

Shining a light on Mali's deal with the Wagner Group: a recipe for disaster

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Introduction

Worry has spread across the world as relations between Mali and France have been steadily breaking down. Last July, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that his country would be putting an end to Operation Barkhane (aimed at fighting jihadism in the Sahel in collaboration with the Sahel G5) as soon as the beginning of 2022.

The French government reckons that its operation is not well adapted enough to the region's needs and requires a transformation to combat ever-evolving threats. As a result, more than 2,500 French soldiers out of 5,000 are currently being withdrawn from the Sahel. The goal is to reintegrate them, to serve as the backbone of the European Takuba Task Force.

These plans were not well received in Mali. Its government has gone through a rough couple of years, with two-staged coups in August 2020 and an ever-since struggling transitional government. Therefore, as a response, Mali has shifted its attention to Russia and its private military industry. This September, it asked the Wagner Group, a private military company with suspected ties to the Kremlin, to help them conduct counter-terrorism operations.

While Mali and Russia deny any deal of the sort having been struck, Sergei Lavrov's speech at the latest UN General Assembly meeting only confirms things. As he stated when referring to Malian authorities, "They appealed to a private military company from Russia due to the fact that, as I understand it, France wants to significantly reduce its military contingent, which was there to fight terrorists" (Interfax.RU).

Diplomatic relations between the two countries date back to 1960, so the present-day dialogue should not necessarily come as a surprise. However, governments worldwide have reacted negatively as they watch a 10 million USD per month deal surface between the two parties. So, what is really at stake with these ongoing negotiations? And what kind of implications could this deal have for both Mali and Russia? What can we expect for the future?

Why to worry?

The European Union's position on the matter is clear. High Representative of the Union for Foreign Relations and Security Policy Josep Borrell stated, "An eventual intervention by the paramilitary Wagner Society in Mali, whose abuses in other countries have been proven, would have immediate consequences for cooperation between the EU and the Transitional Government" (Swissinfo.CH).

Indeed, Wagner is present in many other countries, including Ukraine, Sudan, Libya, Mozambique, the Central African Republic, and Syria. While the Group lives in complete secrecy, it is known for perpetrating human rights abuses, including attacks on civilians, torture, and rape, and causing great instability in said countries. Unfortunately, onlookers around the globe are warning that the same will happen to Mali if it follows through with this deal, causing direct consequences for its citizens and political stability.

Wagner's involvement in the Central African Republic provides a good example of what may happen to Mali if an agreement is reached (J. Siegle and D. Eizenga). The Russian group first established its presence there in 2013. But everything changed in 2018 when president Touadéra employed 400 mercenaries to instruct local forces and assist in putting an end to rebel groups present in the area. As part of the deal, Wagner also went on to serve as Touadéra's presidential guard. In 2020, the country held new controversial presidential elections, which were again won by Touadéra thanks to undivided support from the paramilitary group. Russia was clearly interested in maintaining its sphere of influence in Africa, and to do so, it was necessary to keep its ally in power. Touadéra's victory has allowed the Group to consolidate their presence in the country. Unfortunately, it has also allowed them to commit more atrocious human rights abuses, and the Central African Republic's president is in no position to do anything about it. Russia's presence has clearly compromised the country's sovereignty, and this may well happen to Mali if it blindly trusts the paramilitary group. Not to mention that the Wagner Group would be paid about 6 billion CFA francs (10.8 million USD) a month for its intervention (J. Irish and D. Lewis).

So, what could Mali gain from this Russian intervention? Why does it seem like the country has its eye already set on taking such a great risk?

Could Mali benefit from this new partnership?

Mali's government alleges that this was not an easy decision to take. As the Malian transitional government's Prime Minister Choguel Maïga explained at the latest UN General Assembly, France's "abandonment in mid-flight" left his office with no other choice than "to explore ways and means to better provide security autonomously, with other partners, to fill the gap that will inevitably be created by the closure of Barkhane in northern Mali".

However, this might also be seen as a move by the transitional government, set to hold new elections in February 2022, to hold onto power for longer. Last August 2020, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) successfully pressured Mali's current transitional leaders to agree to an 18-month transition period that would end with elections on the 27 February. But recently, when talking to France 24 and RFI, Choguel Maïga announced that the date could be postponed by "two weeks, two months, a few months" if things were not stable enough by then (AllAfrica.com). The Wagner Group could be a way to extend the transitional government's time by generating instability through the Wagner Group.

However, for much of the local population, this is an opportunity to bring peace to the country. Many Malian citizens are happy to see the French leave and the Russians replace them. They believe that Russia is a more neutral player without political or economic interest that may interfere with their intervention in Mali, as one campaigner told the British Broadcasting Channel this September (M. Rono, BBC Monitoring). However, it seems quite unlikely for the Wagner Group to enter Mali without any personal interest in this intervention, considering its history in other African countries.

What are Russia's intentions in Mali?

Africa is, objectively speaking, an attractive target for Russia to further its geopolitical goals.

Wagner's suspected ties to the Kremlin suggest that Russia uses the private military group to further its so-called asymmetric strategy for expanding influence across Africa (J. Siegle, London School of Economics). The Group's involvement in Libya has given Russia the opportunity to play a role in any settlement reached by the country, to gain access to its petroleum resources as a means of retribution and to gain naval access to strategic ports (J. Siegle, Africa Centre for Strategic Studies).

As can be seen, Russia and its private military group have profited from instability in many African countries, turning it into an opportunity for retribution in natural resources and growing its sphere of influence. If this is true for Mali, the Group's focus will most likely be on training, arming, and securing the 2022 presidency to fill the vacuum of power left behind by France.

Therefore, Mali's future does not look good, as the country could be another piece in the puzzle for Russia to extend its influence worldwide. This puts the country's transition process and its citizens' inherent rights at risk.

What can be done?

So far, threats have been sparking right, left and centre, as various countries attempt to advise Mali on the risks and consequences of contracting Wagner's mercenaries. Josep Borrell's previously mentioned statements on the matter resemble dozens of others made by leaders worldwide, including France, Germany, and Mali's neighbours, namely the Sahel G5. In September, Niger's Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou stated that Wagner's arrival in Mali would "certainly" call the Sahel G5 coalition into question. Moreover, he threatened that "If the Malian military does not hand over power next February, international sanctions against Bamako shall be severe" (C.Boisbousier).

While it remains uncertain how Mali might benefit from its partnership with Russia's private military group, the direct consequences for its relationship with the rest of the world seem to be settled.

Indeed, the possibility of Russia expanding its influence in Africa seems to be a real problem for both the EU and Africa. These tensions might very well escalate into a proxy war for influence between Russia and the West, reminding us of Cold War times. This is precisely what must be avoided at all costs.

Threatening sanctions and breaking ties with the transitional government is not the solution. If countries wish to avoid the potential consequences of the Wagner Group getting involved in Mali, their efforts should be coordinated to further the international liberal order based on human rights and democracy. This is a field where Russia cannot keep up, given its appalling record.

For this reason, international organisations like the ECOWAS and the EU have a significant role to play. As the main guarantor of Mali's transition process, ECOWAS has many tools at its disposal, including the Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa. The community's focus should be on making it clear to the interim president, Assimi Goïta, that his only role is to bring Mali's transition process to a fruitful end, and that deals with foreign actors should be postponed until after February 2022. However, should the transitional government decide not to comply, ECOWAS would have a role in denouncing Goïta in violation of the transition process agreement reached between the two actors in 2020 (J. Siegle and D. Eizenga).

Meanwhile, the EU and its Member States, namely France, should be careful not to create too big a power vacuum. For this reason, the Takuba operation must be a success. France should also be careful not to withdraw more French soldiers too suddenly.

It is important for both organisations to work together with other international actors in raising awareness about the risks associated with Wagner. Statements by local populations about Russia being more neutral suggest a lack of awareness as to the implications of blindly trusting the Wagner Group. Raising awareness would be a way to put internal pressure on the Malian transitional government and avoid this deal going through.

To wrap-up

To conclude, the consequences associated with a partnership between the Wagner Group and Mali remain uncertain. However, the world has a lot to lose from this sort of deal. While the international scene rightly fears the worst, it should also be quite cautious in handling the situation. Too strong a reaction risks turning this problem into a proxy-war for influence, echoing past events in the Central African Republic. It is crucial to move away from this Cold War-like approach and instead take steps towards enforcing the rules-based international liberal order, a field in which Russia cannot compete. This is the only way for the world to preserve Mali's transition process and human rights record.

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