuring many books and articles, including a very recent, book, "Downfall: Prigozhin, Putin, and the New Fight for the Future of Russia" that you coauthored with Anna Arutunyan. So, Mark, what, have you been seeing in, Moscow, in the Kremlin, in the GRU, as far as control over the Wagner Group and other groups like Redut or Convoy

GALEOTTI: Okay. Well, thanks very much again. Delighted to be here. In such illustrious company. They one of the first things first points to make is there are lots of Prigozhins in Russia. Still, the point is, only one of them had his own army. And that's what made him so dangerous. And so, after the unfortunate events, let's call them, the Kremlin clearly has made strides to try and learn the lessons, and as ever with the Kremlin on this, Kremlin, at least it's a mix of, genuine, innovation, business as usual and massive embezzlement. Those really are the sort of the three core elements of Putin's state. But the point is, they still need Wagner like organizations. They need them in terms of the domestic fight, as they would see it on Ukrainian territory, because they represent an alternative channel for recruiting young Russians. Some will be hired directly by the military, but they have a variety of mercenary structures or other almost sort of para-mercenary organizations, which all represent different ways of trying to sort of grab people for the same conflict. You know, we have, for example, you know, corporations like Gazprom with the three sort of quote unquote volunteer battalions that they put together. We have units that have been raised by regional and, even mayors offices in the case of Moscow leaderships. The so-called Sobyenin battalions, for example, from Moscow, even though most of the soldiers within them did not come from Moscow, they came again from impoverished parts of the country.

The point is, though, that these are different ways, really, of feeding troops into a single unified command structure. That's what's different. That is the lesson that they learned about that. So you have the so-called expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps, not exactly a sort of title that rolls off the

tongue, which is the overall sort of structure. But the point is that each individual unit within it is actually subordinated to one of the regular armed forces, groups of force commands. And most importantly of all, this time they have totally broken the connection between, shall we say, the patron and the unit itself. So if you are Rosatom or whoever, you stump up money, you make some advertising to try and get people attract volunteers. You provide the bonuses, maybe some money towards equipping these units, but that's it. Once you've established this unit, it's not yours. You don't, you know, Sobyenin doesn't get to decide who commands one of the Moscow based regiments. Rosatom doesn't have a voice in where its particular unit gets deployed and such like. So essentially, it is just simply, almost a way of thinking about it is as a tax. Those institutions, those organizations, those individuals who have benefited under Putin, well, now it's the Putin regime saying, come on, you have to stump up. So that's what's happening in Ukraine.

What's happening in Africa is as a different but also interesting story. And here it's, I think, much, much more sort of complex and raw because the Kremlin still wants to use Wagner as a geopolitical as well as an economic instrument. But again, it's trying to do so without actually having Prigozhin, without having the Wagner brand name. And the thing is, Prigozhin was so inextricably connected with the deals that were struck and so forth. I mean, this is a man who literally knew where the bodies were buried and perhaps more importantly, knew who was paid and how. And so they have created this Africa Corps with stunning lack of irony in terms of actually giving it that name. And this seems to be an attempt to roll all of our operations, and maybe some also from other PMCs or PSCs, into to one umbrella organization that can do the same thing that Wagner did, make money, make trouble, accrue some geopolitical leverage, and to be blunt, troll the West. I mean, I remember speaking back, back and back in the days when I could still travel to Russia. I remember speaking to someone who was very close to the Foreign Ministry saying, actually, again, you know, every time Wagner does something in somewhere like Mali, the French go ballistic, and that is almost, a benefit in and of itself.

So, you know, they, they want all of these advantages, but they want it to be more controllable. They want it to be more cost effective. And of course, a whole variety of new institutional predators want to be able to dip their beaks and make money out of the various flows that are taking place. So what we now have is a structure in which actually, notionally, the Ministry of Defense is in charge. In practice,

it's military intelligence, GU, though we all still use the old acronym, GRU. And that represented actually an interesting internal power struggle between Admiral Kostyukov, the head of GRU, and the chief of the general staff, the aforementioned glorious military leader, General Gerasimov. Now, in this case, actually Gerasimov lost. He wanted a much more direct level of control by the MOD. What he actually got was, as a token, the role of deputy defense minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, of whom more in a moment. But essentially this is now to be considered, more than anything else, a GRU operation.

So what we have is in this new structure, it's still emerging. The way it was described to me is in effect, you have a triumvirate. You have Yunus-Bek Yevkurov as deputy defense minister; as we said, a pretty distinguished figure who also just looks the part, who is the chairman of the board. He's the guy you trot out to reassure people that everything's fine. He has the kind of the gravitas to go and meet national leaders and so forth. He's the person who seals the deal. He doesn't really run it. Much more you have as, in some ways, the chief operating officer, is Major General Andre Averyanov, who is head of the GRU's infamous unit 29155, which is its kind of wet work, assassination and sabotage unit, which is in this current environment, becoming more and more expansive and more and more powerful. And so, you know, it's Averyanov who handles a lot of that stuff. What they need is a chief executive officer. Now, occasionally I've heard the suggestion that Denis Pavlov, who is a Russian diplomat, almost certainly from the Foreign Intelligence Service. Currently, I believe he's actually attached to the embassy in the CAR, but that doesn't seem to have been fixed. So there's still uncertain as to quite how it works.

And in part, and this is the last issue I would arise because precisely they have missed the point. One of the reasons why Wagner worked in Africa was not just about the fact that it could provide trigger pullers and VIP protection officers and the like, but also because it fitted within this wider business empire of Prigozhin's. So its authoritarian leadership support services included the trolls and so forth, but also included a whole variety of other companies that could, you know, run the funding streams by taking concessions in diamonds or gold or whatever else, and could move the money through financial institutions in Dubai or and so forth. Most of that has actually been picked away by the other predators within Russia, who as soon as Prigozhin literally went down, they took the opportunity to grab the more lucrative parts of his business. What we have now is the GRU trying to run a blended

diplomatic, commercial and military structure while it only really has the skill set to meet the last one of those. So this is why I'm still quite skeptical that in this current form, this model will work. Thank you.

FELBAB-BROWN: What absolutely fascinating comments, Mark, and I'm looking forward to John and Chris to be speaking to us also a bit more about the economic side of the empire, what's happening with resources. John, let me start with you. I mentioned Mark's new book, *Downfall*. You are also on the cusp of having your own book on the Wagner Group come out very soon, "That is Our Business." A terrific title. And, for the book, you have done extensive field work hanging out with the Wagner fighters from Africa to Europe, as well as other characters. As someone who does a lot of field work myself, I know just how difficult and risky it is, to do such work. So, very hearty congratulations and admiration for that. So please tell us what's been happening with Wagner, with Africa Corps, in Central African Republic, in Mali, in Sudan, perhaps Libya as well. What have been their military operations like, as well as the other part of the regime survival package that the Wagner Group provides.

LECHNER: Sure. Well, thank you. And, it's an honor to be with Brookings and also with this very esteemed panel. Mark has laid out a lot of the excellently basically the overall structure or the environment, I think, in which Prigozhin was operating. And I would just add a few things kind of before we go into understand how the transition has been taking place. And in each one of these countries in Africa. And the first factor that we need to consider is that the relationship between Wagner and the Russian state and more specifically, the, the Ministry of Defense, has always been, context dependent on the theater in which Wagner is operating.

And so obviously, Ukraine in 2014, what Russia considers to be its near abroad is always the first priority. We've always seen a high degree of cooperation between Wagner units and the Ministry of Defense. The next most important is Russia's return to the Middle East and again in Syria during, from 2015 on, when Russia intervened on behalf of Assad, we've seen a high level of cooperation between the MOD and Wagner. Wagner fit underneath or within the Ministry of Defense's overall command and control structure. Similarly for Libya as well, it's an important southern flank of NATO.

It's an important country to Russia economically. In terms of narrative, the downfall of Gadhafi was something Putin personally took quite a large amount of offense to.

But when we get to sub-Saharan Africa, Prigozhin structures had much more freedom to pursue initiatives as they saw fit. And very often, you know, we've seen in the, in the media that, a place like the Central African Republic is ground zero for Russian influence in Africa. But the reality is, is that the reason Prigozhin was able to pursue all sorts of economic activities military operations, training, diplomacy, even bringing 14 armed groups into an internationally recognized peace accord, the 2019 Khartoum agreement, was because, precisely because the Central African Republic was not a major priority for the Kremlin. And if a country isn't a major priority, you have less competition from other competing Russian elite or institutions that are that can keep Prigozhin or anybody else in check. And second, African governments and Africans generally have far more agency in dealing with Wagner than, than a lot of, folks believe. And so the security package that promotion offered in Africa was different.

And in each theater based on the needs of the host government but also could change over time and in response to, conflict or political developments. And this is another important aspect that we have to consider is that Wagner was always operating and at the very least, kind of politically unstable environments, but very often, places, that are, that have fallen into, into a civil war and kind of by definition, the state's presence is contested in significant territory. Wagner is a product of conflict; it not, it never started any of the conflicts in which it participated. And so by definition, no one is in charge. And so, like all intervenors, Wagner's day to day operations, at least over time, become much more reactive to events on the ground than, say, the product of long term strategic planning.

And finally, and I think Mark has also alluded to this quite well, is that, Prigozhin operated in an environment of constrained resources where there is a tax, as Mark alluded to, and the tax is also, essentially, a form also of virtue signaling to the regime on why you should still have continued access to the state's largesse. And the vast majority of Prigozhin, of the money that Prigozhin made over time came from his contracts with the Russian military and schools for food. And we can think of his Africa operations as almost a form of virtue signaling to the regime, to us as a means to justify his continued

access to, to those contracts. And so he thrived in that environment of ambiguity. But a lot of the, as Mark again said, a lot of the initiatives, that that we have often kind of tacked up to being kind of Russia's version of hybrid warfare in Africa, are really initiatives that Prigozhin and his associates have come up with themselves. And many of them, such as kind of disinformation, trolls, all of these have, their roots in, in, in Russia or early on before Wagner was created and Prigozhin wanted to, have better advertising for his Concord catering company or wanted to take down a Russian opposition figure to look good in front of Putin. So, essentially that means that Prigozhin was always operating in an environment where failure was the failure of the private individual and success was the government's success. And, and he did quite well in that environment until he appears to have been fed up with it, in Ukraine, which ultimately led to his demise.

But taking all of that into consideration, so where were we kind of in Africa at the time of Prigozhin's death? Well, Wagner had active operations in four countries. Each of the conflicts and each of, each of Wagner's interventions there were very different. In Libya, which, again, was a strong priority for the Russian government, you had heavy cooperation from the Ministry of Defense, and you also had no war since October 2020, when a cease fire was signed between Haftar's LNA and the Government of National Accord. In Sudan, you had just a training mission and gold mining activities. In the Central African Republic, you had extensive operations, and low MOD presence, because CAR is the least developed, poorest country in the world and not a priority. And in Mali, you had a historic MOD relationship with the Malians and Wagner personnel on the ground in a high intensity conflict between the government in Bamako and JNIM and ISIS in the center of the country and Tuareg separatists in north.

And so what happened? In Libya, we saw a relatively seamless transition over to Africa Corps, just not a direct descendant of Wagner, but has subsumed many of its structures. In Sudan, the civil war that broke out between the RSF and the Sudanese Armed forces in April made it impossible for anyone to operate. And we saw some early supplying on a kind of an ad hoc basis, of the RSF through CAR, but very little. We can talk about that perhaps later if folks are interested. In the Central African Republic, again, this was a low priority. And so when the MOD was looking to take over these types of operations, this it was simply kind of an idea of if it's not broke, don't fix it. So, you know,

we've seen kind of a transition of some personalities at the top, but most of the structures have stayed in place.

And in Mali, which is the most interesting case we've seen kind of a retention of the Wagner brand, but for very different reasons. And that's because unlike in CAR, which is now kind of a very low level insurgency with very poorly equipped insurgents, in CAR, there's a serious ethnic conflict in the center that's masking as a jihadist insurgency, and there's now a conflict in the north of the country with separatists. All of this is very difficult terrain, for any group, let alone 1500 mercenaries or contractors to be operating in. There's massive requirements of humanitarian aid and budgetary support that would be needed, political tension in Bamako. And so a lot of smart Russians who are passing through there have recognized that maybe it's not actually the best idea for us to take this over officially. And we'll keep the private, or at least the illusion of a private structure in case they eventually need to quit Mali. And I'll end there.

FELBAB-BROWN: And, thank you very much, John. You know, of course, we also just saw, a very significant attack on Wagner personnel in Mali, something we'll return to in the question and answer period. But it echoes the Krasikov on the tarmac metaphor. One of the reason why Wagner operated the way it did was because there was concerns about death toll of Russian people in Russia. If the Russian soldiers were dying in Africa, what kind of political blowback that would generate? Well, a tremendous amount of Russian soldiers are dying in Ukraine, 300,000, and yet there is very little blowback, at least visibly. So, which I also think is one of the reason why the Russian state was able to just officially embrace, Wagner Corps and make it into Africa Corps, because the fear of the repercussions of casualties domestically has just gone very significantly down.

Chris, you too have been watching, very closely Wagner's Africa Corps operation in Africa, have been producing, some of the leading analysis of the Wagner Group there. And the Naval War College is very lucky to have you on its faculty. What have you been seeing in the new theaters for Wagner Africa Corps? Niger, from which the United States was ingloriously expelled in the spring, losing its three hundred million base, and its key counterterrorism asset in West Africa and Burkina Faso.

FAULKNER: Yeah, great. First, thank you for having me. Like all the panelists have suggested, I'm thrilled to be here. Some great overviews so far. And, I'll kind of piggyback on some of the stuff John's talked about with the legacy deployments for the Wagner group and looking now at what is, from my perspective, kind of the new iteration, Africa Corps, specifically where, Burkina Faso and Niger, both didn't have legacy Wagner deployments. So I'm a beneficiary of a lot of John's good field work. So, kudos to him for being kind of a first mover in a lot of this space.

And, but I want to kind of mention is when we think about these two new environments, they are interesting, given the fact that Wagner didn't, from the best of my knowledge, exist in these spaces. Though there was a lot of speculation that a Wagner deployment was imminent in Burkina Faso, particularly around the September 2022 coup where, Ibrahim Traoré to power. There was a, you know, plethora of analysts speculating that Wagner was, it was the next domino to fall, if you will, in the Sahel. And we didn't really see it manifest that way for a few different reasons. John's written some of this stuff. I've written several pieces, to kind of have investigated this particular, context, this particular theater. And one of the things that's interesting is Traoré was very adamant, given Burkina Faso's long standing pro-sovereignty ideology, dating back to Thomas Sankara, that they would utilize volunteer, defense of the fatherland, the VDP to kind of be, I think the quote is, our Wagner. And so that resistance kind of manifested from the start of Traoré regime.

And I think that what we've ultimately seen is Russia capitalize on the continued jihadist violence that has plagued Burkina Faso. And Traoré feeling internal pressure, from his own military. You know, if you're tracking the news, we've seen several recent events in which, Burkinabe military has suffered ambushes from JNIM. And I think the death tolls from one in June were north of 100 personnel and a death toll in a recent attack, maybe even as early as last week or August., August 9th or 10th was another 100 plus soldiers killed. And so we're facing that kind of internal challenge, it becomes clear that an external actor and some force importing some type of security was a necessity. I'll tee that up with additionally talking about the trilateral alliance, the Alliance of Sahel States. And so, as John kind of already discussed, we saw Mali quickly ink a deal with the Wagner Group in December 2021. And as we've seen coups strike both Burkina Faso and Niger, we've seen a concerted effort to stand up a regional bloc. And this Alliance of Sahel States that is now, I think, fomented in a way that has made

Africa Corps a desired element for all three of these actors. So basically following suit with what Mali had done.

Now, Burkina Faso, to go back to this pro sovereignty ideology, I think John has mentioned this in a piece, maybe a year ago at this point, where one of the things that makes Africa Corps really desirable, if you're Burkina Faso, is it is a state to state relationship as opposed to a state to mercenary relationship. And so this is one of the things that maybe held up Traoré's regime to sign an agreement. And it's maybe now made it easier. And as of January of 2024, we've seen about 100 personnel. And I'm unclear if the, the rhetoric from the Foreign Minister Lavrov is actually come to fruition, the promise of an additional 200 personnel to be deployed. But kind of the best I can, can sense of it is what we've seen is really kind of just presidential security. We haven't seen, to the best of my knowledge, front line offensives like we've seen Wagner participants in in Mali or Central African Republic, it's very much been concentrated in the capital in Ouagadougou and training personnel as opposed to really serving as kind of an auxiliary force. And I think that a lot of this fits to the term Mark brought up earlier, the regime survival package. It really is become kind of a coup-proofing mechanism.

Now in Niger, that, Vanda, as you mentioned, the US was unceremoniously kicked out following a diplomatic kerfuffle and in 20, in March 2024. And we've seen, like other Wagner deployments, Africa Corps serve as kind of an opportunistic being to try to solidify some form of contract or agreement with, with the junta there. And so Tchiani's regime is, I think, looking for someone to backfill, the, the exit of the French and the exit of the United States. My cynical perspective is we're looking at 100 Africa Corps personnel that have been deployed to kind of insulate the regime. And, you know, to the best of my knowledge, it hasn't seemed like there's been a scaling up, despite rhetoric to the contrary, that there would be a scaling up of the mission set there. And this could be because of what's happening on the front in Ukraine. This could be for the challenges and looking at whether or not there's lucrative opportunities. As Mark said, Africa is complex and raw compared to some of these other theaters in which the Wagner Group had operated. And trying to create some type of commercial enterprise isn't really the forte of the GRU. And subsequently how we create a self-sufficient entity in Niger, I think it's been or it's proven a little bit challenging. It's also very new. We're

talking about an April 2024 deployment. I think the initial reporting was something like 100 personnel with some surface to air missiles with a training mission. It was unclear why this particular, you know, surface to air missiles were necessary given the threat that the Nigerian military is facing from jihadist groups. But nonetheless, this was kind of the, the way in which we could sell this, if you're the Russian state, as a valuable kind of partnership, to maybe, you know, snub the West, if you will.

And so that's kind of where I think we're at right now with what Africa Corps looks like. Still kind of in the elementary phase, kind of on the sitting on the fence and waiting to see what's going to transpire and whether or not the state, Moscow, will actually invest in real, genuine security. I think for these states that have gambled with Wagner and Africa Corps, you know, it's not a homogenous group, but we're looking at, very serious security challenges that the personnel that have been deployed in places like Burkina Faso and Niger are really inadequate to address.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, terrific, Chris, thank you very much. I have many questions for our conversation part. Also, enormous thanks to our audience. We have received more than 60 questions submitted in advance that I will cure for, that I will pick from and that I will curate. But before I do that, let me make some observations on my own, sort of capping what Russia's policy has been in Africa, how that fits with Wagner, and what are some of the new areas that we are seeing Russian activity in.

So, Wagner Africa Corps has had highly varied effectiveness, in terms of its battlefield performance. Its counterinsurgency operations have often been very unspectacular. The biggest success was in the Central African Republic, where the regime felt enormously threatened, the regime that was sanctioned under embargo but faced very local armed groups, and very ethnically underpinned local armed groups, very different kind of enemy that Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, JNIM, that we have already spoken about, very different than the, than the Islamic State in the Sahel province, much weaker capability though. So the success was against a pretty weak enemy. And we have seen Wagner failing, against even weaker enemies such as al-Shabab in Mozambique. But what, despite the very limit, I should also add that the Wagner Group has often been very determined to avoid actual military encounter with both JNIM and other al-Qaida groups and the Islamic State, and concentrated its operations on much more local actors, be they Tuareg groups, such as in Mali, as a

direct service to the government. Or even smaller actors, smaller militia groups, or artisanal miners in is desired to take over gold mines, diamond mines, other economic assets. So it's been very picky what enemy it takes. And when it confronts a more potent enemy and drives local actors like the Tuaregs back into the hands of JNIM, it is not surprising it will then end up in ambush. Like what we just saw in Mali. What it, however, has been selling in addition to the regime survival package, a term that the terrific RUSI paper, which Jack Watling used several months ago, is a license for brutality.

The problem with Western assistance from the perspective of many African countries is that it comes with annoyances such as observations of human rights and vetting and sanctions on arms transfer to local actors that are very brutal. Well, Russia's counter-insurgency policy is centered on brutality and not just brutality toward the insurgents, but brutality toward local populations to drive them away, to intimidate and to break them so the insurgent actors cannot use them in any way for support. And long term attrition is also very much part of the Russian counter-insurgency script. As is, however, the question if there were success against defeating JNIM, defeating the Islamic State in Africa province, how much need would the regimes have?

So the agent hired by the principal, the state, might not really have a full interest in crushing the, the opponent. But even when, the performance of the Wagner Group Africa Corps is very inadequate on the battlefield, it sells, it still sells the petroleum guard aspect. And in fact, I would posit that whether Wagner itself or the Russians staying behind is really trying to create a regime dependency on the Russian tool, whether it's visibly part of the Russian state or not. And it does so also through systematically engaging in driving up polarizations, provoking violence, and economic infiltration, as well as the use of organized crime groups on the continent.

So we have seen two new, several new areas of Russian activity. One of which is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This is a place where the Russian government has signed military deals with the government there. There was speculation for about two years when we are going to see Wagner Group officially arriving. That has never happened. There are very many, or at least not officially happened. There are very many Western, and not Western private security companies, Bulgarian, Romanian operating in DRC. But we have certainly seen a very systematic Russian engagement with

the government and with the military, with many fears in 2023, that a military coup will take place in DRC, a country facing M23 insurgency, massively supported by Rwanda, and struggling militarily on the battlefield. And I think the risk was very high that the coup would take place. Ultimately, we haven't seen it. We've seen President Felix Tshisekedi reelected, with questionable elections. And if you are more interested in DRC, I would suggest you watch our July event, in which we dealt, delved very significantly and in detail into what's happening in the country. But certainly Russia is playing for influence and much as the US is trying to counter the influence, it's a country where the great power competition will continue to be playing out, intensely.

We have also, over the past several months seen Russian thrust into some of other central African and African countries, such as Sao Tomé and Príncipe, where Russia signed the military deal in May, selling weapons, equipment and training, and where, in my view, quite significantly, the government has, is keen to be sending its forces to Ramzan Kadyrov's academy. This, for proxy actors; it's the Russian university of special operations forces in Chechnya. But it really trains proxy actors. And I think there is a good deal of concern about how those linkages will develop and how they are a beachhead for more extensive Russian presence.

And we also see quite significant effort in Russia to get into Guinea-Bissau, one of the poorest, most unstable countries, highly coup prone with a very weak president, that has had some democratic revival over the past decade, but where Russia has recently canceled some of its, some of the debt that Guinea-Bissau owes Russia. And is restructuring another debt. And I am, but particularly in watching Guinea Bissau because even if there is no official Africa Corps deployment, extensive Russian intelligence, military proxy presence there, military advisory presence will put Russia even closer to the massive cocaine trade that runs through Guinea-Bissau, and the very many organized crime groups from Latin America, from Africa, that operate there. And, just thicken, at least the possibility of thickening the linkages between Russian intelligence operations and criminal groups. And, of course, Russian intelligence services are well known to be readily and eagerly using criminal groups for the purposes.

So with that, let me now start taking, or start fielding to our participants, some of the questions from the audience that we have received. And let me just start by, the first one, that I already mentioned, which is the recent deaths of some 50 Wagner operatives in Mali, two others were presumably captured by JNIM. We received very many questions from the audience about that. And, with sort of two thrusts to the questions and I'll, I'll pose them and ask each of you to reflect on them.

So one large thrust of the question is, what does this mean for Wagner Group? Do these 50 deaths matter? What does it mean for Russia's use of Africa Corps? And the second large question is, what role, if any, Ukrainian intelligence operations had in helping the Tuareg separatist, the Azawad movement to, in in the attack, in the ambush of the, of the Wagner Group Africa Corps convoy. And this is, of course, significant because, for many reasons, including, this would be a second major, allegedly second major, expansion of Ukrainian intelligence operations in Africa. A year ago, we were looking at the attack on a RSF weapons convoy that was attributed to Ukrainian intelligence. But it's also significant because the Tuareg are back with JNIM, al-Qaida-like terrorist group. So for Ukrainian intelligence to be supporting a group that is very close to a major militant, terrorist militant, organization, jihadist organization, would be a significant move. So two, two sets of issues. Angela, let me start with you and then, go, in order of your reflections on Ukraine's role and the implications of the deaths.

STENT: So, I think that, you know, my other colleagues are better positioned to answer the question of the impact of these deaths on Wagner's operations as a whole. I haven't seen anything that would make me believe until now that it's had a major impact. If I listen to what my colleagues have said that obviously the Africa Corps, etc. are operating in all of these different countries on different levels, I suppose you could say it could be potentially an example to other groups in Africa who oppose what the Russians are doing. But I think, you know, that would imply that these groups would have good information about what happened.

It seems to me this was maybe a one off and it wouldn't necessarily have any impact. And I don't have any independent information on Ukrainian intelligence links with the Tuareg. I've obviously read the stories. If they were indeed involved, that's another, you know, sign to the Russians that, that they can

also combat the Russians in other areas, that they have their own means of trying to sabotage what the Russians are doing. But as I said, I don't have any independent information on that.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thanks. Mark.

GALEOTTI: Yeah. I mean, first of all, in terms of 50 deaths, obviously 50 deaths is 50 tragedies. But on the other hand, does it actually matter in and of itself? I doubt it. Unless it's the start of a trend. And in that case, obviously it would have an effect on Wagner/Africa Corps' kind of brand name, but also its capacity to recruit, the morale of its fighters, and suchlike. I mean, this is this is the funny thing. And obviously, one of the interesting things we'll be watching is whether or not Africa Corps become begins to become localized, in other words, depending more upon troops hired in Africa to conduct operations in Africa under Russian officers, because there is the question that Africa Corps is having to compete with the Wagner-like structures that are fighting in Ukraine and other elements of the Russian state. So you know that, that, that's where I think it would matter. In terms of the Ukrainian role, I am a little skeptical. GUR, Ukrainian military intelligence, Ukrainian counterpart to the GRU, you know, part of its, its mission is to be conducting information operations. And therefore, we quite often find them making statements that could be perhaps best described as mischievous, precisely because they're trying to get under the skin of, of the Kremlin or otherwise distract and dismay. So, you know, obviously, I you know, I wait to see where the sort of the hard evidence is, but, I, I tend to feel that a lot of GUR press releases, because after all this, we have seen very little evidence, tend to be ones that we have to treat with a considerable amount of caution.

FELBAB-BROWN: John, please.

LECHNER: Sure. Yeah. I just wrote an article on this, so perhaps I can cut out a few thoughts, because I think it does, that that's do represent, something interesting, but I think it represents something interesting in terms of the separate echo chambers that exist in Africa versus in the West when we're thinking about Wagner. And so I would say just very briefly, you know, we have to keep in mind Wagner is in these areas because the West also failed in its counterterrorism mission. They came in to fight the jihadists, and things got worse over time. And, Wagner, the selling point is that

they will pursue the mandate that the African governments want them to pursue. Bamako and Mali was not as interested about the center of the country and ISIS and JNIM getting more territory. They wanted to go after the separatists in the north, because that was an issue of sovereignty, and the French prevented them from doing that. So Wagner comes in, their major selling point is to take Kidal. They do that, they extend themselves too far and they lose 50 guys. If they pack up their bags tomorrow, then yes, that's a failure. But if they don't and they reinvest in the conflict, then that's actually making a statement to African governments to the opposite, which is we're willing to lose 50 guys in Africa and continue to pursue the mission that you guys want us to pursue. And I think we can all say that the West, you know, the US, if they lost 50 people in Mali, there would be a lot of congressional hearings about what exactly happened and a lot of pressure to pull out. And so in a way, they're able to show that they have skin in the game. Now, I'm not saying, you know, lose 50 guys every day and people will be happy with that, but it does show that they're willing to be on the ground.

And, you know, ultimately when it comes to, you know, some of the, the issues like praetorian guard or support for autocracies, I think we confuse often intentions and results. We judge the other based on the results of their intervention. We judge ourselves based on our intentions. And so Wagner is, you know, everyone that I speak to involved in Wagner or the Russians, they firmly believe that they are bringing stability to the region. They firmly believe that the West has created a culture of dependency in these countries, that they deliberately, through their policies, were actually creating chaos because the interventions only resulted in more jihadists over time. And so, from their perspective, they are the ones who actually have a track record of taking on ISIS in Syria, of taking on jihadists in their home in Chechnya. And so they have a product that they can offer to these governments. And, and so I think that's something that we have to keep in mind that there's a different story, a different narrative in Africa, which is much more kind of aligned with this new sovereignty movement where African governments don't want to be criticized about human rights abuses, especially given what's going on in the Middle East currently. And, you know, some of the things that the West supports and the, and so we have to just take that in mind. I think you're on mute.

FAULKNER: I think that was for me to go too, Vanda? Yeah, I think, I think John's laid it out quite nicely, and I too, I wrote a piece. Beneficiary again of several analysts who are kind of, closely examining the media reporting in the, in the aftermath of the ambush. And so I won't repeat a lot of what John said, but I do think one of the important elements is who the audience the Africa Corps/Wagner Group is auditioning for is very much the local actors. And so to the degree to which the West could project onto this as a major loss and a consequence that, you know, as I even suggested, shows the limits of an organization like Wagner or Africa Corps. It's also, to John's point, showing the value of getting in the fight with you. And, I think that's distinct from what Western counterterrorism partners did in the past, and shows that they recognize Bamako's agency in this entire thing. I mean, I think that's a really important signal.

The other element which is still unfolding that I think is interesting from this dynamic is there's some chatter, it's difficult to verify, and maybe I'll defer to John of whether he's got any firsthand accounts of this, is tensions between the Malian army and Wagner personnel or Africa Corps personnel that might boil over as events like this transpire. You know, there's a lot of speculation of the bill that Wagner was charging for their contract with Bamako. 10 million a month is what the cycle keeps suggesting. You know, I don't have hard and fast figures if that's remained true, post- the effort to take it over. But at some point, might there be some disgruntlement should the security situation not get better? I think John's kind of explained that, maybe not, because of the mission set that the Wagner and Africa Corps have pursued in terms of targeting Tuaregs and separatists in the north of the country.

On the second point, on the Ukraine intelligence, I kind of land the camp that my, my colleagues here do. There's a lot of great speculation that it might have existed, but, to Mark's point, I think they, there's an incentive in this information space to, to be ambiguous and maybe signal we did or we didn't. I think the broader theme is there are serious consequences in terms of Ukraine's legitimacy with some of these African states. So when you're competing in this kind of political sphere with Moscow, I think that Kyiv maybe undermined itself by being ambiguous in this space, because we've seen Mali cut diplomatic ties and Nigeria quickly follow suit. And so that's all to say, I can't really suggest that they were involved in the intel, but there are consequences for not coming out that you weren't involved in it. I'll stop there.

FELBAB-BROWN: You know, I actually have a different take a bit here, Chris. So whether or not, Ukrainian intelligence was involved, I am actually not think, I actually don't think that Ukraine is paying very high price in Africa because it never got a good price in Africa. And what was stunning in Africa was overwhelming support for Russia, or at least dismissals of Russia's egregious aggression in Ukraine. Just little, little embrace in Ukraine despite determined Ukrainian efforts to get more Africa world. I would also kind of add that I don't think that the 50 deaths have very much of a significance at all. It's, I, you know, mentioned 300,000 Russians are dead in Ukraine. 50 deaths, semi- and not so semi-mercenaries dying in Mali is not very significant from at least the public perspective or the change of operations, which has been to avoid the big guys in their fight and to go after the much lower actors.

But to me, the significant question is whether we are going to see an enormously brutal Africa Corps retaliation, if not against JNIM, against the Tuareg population up north, and whether this would help provoke, create the counterproductive effect, in fact, help provoke more resistance and create far greater trouble than the seeming success in Kidal had several months ago. And I would finally add here, you know, Mark's comment about, are we going to see, the Wagner using local militias? But they have been all along; a crucial element of the strategy in the Central African Republic was working with militias, splitting some of the militias back to its side and letting them conduct, a lot of the fighting. And that's essentially the core strategy in Burkina, where, of course, the militia brutality is intense. Mark, I'm seeing you want to come in a bit more before I turn to the next question on the Central African Republic.

GALEOTTI: Just very briefly, I absolutely agree with you that Ukraine has not had an any kind of real strong diplomatic support from Africa. But at the same time, certainly in the past year, there has been a lot of effort from Washington, from London, from Brussels, from Paris, precisely to turn that around. And certainly speaking to some British contacts who've been involved. I mean, they were throwing up their hands and saying, look how much of the effort we've done to try to persuade people that Ukraine is the good guys and Russians are the bad guys gets undermined when you give the Russians the

opportunity to say, why are the Ukrainians in bed with al-Qaida? Of course, that's not an accurate representation, but since when has that been the case in PR?

FELBAB-BROWN: Very well, very well taken. And certainly I am, I would actually be much more concerned about the imagery in the West of any kind of indirect proximity for al-Qaida-like groups than even the implications, the diplomatic implications, in Africa.

So let's look at the Central African Republic, where something fascinating or seemingly fascinating was taking place across the spring and late winter, where, you know, the ground rock, the ground, the ground zero of Wagner Africa Corps operation, for so many years with the greatest infiltration, penetrations, of many Russian advisors into the government structures, even Russian ex-GRU officials serving as the national security advisor for a while.

There were all these rumors that, the Central African Republic was getting tired with Wagner and Africa Corps and the US invested a great deal of diplomatic efforts to try to persuade the Central African Republic to shed Wagner and perhaps hire Bancroft, a U.S. private military company, instead. John, let me start with you, and I'll go around to anyone else, Chris and Mark and Angela, if you want to come in. What, was the Central African Republic was taking the U.S. all along for a ride? Was that ever at all serious that they were willing to shed, the Central African Republic, or was it the most, was it a brilliant disinformation ploy? Let's just toy with the U.S. and have them waste their diplomatic effort and focus here on something that would not materialize.

LECHNER: Sure. I mean, I think it's a great example of something that we've been hitting on quite a bit, which is the agency of African governments and Africans in terms of dealing with these outside powers. And by no means does that mean that the relationships are equal, right. The Central African Republic is the poorest, least developed country in the world. But even they, even Touadéra, the president, even the even the elite in Bangui are still able to play outside powers against each other in order to perpetuate their own domestic standing.

And so Touadéra has been an expert at balancing, even though he he's come to rely so much on Wagner Group for his security, he still has done an, I mean, you can say whatever you know, you want about, you know, whether it's good or it's bad, but he has still managed to keep a relationship with the United States. He still managed to keep NGOs in the country. He's recently met with Macron in France. And so, these countries have, since the Cold War, become experts at balancing, the, these outside powers in order to enhance their own domestic standing. And so it's not surprising at all that that he would engage in this kind of activity as a way to create some leverage over the Russians as well.

FELBAB-BROWN: Chris or Mark or Angela? Would any of you like to add anything to that? Chris, please.

FAULKNER: Yeah, I'll be brief. I think one of the parts, to think about, and I don't know that I have a strong position on what the answer is, but more, what the offer would entail. In other words, hitching your wagon to Wagner and Africa Corps, there's very clearly things that they will do that the West cannot offer. You know, from the presidential security element in ensuring Touadéra's survival. You know, maybe that's easier to do, but there might come up, there might be strings attached, as we've all talked about already, that, the government is unwilling to part with when it comes to, to Wagner Group. And so I think that thinking creatively about what can be offered, in addition to the hard security element, is the part where just backfilling with a new private military company that's Western in nature isn't really going to whet the beak of the Central African Republic government.

FELBAB-BROWN: Mark, anything?

GALEOTTI: I mean, just simply, I'm, John, I'm really pleased that you made that point about the agency, of the countries, because I think this is something that, you know, with the best will in the world we too often lose track of. We see this as, again, great games, rather than realizing the degree to which actually, more than anything else, probably the most important single dynamic is the degree to which local actors are desperately trying to screw the Russians, the French, the Americans, whoever, out of whatever resources they can get. And in that respect, the Russians actually have one

key advantage, which is precisely that, that they are deeply corrupt and ruthless. And something that we haven't really mentioned is how far underpinning so many of these is not just the overt offer of, you know, what can they provide? It's also who are they willing to pay off and to what to what degree. And again, I think that's something that, you know, is an inevitable fact that needs to be sort of factored in.

FELBAB-BROWN: I want, John, I see you, I want to give a chance to Angela. And, then I have two final questions for everyone. Anything you would like to add to Central African Republic?

LECHNER: Yeah. No, I would just kind of follow up and say, you know, at the end of the day, as folks have mentioned, what, as Chris mentioned, what is the offer? I mean, again, we can come back to no one, no one, from the perspective of the Central African Republic, has been willing to offer what Wagner offered, which is putting men on the ground in the provinces to pursue these armed groups and for people, for their men to die out there. And, you know, the U.S. does not have an interest in and putting its own soldiers on the ground for a country like the Central African Republic. And so Touadéra --

FELBAB-BROWN: --the U.S., which was Bancroft, right?

LECHNER: We even get down to, you know, would Bancroft be willing, you know, to, to do that kind of work? I don't I don't know, but I mean, there's a lot there's a lot that they're doing that would be very difficult to replace. And for African governments, it's much more of a put up or shut up type of situation now at this point.

FELBAB-BROWN: Right. And I want to echo the, the US cannot, the West cannot and should not be offering license and mechanisms for just brutal onslaught, brutality and slaughter of everyone, like Russia Africa Corps and Wagner do. Angela, do you want to add anything on this or should I go to the next question?

STENT: I mean, I would briefly say, this isn't about the Central African Republic, but in general, since the war with Ukraine began, we've seen more and more countries in the Global South, y'know,

unwilling to take a stand and playing, and successfully playing off Russia, sometimes China and the United States against each other. So this is, I mean, what's happening in Africa specific to Wagner, what we're discussing, but this is a much more general phenomenon that we've seen quite recently. India being a prime example.

FELBAB-BROWN: And part of the phenomenon, of course, is not just the legacy of Cold War and knowing how to play the actors against each other and know when to cry Islamic terrorism as opposed to some other issue. But the fact that countries that have gone fully authoritarian, that have pulled off coups, are not paying much of a price. Yes, they get sanctions by the West, the Western military support and perhaps economic sanctions have come down. But the replacement of Russia with weapons and China with vast economic investments, or not so vast economic investments, often troubling ones. But China is, yet another actor that steps in into the Western void. So the Western bargaining power has gone significantly down as countries are not paying a very, hard price for pulling off coup d'états.

So I have two questions for the last two rounds, and I ask everyone to be brief. Let me start with the first one, which is what has been happening with the restructuring of Wagner's economic assets, economic enterprises, investments, in Africa. We get much less of a sense of that than we see with the military component. Mark talked about how much more difficult that is to grasp and is structured, more limited GRU skills in that. Where are we with that and what can we say about that? Mark, maybe I'll start with you.

GALEOTTI: Okay, give me that question and then ask me to be brief. Very unfair. No, I mean, I think this is the thing, we have to appreciate that in some ways, we're talking about three separate pots of investments or assets. One of them are those that were clearly transferred as a way of paying the price for Wagner's services, you know, the gold and the diamond mines and suchlike. And in a way, those are to a degree locked in with, with contracts. Secondly, we have what could be considered to be strategic level kind of Concord Investments, which largely, in my opinion, have been have been gobbled up or hollowed out and assets stripped to very little, because essentially the state didn't really appreciate their importance, but predators did. And then the third one are, were really

corrupt ventures. You know, we see a whole variety, whether it's in terms of, in parallel with the flows of resources to pay for Wagner's services which flowed particularly to the UAE, we also see a kind of a parallel stream of money laundering. And some other, you know, you mentioned about the connections with organized crime. I mean, this is one of the key ways in which actually, in some ways, organized crime becomes laundered by state level assets. So I think you might say the contractual ones are still present because that they're largely contractually locked. The sort of strategic investments have been, as I said, largely stolen and hollowed out. And the corrupt ventures do seem to be still running perfectly well. But what's happened is just simply a new collection of partners, again, largely connected to GRU have rolled in and said, well, we're going to be wanting our cut to allow this to continue. But the point is, everyone has an interest in letting the corruption flow.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, Angela, let me come to you with this question of the economic significance of what's been happening in Africa and couple it with Western sanctions on Russia. You mentioned in your talk, the Russian economy is booming. The war economy is up. How significant is the gold flow, the diamond flow and the resources in Africa today for the Russian economy as a mechanism to escape sanctions? Or has that importance decreased?

STENT: Oh, I think it's important. I mean, I think the other thing to say about sanctions is we now know that there's so many mechanisms by which Russia has been evading sanctions. Other countries have been helping Russia evade sanctions. Turkey, a number of Central Asian countries. So I think these resources are important still for the Kremlin. But, you know, there's they've been sinking so much money now into, weapons production, into putting the country on a war footing that, that this adds to it, but I don't think it's, it's not, I would say, a crucial element. Because the question is, you know, I mean, others can answer this better than I can, how many how many of these resources actually do go back to the Kremlin? And how many of them stay in other people's hands?

FELBAB-BROWN: Chris, let me turn to you with the economic portfolio. Of course, the big prize in Niger was uranium. Something that Russia wants to create a dependence in Europe on its own supply. What is happening with the uranium mine in Niger, who has access to it, what's the division

between Russia and China in that space, and any other broader comments you would like to make over the restructuring of Wagner's economic resources.

FAULKNER: Yeah. I may have to defer to one of my counterparts on what's happened with the uranium mine. I think one of the big things we've seen is a, a break with the French, and efforts by the Iranians, the Chinese and the Russians to try to come in and backfill that vacancy, in ways that are advantageous for their, their domestic economies. And then I think I'm a little cynical with Russia. I mean, they promised uranium facilities in other states or, and nuclear facilities in other states and have fallen short on ever making good on it. So, whether or not they're able to commandeer what, I can't remember the French corporation that was basically kicked out, but whether they able to take that over, I'm probably not the best position to weigh in on it.

But broadly speaking, from the economic portfolio, I mean, I think that, I'll use Central African Republic to be brief. I think that's where the economy was most, visible, the Wagner economy was most visible, the Prigozhin infrastructure was most visible. I think that served as kind of a model to try to export to a place like Mali that didn't really work in the same ways. And so those economic structures never really took root in Mali. And I don't think that to Mark's earlier point, the GRU is necessarily well positioned to try to stand up commercial ventures or overtake or commandeer commercial ventures from the Prigozhin enterprise in Africa. That's my that's my perspective on it. What I have, the other element here that I think is important to note is we've seen African states try to reclaim agency over their, their resources via mining code changes, Mali being the clear frontrunner in this space to try to, to ensure increased access and wealth generation from their gold industry. And we saw Niger and Burkina Faso follow suit over the last year with changes to their mining code that would then give the government an increased stake. And whether or not that's to appease the Russians or enhance their economic prosperity, remains to be seen. But that's kind of my overview of the economic portfolio. And I think it's, you know, broadly speaking I think it's inherently murky. That was by design. So.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you, John, I'll turn to for one minute and then I have a question for everyone. One minute answer. What are the most important thing or a few most important things that

the United States, the West, should adopt vis-a-vis Russia in Africa. And then you will each have one minute to answer that. So before that, John, you have one minute, to add to anything about the economic portfolio restructuring.

LECHNER: Yeah, in one minute. It's been way overstated how much Wagner made in Africa. And it's, it's an example of them often getting their butts handed to them on these mining concessions. These are places in conflict where people are artisanal mining, which means with pickaxes and with their hands. It's not an easy environment to work in. And a lot of the estimates that have come out about how much Wagner was making are, in some cases, multiple times larger than the whole GDP of the Central African Republic. So was Prigozhin making money that was, you know, good for an individual? Yes. I wouldn't say no to \$100 million or \$200 million. Is that significant to the Kremlin? No.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much. And the prime example is the gold mine, which keeps attributing 2 billion to Wagner group where the entire potential production of the mine is estimated at that price tag.

LECHNER: Which also involves investing hundreds of millions of dollars to get it to an industrial scale.

FELBAB-BROWN: Exactly. So, Angela, what to do or not to do against Russia in Africa or vis-à-vis Russia in Africa?

STENT: Well, I mean, I think the main thing is that the U.S. still needs to be present there. I mean, what we've seen is the opposite trend. We've been withdrawing. You know, in the past few years, we've been thrown out of some countries, as we've been discussing. But it's to redouble, you know, the US's efforts to make the, the different countries in Africa understand that this is an important country, that we do, you know, want to work with them and not to make them feel ignored, because I think that's one of the reasons why it's also much easier for them to turn to other patrons.

And the other thing I'll mention is, I did this study last year about Russia in the Global South, and interviewed, you know, a number of people in different countries. The U.S. is very bad at countering Russian disinformation. Also Chinese as well, but we need much better information operations, if I can use the phrase that we need to make the different African countries understand our point of view, and also understand what it is, that Russia and China and other countries are doing there. And we just we haven't been very good at it. We've neglected it. We need to do it more.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much. Brilliant. Mark.

GALEOTTI: Yeah, I'm going to follow up from that. I mean, I think that we have to realize that Russia doesn't really have an Africa strategy. Instead, it is scavenging whatever opportunities that happen to kind of crop up, it will try and grab on the most cost-effective basis. So really, if we want to combat this, we actually have to ensure that we do not abandon spaces, create vacuums and also create hypocrisies that then the Russians will use to lambaste us. So a lot of it is actually just sort of fitting, actually making sure that we do, we do what we say we're going to do.

And finally, I mean, again, go back to the monetary side of things. Mercenary forces actually are quite expensive things. They require resupply. They require payments to be made often actually in hard currency and so forth. We could be doing a lot more to actually be trying to, to hit the financial flows. This is not like the Kremlin exactly, as John said, expect a lot of money out of Wagner, but it does not expect to be bankrolling Wagner. That's the key thing, the point of which becomes a cost to the Kremlin, then I don't think they'll be interested.

FELBAB-BROWN: But of course, there have all along been flows in direct or indirect ways between the Russian state, the Kremlin, and Wagner, both in Ukraine but also in Africa. And just on the point of let's not be hypocritical and let's not leave. Well, there is a big inherent tension where the US centers so much of this policy in Africa on democracy, how do you stay when the country goes authoritarian, whereas Russia is very glad when a country goes authoritarian? John, your thoughts?

LECHNER: Yeah. And I think that gets to the crux of the issue is the hypocrisy, right? I mean, we've talked about how Russia supports authoritarianism in Africa, the West also supports authoritarianism in Africa, in Chad, for example, right. There's been, you know, a constitutional coup that hasn't really gotten a lot of criticism from the West. And those things are picked up, right? I mean, this is an age where, you know, everybody now is getting cell phones. Everybody knows what's going on in the news. And so, ironically, they'll see full Western support for Ukraine's territorial integrity or for Israel's policies against, you know, terrorism. And they'll say, well, wait a minute, why, why are we the low priority here? And that's where Russia has been very effective at basically coming in and saying, no, you know, we're going to prioritize you.

FELBAB-BROWN: Chris, your last one-minute comment, please.

FAULKNER: Very, very briefly. I think that, as everyone suggested, Russia provides one thing and that is hard security. And I don't know that they provide a ton of other, you know, kind of carrots, if you will, to their African partners. The West alternatively, can't provide that kind of hard security or should not provide just hard security. And that's one of the things that becomes the difficult balancing act. So rather than provide you with a great solution on how to do so, I mean, unfortunately one of these things is these juntas are making mistakes. And unfortunately, the consequence is, you know, brutality against civilians. But, I hate to say the wait and watch your enemy make mistakes along the way, because that really puts it like a Cold War kind of, redo, and I don't think that's the best policy. But not divesting in nontraditional, hard security things, instead investing in, you know, civil society. To Angela's point, information operations getting better at kind of publicizing the Russians shortcomings and, becoming the partner of choice. I know it sounds cliché, but I do think that that's one of the things where the West has to get better, the US specifically.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, I would, you know, perhaps even phrase it that Russia provides hard power. Does it provide hard security? It's an altogether different question. And for very many people it does not provide security. But perhaps it provides survival, longevity, for brutal government. And yes, you know, of course, the United States has many times been hypocritical. But I will still point out that hypocrisy is the price that vice pays to virtue. It's much better to be hypocritical and hopefully,

sometimes also be honest and stand up to one's principle than to being openly for authoritarianism, for brutality, for disregard for civil liberties and simply to ignore all human rights issues as countries such as Russia and China often publicly do in Africa. So, don't kiss the authoritarian regimes on the tarmac, even if you have to deal with them in the background would be my contribution, to how U.S. policy will have to be conducted, at least in some places in Africa.

Very many thanks to our absolutely brilliant speakers, Angela Stent, Mark Galeotti, John Lechner, and Chris Faulkner. It's been enormously, enormously enlightening, having you with us today. Very many thanks to our audience, for your interest in the event. Please continue watching for more events coming out from the Initiative of Non-State Armed Actors such as on 9/11, our event on Afghanistan, further events from the Africa Security Initiative on many of these events, on many developments in Africa, in the fall. Thank you.