

How Wagner's Mutiny Affects Russia's Global Footprint

by Caroline D. Rose - July 16, 2023

Last month, the leader of Russia's private military company the Wagner Group led an unsuccessful revolt against Russia's military elite. Yevgeny Prigozhin directed his forces to launch a military takeover in what was essentially the culmination of a public feud between Wagner and Russia's top military brass that had been escalating for months. For weeks before the mutiny, Prigozhin had blamed Moscow's hesitation to provide logistical support and supplies for Wagner's massive casualty count – totaling more than 20,000, according to him – in the offensive on the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut.

Though Prigozhin asserted that his issue was not with Vladimir Putin himself but rather with the military command, it was still an embarrassing blow to the Russian president, exposing key gaps rivals could exploit to undermine public confidence in the regime. Wagner will very likely be disbanded and its leadership purged. Prigozhin was supposedly exiled to Belarus, though the Belarusian leader recently said he was back in Russia. Much has been said about how this incident will shape the war in Ukraine, but what hasn't received nearly as much attention is how Wagner's collapse will change Russia's footprint farther afield.

Everywhere All at Once

Since its establishment, Wagner has played a considerable role in Russia's forward military posture. For Moscow, a key advantage of Wagner was that the group could help advance the Kremlin's foreign policy goals, which include countering the U.S. presence in regions across the globe while providing a level of plausible deniability. With a far-reaching presence through mercenaries who were essentially instructed by Moscow, Russia developed a subtle, creeping influence in areas it considered geopolitically vital.

Wagner forces were deployed around the world, including in Ukraine, Venezuela, Sri Lanka, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali, Libya and Syria. They carried out missions such as protecting gold and diamond mines, securing authoritarian regimes and countering armed terrorist organizations. Russia also used Wagner forces in these regions to counter its international rivals, including most notably the United States. Wagner's activities were seen as aiding Russia's goal of

cultivating dependent clientele among governments and local security groups in far-flung regions to expand Russia's influence.

Countries with known Wagner Group Operations



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

But Wagner's recent misadventure meant that Putin could no longer rely on the group to do his bidding. In the fallout from the insurrection, Moscow has sought to publicly take out the Wagner leadership and disassemble the group as a whole.

Putin's Playbook

Unsurprisingly, Putin immediately tried to neutralize the group's leader, issuing an arrest warrant for Prigozhin on June 24 and allowing him to flee to Belarus. The Russian government has also reportedly cracked down on ministry officials closely associated with Wagner, such as Aerospace Forces Commander-in-Chief Sergei Surovikin and Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov, who have been absent since the insurrection, in an effort to further stifle competition from within Wagner and the Russian armed forces.

Wagner's March on Moscow



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

The mutiny has also reinforced incentives for the Russian Ministry of Defense to reduce the agency of military contractors as a whole and merge them with Russia's armed forces. Even before Prigozhin's fated march on Moscow, the Russian government had introduced a rule that all private contractors must enlist in the Russian military by July. Still, it'll take time to integrate the mercenaries. While some fought alongside Russian troops and shared with them similar goals, Wagner mercenaries received different training and had different battlefield experiences than their counterparts in the military. The two sides also competed for resources and credit for battlefield successes – which will make a merger even harder to deliver. Wagner forces voiced frustration with how the Ministry of Defense handled the war in Ukraine, saying it suffered from logistics, supply and personnel mismanagement, while the leadership of the Russian armed forces perceived Wagner as a rival with a dangerous degree of autonomy on the battlefield. It will no doubt be a bumpy road ahead for the Kremlin as it seeks to mitigate these divisions and fully integrate Wagner forces.

Another factor that will chip away at Wagner's global posture is the Kremlin's renewed inward focus. The insurrection attempt was a wakeup call for Putin and his advisers, demonstrating that opposition forces could exploit gaps in Russian security and public cohesion. That Wagner was able to push its

way so close to Moscow was an indication that the Kremlin had lowered its guard. Thus, it's likely that Russia will now focus on bolstering internal security. Putin and his top military brass will seek to shore up additional support for the war effort in Ukraine, accelerating its offensive in the east and pushing for decisive victories to demonstrate to the public and rivals that the Russian military can perform successfully without Wagner. Because of this dual focus on regime security and operational performance in Ukraine, it's likely that Russia won't seek to immediately fill the gaps Wagner mercenaries are leaving behind in Libya, Syria and Central Asia. Though Moscow still wants access to things like resources and ports as well as influence in these areas, regime continuity and a win in Ukraine will be bigger priorities as the Kremlin moves on from Prigozhin's failed campaign.

Wagner's dissolution – whether formal or informal – impacts not only Russia's internal security landscape but also its global footprint. As Wagner leaders are purged and personnel absorbed into the armed forces, potential vacuums will open up in active and latent conflict zones including Libya, Syria, the Sahel and Central Asia. And with this will come new opportunities for competing actors.

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