

Wagner PMC Coup d'état: Unmasking the Escalating Danger of Private Military Contractors to National Security

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Cover Image Attribute: On June 24, 2023, a combatant from the Wagner private mercenary group was seen keeping watch in the street adjacent to the Southern Military District's headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. / Source: Stringer/REUTERS

The escalating tension between Moscow's military hierarchy and Yevgeny Prigozhin, the outspoken leader of the private military contractor Wagner, has now escalated into an overt revolt, thrusting Russia into fresh instability and a tangible risk of civil strife.

Wagner PMC Coup d'état

Russia has fortified security at vital facilities and government buildings and mobilized military vehicles in response to a reported "*coup d'état*" threat from the Wagner Private Military Company (Wagner PMC, Группа Вагнера). As per the TASS news agency, these military vehicles were observed in central Moscow early Saturday.

The heightened security measures came after Russia initiated a criminal investigation into calls for an armed mutiny. This move was triggered by allegations from Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner mercenary group, that Moscow had targeted his forces with lethal missile attacks, to which he promised retaliation. He has pledged to avenge what he claims, albeit without any substantiating evidence, was the Russian army's massacre of 2,000 of his combatants.

Prigozhin has openly invited Russians to support his forces and seek retribution against Moscow's military leadership in what is perceived as the most brazen challenge to President Vladimir Putin since the onset of hostilities in Ukraine last year.

Although Prigozhin's private military group has played a significant role in Russia's offensive in Ukraine, he has been embroiled in an increasingly acrimonious dispute with Moscow's military leadership, which he alleges has resulted in direct conflict on the battlefield.

Prigozhin has consistently pointed fingers at Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov, the head of the general staff, accusing them of being responsible for the death of his soldiers in the Ukraine campaign.

NOTE: Prigozhin established Wagner as a covert mercenary group engaged in conflicts in eastern Ukraine and in support of Russian-endorsed objectives globally. The Wagner mercenaries have historically been involved in numerous operations across the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, Mozambique, Ukraine, and Syria. Over time, they have garnered a particularly notorious reputation and have been associated with numerous human rights violations.

Editor's Opinion

In recent years, there's been a significant rise in the deployment of private military contractors (PMCs) in various conflict zones worldwide. With their armies for hire, these entities represent an industry valued in the billions, promising efficiency, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness. However, as PMCs grow more prominent and influential, they become an escalating risk to the governments that commission them. This op-ed explores these contractors' potential threats to national security, sovereignty, and diplomatic standing.

The inherent lack of accountability within the PMC industry is at the heart of the issue. Unlike national military and security forces, which are directly accountable to the state

and its citizens, PMCs operate in a gray area. Although governments contract them, they're fundamentally private entities driven by profit. This dichotomy generates significant oversight and control issues. The absence of robust international regulation and the challenges of enforcing national laws in conflict zones often result in PMCs functioning without legal constraint, sparking concerns about potential human rights abuses and war crimes. When accountability is diluted, it's national governments that face the backlash for their contractors' misdeeds, tarnishing their international reputation and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the growing reliance on PMCs signifies outsourcing of state responsibilities that may prove dangerous. The use of private forces can weaken national military structures, undermining their operational capacity and creating dependency. Indeed, outsourcing warfare raises questions about national sovereignty and the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, a pillar of modern governance. If the tide continues to turn towards privatization, we risk eroding our state military's skills and experience, potentially leaving our national security in the hands of commercial entities.

National security may also be compromised if these PMCs fall into the wrong hands. Due to their inherently private nature, there's always the risk that they could be contracted by malicious actors, including hostile foreign governments, terrorist organizations, or even organized criminal networks. This risk is amplified by the global nature of the PMC industry, with contractors often working for multiple governments and non-state actors, further blurring lines of allegiance and control.

The rapid proliferation and influence of PMCs have raised questions about political interference and influence as well. Well-financed PMCs can wield immense lobbying power within their home countries. This may give them undue influence over defense and foreign policies, creating conflicts of interest and threatening the integrity of democratic decision-making processes. Moreover, the inherently clandestine nature of these operations often means they are conducted with little to no public oversight, putting at risk the transparency and accountability that are fundamental to democratic systems.

There is also a substantial risk that PMCs can be used to bypass constitutional constraints and international laws. Governments may resort to contractors to conduct operations that would otherwise be deemed unlawful or unacceptable for national troops. This can include tasks like assassinations, coups, or even acts of aggression against other countries. Using PMCs provides a layer of deniability for states, making it possible to engage in activities that may undermine international peace and stability.

Finally, overreliance on PMCs may inhibit long-term peacebuilding and diplomatic efforts. Historically, military actions have been last-resort tools employed when diplomatic avenues have been exhausted. However, the accessibility and perceived efficiency of PMCs may lower the threshold for military intervention, leading to rash decision-making and missed opportunities for diplomatic solutions. PMCs are not designed to engage in nation-building or peacekeeping. They are there to fulfill a contract, not to foster lasting

stability. This perspective could further exacerbate conflict situations and prolong wars, contrary to the interests of states and international peace.

The rising prominence of PMCs in conflict situations worldwide presents significant risks for national governments. These concerns about accountability, sovereignty, security, political influence, legality, and peacebuilding need to be taken seriously. Governments must rethink their reliance on these entities, and the international community needs to consider creating more robust regulatory structures to oversee the PMC industry. Failure to address these challenges could lead to a future where warfare is not only outsourced but out of control. As we tread this slippery slope, it is paramount that we consider the possible consequences to our national security, international reputation, and the global order.

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