

Africa Corps: Has Russia Hit a Ceiling in Africa?

By Christopher Faulkner, Raphael Parens, and Marcel Plichta

The picture of Moscow’s replacement for the Wagner Group—known as Africa Corps—has become clearer over the past several months. For all the hype that Russia’s newest security assistance appendage has garnered, the early story is that it is more of the same, but with less fanfare. Though Africa Corps has strengthened the lines of control that existed between Moscow and their soldiers of fortune, this new security outfit’s mission and operations have been much smaller in scale so far, but still enough to pull former U.S. partners into Moscow’s orbit. Sahelian states will continue to suffer with Russia as its chief security partner. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers should rethink their approach to the continent as the Sahel’s insecurity creeps toward a new set of West African nations.

Over the past year and a half, the Sahel has undergone dramatic changes. These “shifting sands” have included the great Western exodus from the region, expanding relations with Moscow, worsening security crises, and the increasing risks of jihadi spillover to coastal West African nations in the Sahel.¹ The evolving landscape makes it increasingly difficult for the United States to use traditional security force assistance efforts to counter terrorist threats, but increasingly important that the United States not abandon CT efforts and support altogether.

Strained relations with Mali and Burkina Faso that led to the departure of European and U.S. troops were only harbingers of things to come. A coup in Niamey, Niger, in July 2023 quickly threatened the United States’ primary basing for counterterrorism (CT) support and operations in the region. In March 2024, a high-level delegation consisting of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau Chief for African Affairs, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the U.S. Defense Department, and the Combatant Commander for AFRICOM visited the nascent military junta in Niamey in an effort to forge a path for future partnership that would see Niger return to democratic rule and ensure continuity of a security partnership.² Instead, the delegation’s visit led to the revocation of a status of forces agreement between Niamey and Washington, effectively banning the presence of U.S. troops in Niger and ending a decade-long mission of direct CT support.³ Shortly thereafter, personnel from Russia’s Africa Corps arrived in Niamey, taking the mantle from the United States and becoming the Tchiani regime’s new ‘partner of choice.’

Since that diplomatic calamity, the United States has officially withdrawn all military personnel from Niger effective as of September 15, 2024.⁴ The exit included the handover of two key military installations, Airbase 101 and 201, the latter which cost

the United States well over \$100 million to construct and served as a bastion for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) efforts in support of CT operations. Despite the fallout, one senior U.S. Defense official argued that the relationship with Niger is not completely dead and that the Nigeriens were, in fact, “keen to keep opportunities open for future engagements.”⁵ Meanwhile, the Africa Corps deployment has done little to curb the tide of jihadi violence in Niger. As Christopher Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, noted during the U.S. drawdown, the Russians have to “prove” themselves since they are now on the inside.⁶

The reality, however, is that there are both operational and strategic limits to Russia’s Africa Corps. In the realm of CT, Moscow’s nascent Wagner substitute is ill-prepared and ill-equipped to serve as a viable replacement for the Sahel’s former Western CT partners. More importantly, Russia’s objectives and priorities in the Sahel are not the same as those of the United States and Europe. Instead, Moscow has become the de facto security partner because, operationally, they are willing to entertain the whims and desires of their military partners across the Sahel—even if those expectations are self-defeating and lead to increasingly complex security challenges. This essentially means that Russia’s proxies—whether Wagner or now Africa Corps—are willing to engage in counterinsurgency campaigns that are often indiscriminate, leading with violence instead of looking for opportunities to build trust and relationships with civilians or local partners.

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Strategically, it is dubious, at best, as to whether Moscow has a clear Sahel strategy. Though the Kremlin may have successfully capitalized on anti-French and Western sentiments and cheered the chorus of sovereignty demands stemming from Sahelian regimes, Russia's Sahel strategy, and arguably its Africa strategy writ large, is one that promotes more disruption and chaos, not less. While Moscow, originally through Wagner and now via Africa Corps, can cheaply state its intention to rectify the terrorist insecurity that has plagued its new Sahelian partners for over a decade, Russia has limited CT experience and diminished incentives to invest the resources necessary to genuinely solve the complex security crises in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and across the greater Sahel—crises that demand much more than a military solution. Adding to the complications is the potential loss of Russian bases in Syria following the overthrow of the Assad regime. Any resulting Russian forfeiture of its bases, notably its airbase in Latakia or naval base in Tartus, could make airlifting goods to Libya, the Sahel, and Central Africa significantly more challenging in the short term. This disruption would be increasingly consequential for Sahelian juntas as time is not on their side.

Pragmatically, for all the global attention on the Wagner Group, Africa Corps, and Russian hybrid warfare in Africa, Moscow's main lines of effort have tangible limits while the bulk of Russian military and political life remains squarely centered on Ukraine. This was recently demonstrated in Syria, where Russia refused to double down on the Assad regime whether by choice or as a consequence of Moscow's focus on the war in Ukraine. This article begins by looking at the terrorism and counterterrorism landscape in the Sahel, including examining why Western CT missions failed. This provides important background and context for the next section of the article, which examines Russian activity in Africa from Wagner to Africa Corps, and resulting complications in the hostile takeover before assessing the obstacles Africa Corps will likely face trying to capitalize on the fleeting successes of its predecessor. The article concludes with some thoughts on ways forward for U.S. policy.

Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel

The terrorism landscape in the Sahel sits at the nexus of blowback from conflicts and rebellions in Algeria and Libya, preexisting rebel and separatist movements, weak but punitive state security institutions, and growing discontent among communities at the periphery of economic and political power. While the origins of jihadi groups in Algeria date back to the Algerian war of independence, more recent conflicts such as the Algerian civil war (1991-2002) have fueled a growing jihadi strain in the country. However, the failures of democratization during the Arab Spring and the chaos wrought in Libya encouraged Algerian security forces to push jihadi elements in the country southward into the Sahel, particularly Mali.

This led to an alphabet soup of Islamist organizations taking over northern Mali in 2012, sparking a budding rivalry between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷ Further complicating this picture, though, was a Tuareg independence movement, which often coordinated with or overlapped with jihadi organizations during its 2012 rebellion, a rebellion that saw Mali cede nearly half its territory.⁸ In response, and amidst popular protests, the Malian army overthrew the government due to frustrations over military setbacks. Meanwhile, jihadi forces turned on the Tuareg

MNLA (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad—National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), pushing them out of much of northern Mali.⁹

Against this backdrop, a French CT operation (Operation Serval) was initiated to assist the Malian government to reclaim territory and stabilize the government. While Operation Serval focused on concrete military objectives, its successor operation, Operation Barkhane, expanded the mandate. Barkhane evolved into an international coalition, led by the French, with the goal of eradicating terrorism across the Sahel. Ambitious and unclear objectives faced severe resistance, and the operation's eventual failure led to successive military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, as the armed forces eventually grew tired of Western involvement and a perceived failure to defeat jihadi groups comprehensively.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Western forces appeared disinclined to conduct risky counterinsurgency missions in the Sahel because of blowback from previous losses, particularly American casualties at Tongo Tongo during its support mission for the Nigerien state after these forces were ambushed by Islamic State affiliates.¹¹

Despite Western and regional attempts to stem the flood, jihadi attacks have only increased in recent years, reflecting significant societal issues. With limited or nonexistent job prospects and facing failing state infrastructure, many in the Sahel have turned to, or at least tolerated, jihadi groups. This reflects badly on insular regimes in Niamey, Bamako, and Ouagadougou that have failed their peripheral populations, particularly Muslim minority Fulani and Tuaregs. Many are caught in cycles of violence between governments and jihadi organizations that suspect communities of collaboration with their rivals, leading to abhorrent attacks on civilians. Add in the effects of climate change and the Sahel's failures have spun themselves into a slew of internal conflicts that often bleed across borders.¹²

The Western CT approach to the Sahel did not fail for lack of trying. The nearly 10-year-long French CT mission supported by many Western states certainly included significant investment and foreign policy commitment. Yet, today, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali have all moved away from the West and toward Russia, seeking new, authoritarian-style CT assistance to accompany their military junta regimes.

So why did these CT missions fail? First, the West misdiagnosed the problem. Western leaders ignored the lack of interest or buy-in from local governments, assuming that CT goals were mutually shared. Leaders in Mali, for example, were unhappy with the level of autonomy given to Tuareg groups by the U.N.-brokered Algiers Accords.¹³ While Western leaders focused on JNIM and ISGS, Malian military leaders were equally concerned with Tuareg autonomy. This is part of a greater issue: Africa's colonial-era borders and their relationship with conflict, including among ethnic groups grouped awkwardly together with rivals or away from their compatriots.

Building on these failed borders, illicit economies continue to play a key role in fueling terrorism, corruption, and instability across the region. Western CT operations were ill-prepared to deal with smugglers, businessmen, and government officials making up these networks.

Beyond misdiagnoses, the United States also brought a gun to a knife fight and failed to effectively tie in CT ops with non-military aid. Although this is symptomatic of an over-militarized CT approach across U.S. operations abroad, these shortcomings

were particularly egregious in the Sahel. A lack of infrastructure and development are painfully clear, more so than almost any region. Poverty, lack of social services, and corrupt governance are key drivers of terrorism in the Sahel, particularly in youthful populations that lack alternative livelihoods. While Western military interventions were well-staffed, their diplomatic and development wings were clipped. One need look no further than the significant staffing gaps in the U.S. State Department's African offices, which are so limited that such "hard-to-fill" posts were classified as a national security priority in 2023.¹⁴

Last, Western approaches failed to account for security preferences of partner countries in the Sahel. Blinded by great power competition, American diplomats and generals viewed Russian involvement in the Sahel through an unequivocally zero-sum lens—either Russia or the West. In Niger, the U.S. diplomatic jockeying to deter the new junta's pursuit of new partners in the Russians or Iranians was viewed as an attempt at strong-arming.¹⁵ By ignoring the agency of African states in choosing their international partners, not to mention the historical connections between African states and Russia or China, the West has gambled in the Sahel and lost. Without tangible results to show for their CT campaigns, junta leaders had no problems reorienting toward new allies. But an early review hardly suggests that gambling on the Russians has been good for security.

Understanding Africa Corps

For all the fanfare surrounding Wagner's infamous rise, the post-mortem has been riddled with significant mystery. What has emerged in its place is the aptly named, Africa Corps, reminiscent of Germany's Afrika Korps, which plundered the continent during the Nazi regime, and in many ways continuing the Nazi symbolism so deeply entrenched in the Wagner brand. But Africa Corps, unlike Wagner, is a formal project of the Russian state, an expeditionary corps like Wagner but with a command-and-control structure designed to ensure Moscow keeps the leash tight. Gone are any claims of plausible deniability, though it is likely that when Africa Corps faces negative press or defeats, Moscow will try to craft narratives to keep that façade alive. Where an unsavory oligarch headed Wagner, the Russian Ministry of Defense now serves as the direct underwriter of Africa Corps with Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Russian military intelligence (GRU) General Andrei Averyanov reportedly positioned as the organization's commanding officers.¹⁶

The shift in command indicates a level of control both by the Ministry of Defense and GRU over former Wagner units located across Africa, while other former Wagner components located in and around Ukraine have been subsumed by Rosvgardia (Russian National Guard), the FSB, GRU, and even the Belarussian ministry of the interior for units stationed in Belarus.¹⁷ Meanwhile, and adding confusion to the mix, Wagner components are still active in several African countries, with the organization maintaining its structure in the Central African Republic (CAR) and retaining some level of autonomy in Mali under Wagner's legacy commanders.¹⁸ In Mali specifically, Africa Corps serves as the umbrella organization while the Wagner brand is still widely visible and used by personnel.¹⁹

Distinct from the elaborate corporate and criminal network that allowed Wagner to thrive, Africa Corps lacks the corporate infrastructure that helped offset the Wagner Group's costs, which

allowed the organization to expand Russian influence in countries where it deployed. This reflects both a fear of Prigozhin-like figures leading Africa Corps and an interest in state control, yet it also restricts the organization's ability to project power or extract resources that could benefit the Russian state. Meanwhile, Africa Corps has yet to reach the same level of fame or lore, either back in Russia, Africa, or the West, perhaps reflecting the challenges of Kremlin-run disinformation platforms in building grassroots interest in Russia's new security outfit. This is not for lack of trying. The Kremlin's efforts to create their own influence network via the African Initiative, a media ecosystem designed to mirror Prigozhin-era efforts at promoting Russia while spreading disinformation about the West, is up and running.²⁰ From disinformation campaigns targeting U.S.-funded anti-malaria efforts in Burkina Faso to organizing a "press tour" for Malian bloggers to visit Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine, only time will tell the African Initiative's longer-term impact.²¹

In that light, it is far too early to call Africa Corps a flop, but it is undeniable that the new Corps has run into significant issues since its inception. One of the key challenges in the shift to a public-sector version of the Wagner Group has been recruitment. Challenges in this area reportedly delayed its initial deployment to Niger. After Africa Corps' founding in 2023, the Kremlin tasked the Ministry of Defense with recruiting 40,000 troops—a monumental task amidst troop shortages during the war in Ukraine.²² Whether that figure was propaganda or an effort to virtue signal Moscow's commitment to African partners, it has fallen woefully short. Given recruitment shortcomings, the Kremlin halved its requirements, yet the Ministry of Defense was still unable to hit a 20,000-troop threshold for the force.²³ This points to problems in the state-backed model of private military companies, including issues with payment, organizational prestige, and casualty concerns.

The Emergence of Russia's Africa Corps

Like Wagner before it, Africa Corps' story is believed to have commenced in Libya. After Prigozhin's death, Wagner Group mercenaries in Libya were compelled to sign new contracts with the Ministry of Defense and remained at bases at or near airfields at Sirte, al-Khadim, al-Jufra, and Brak al-Shati. This was the beginning of the transition from Wagner to Africa Corps in Libya. However, in December 2023 an Il-76 transport aircraft used by Wagner was severely damaged by a drone or missile strike, dramatically impacting its logistics capacity.²⁴ Around this time, Russia's tenuous relations with Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army, which controls most of eastern Libya, warmed. This led to a new military agreement, including an agreement for Russian naval access to the port of Tobruk, fulfilling a key Russian strategic objective of obtaining port facilities and a permanent naval base on NATO's southern flank.²⁵ Thus, Russia entered 2024 with a new motivation to make an impact on the Libyan civil war, just as Africa Corps would begin new deployments to the country. Russia's continued alliance with Haftar could have significant long-term impacts on Libya's stability and migration flows to Southern Europe.

Africa Corps' first major operation involved flooding Libya with troops and equipment, supporting the efforts of Russian ally Khalifa Haftar and providing a jumping-off point for future operations across the Sahel. Africa Corps has allegedly deployed thousands of recruits to Libya, including foreign fighters, supporting Russia's

foreign policy interests in the country.²⁶ While Russian forces only numbered approximately 800 at the beginning of 2024, this number more than doubled to 1,800 by early May.²⁷ This deployment coincided with Africa Corps' replacement of Wagner Group as the flagship Russian military entity operating in Libya. According to researchers at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), a further 6,000 tons of military equipment was transported to Tobruk from the Russian naval base at Tartus during this period.²⁸ That transport reportedly included 2S12 Sani mortars, 2L81 trailers, and armed personnel carriers (APCs).²⁹ These developments point to the integral role played by Russian port facilities in the Kremlin style of aggressive, kinetic foreign policy.

Africa Corps troops in Libya have reportedly been deployed to at least 10 locations alongside Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), and according to analysts, four Russian commanders responsible for Libya operations report directly to Yevkurov and rotate between Libya and Syria.³⁰ This highlights the importance of Libya for Africa Corps operations, serving as a crucial fulcrum in support of Russia's efforts in Africa, and especially across the Sahel. As it was for Wagner, Libya operates as a key logistical hub for the force, enabling it to project and distribute its military assets across other African states more efficiently. Reports note that some Africa Corps troops that arrived in Libya in early 2024 have since been transferred to Niger.³¹

Despite rumors about a Wagner deployment after Burkina Faso's initial coup in early 2022, substantive engagement was not forthcoming between the group and coup leader Damiba. After a second coup removed Damiba in favor of Capt. Ibrahim Traoré, the young leader opted for national means, including arming tens of thousands of civilian volunteers, to restore security through popular mobilization of militias.³² However, Traoré has increasingly looked to Russia for help as he finds himself trapped between the expansion of jihadi groups externally and the ever-present potential for mutinies and coups internally.³³

Traoré's hesitation with inking deals with Wagner seemed to subside when Moscow formally stood up Africa Corps. In January 2024, 100 Africa Corps troops arrived in Ouagadougou, supplemented with personnel from the Russian 81st Volunteer Spetsnaz Brigade—known as the BEARS unit.³⁴ It remains unclear if/how these Africa Corps fighters contributed to Burkina Faso's war with jihadi groups or to other security operations. Some members of the BEARS unit were recalled in August due to Russian manpower shortages in the face of the surprise Ukrainian offensive at Kursk.³⁵

Russian interest in Burkina Faso may have been initially piqued by the desire to protect gold mines run by Russian-owned Nordgold, led by the powerful Alexey Mordashov, that had been shuttered due to jihadi activity.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, Nordgold received permits for a mine (Yimougou) it had been pursuing for five years shortly after the coup in 2022. Experts have noted that Burkina Faso's junta has followed Mali's initiative, increasing state shares of gold exports through mining code amendments, perhaps in a bid to entice its Africa Corps deployment.³⁷ However, there have yet to be substantive linkages between Burkina Faso's mining capacity and its Africa Corps deployment. Instead, the most likely role of Africa Corps in Burkina Faso is one designed to insulate the Traoré regime, which extended military rule by five years in a declaration in late May 2024.³⁸ Africa Corps will undoubtedly have its work cut out for it as a regime guarantor as the Burkinabe army has faced an onslaught of attacks from jihadis that are only likely to further

strain tenuous intra-military relations.³⁹

The Africa Corps deployment to Niger looks quite similar to its activities in Burkina Faso. On April 10, 2024, 100 military "instructors" from Africa Corps arrived with anti-aircraft equipment, which some analysts think could have been an escalation tactic to accelerate the departure of U.S. air assets from Niger or as a tacit threat in signaling that Niger would not tolerate incursions of its airspace.⁴⁰ Later shipments included military and humanitarian aid, and the number of Africa Corps personnel deployed to the country increased.⁴¹ As noted by analysts at PISM, "the possibility of using an air base in Niger, centrally located in relation to the other Africa Corps missions, will consolidate Russia's logistical capabilities in Africa. However, the small Russian contingent will not be sufficient to effectively combat terrorist groups operating there."⁴² This diagnosis sounds remarkably similar to Africa Corps' situation in Burkina Faso. At a minimum, Africa Corps is in place to serve as a praetorian guard for junta leader General Abdourahamane Tchiani.

Elsewhere, Africa Corps may again be seeking to copy Wagner's resource extraction model. However, Russia's resource extraction access remains unclear in Niger, due to fraught gold mining locations (Tillabéri region).⁴³ Oil and uranium are more likely options, with Africa Corps serving as a bridgehead for Moscow's influence. The Nigerien junta has offered extractive concessions to Russian corporations, particularly in the uranium sector.⁴⁴ However, conclusive agreements on this subject have yet to be made, particularly as French, British, and Chinese companies still maintain significant involvement in both industries.⁴⁵

Africa Corps' Strategic and Operational Limits

The ease with which Wagner, and now Africa Corps, has displaced Western partners should not be mistaken for capability in difficult CT fights, particularly in the Sahel. The turn to Russia via Wagner and Africa Corps in the Sahel reflects a confluence of factors such as frustration with the West, a truncated list of viable security partners due to a series of unconstitutional power grabs, and short time horizons that have pushed nascent juntas to prioritize their own survival as paramount to CT missions. New junta regimes are primarily concerned with staying in power in the immediate and prefer policies that deviate from the status quo and appear proactive, even if long-term the policies are self-defeating. Wagner and now Africa Corps provide regime protection that Western partners would not (and should not). Moreover, these Russian proxies' pursuit of new CT operations that align with expectations of the armed forces and deviate from Western approaches that were often deemed too restrictive buys these fragile juntas more time, even if the operations are less effective in the long run.

Russia's Africa Corps has struggled to constitute itself in the midst of Wagner's lingering presence in places such as Mali. Many of Wagner's structures have proven evergreen, despite the Kremlin's attempts to sideline them and reconstitute them as part of the Africa Corps enterprise. This has been especially true outside of the Sahel, particularly in CAR but is also in Mali. In Mali, early reports noted that Wagner Group allegedly turned over their operations to Africa Corps, but there have been few changes in force posture, beyond the expansion of the organization's base at Bamako's international airport and Wagner's legacy fighters still operate under the Wagner brand.⁴⁶ In part, this may be strategic as it gives Moscow some cover to suggest that any failures in Mali are not

Africa Corps' shortcomings, but instead are Wagner's legacy forces. In CAR, Wagner has very much continued its resource extraction operations alongside its regime protection and military assistance programs, reinforcing the increasingly totalitarian regime of President Faustin-Auchange Touadéra.⁴⁷

While organizational structures are shifting, what remains constant, and is trending in an even worse direction, is the brutality of Russian mercenary activity in the Sahel. According to analysts at the Armed Conflict Location and Events Dataset (ACLED), since Prigozhin's death there has been an "81% increase in violence involving Russian mercenaries in Mali ... and a 65% increase in reported fatalities."⁴⁸ This reflects an ongoing counterinsurgency program that is failing to accomplish more than its Western predecessors had and instead is further degrading an already catastrophic security environment.

Africa Corps' missions in Burkina Faso and Niger are distinct. Wagner had no presence in either country, so the arrival of Africa Corps personnel offers an opportunity to assess the new Kremlin tool's value as a security force provider. Despite arriving in Ouagadougou and Niamey in January and April 2024, respectively, there is very little evidence to suggest Africa Corps has made any sort of tangible security gains unless one assesses their presence as effectively deterring any would-be coup-plotters from challenging the regimes of Traoré or Tchiani. This claim is a weak one at best. Meanwhile, any security force assistance it is offering clearly has not shifted the security landscape; violence is escalating in both countries, especially in Burkina Faso.

Despite Africa Corps' involvement, one of the key issues in Burkina Faso is its limited number of trained soldiers; this has led successive Burkinabe military regimes to weaponize the civilian population through self-defense militias known as Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (or Les Volontaires pour la défense de la Patrie-VDPs), who themselves exacerbate the conflict through attacks on civilians, particularly Fulani Muslims.⁴⁹ Violence against civilians has skyrocketed in the country. In February 2024, the Burkinabe army executed over 200 civilians over allegations of collaboration with jihadis.⁵⁰ In August 2024, an attack by JNIM on civilians building a trench system near Barsalogo resulted in 600 dead.⁵¹ Africa Corps has neither reined in the threat posed by jihadis nor served as a conduit to restrain government inflicted violence. Civilians bear the brunt.

In Niger, Africa Corps' footprint is equally weak as is Russia's in general, lacking an embassy in the country. However, Moscow claims it will be opening an embassy in Niamey and recent changes in Niger's CT strategy suggest a turn toward Putin-esque authoritarianism.⁵² The implementation of a new Nigerien terrorism ordinance gives the regime broad power to label civilians as suspected terrorists. Arbitrary detentions, freezing of assets, and the stripping of citizenship are just some of the potential consequences for civilians who end up in Niger's terrorism database.⁵³ Meanwhile, Niger is facing a new, non-jihadi threat. A pro-Bazoum militia, the Free Armed Forces (FAL), led by former Nigerien minister Rhissa Ag Boula, has formed with the goal of overthrowing the junta and reinstating the deposed president.⁵⁴ This threat may speak to Africa Corps' actual role in both Burkina Faso and Niger—coup-proofing the respective regimes. Instead of fighting difficult CT campaigns, Africa Corps appears to be holed up in Ouagadougou and Niamey, acting as a deterrent against threats stemming from within the regime. This strategy certainly weakens

rule of law outside of the capitals and offers jihadi and separatist groups the running room to flourish.

Both legacy Wagner operations in Mali and nascent Africa Corps deployments in Niger and Burkina Faso demonstrate the severe constraints of Russian military assistance on the continent. While Wagner's initial deployment in Mali reflected a greater commitment to offensive CT activities than the operations of Africa Corps in Burkina Faso or Niger, such strategies are by no means more effective there. While Moscow's Africa Corps reorganization efforts were still unfolding, Wagner CT operations in Mali won a significant public-relations victory in late 2023 with the taking of Kidal, a town previously under Tuareg separatist control.⁵⁵ That victory inspired the Malian army (FAMA) and emboldened Wagner, which in the interim had been folded under the Africa Corps umbrella but retained some level of autonomy. In late July 2024, a Wagner and FAMA convoy approached the town of Tinzaouaten in northern Mali, seeking to fight various insurgent and jihadi groups in the area. They got more than they bargained for. After being attacked by Tuareg forces and sustaining casualties, the convoy retreated into territory controlled by JNIM, where they were ambushed. The convoy limped home, having lost dozens of soldiers.⁵⁶ With this significant defeat, the Wagner Group showcased its limitations as a CT partner and watched its "image crumble."⁵⁷

Wagner's efforts to stage a retaliatory offensive in October 2024 further illustrated the group's limitations. Separatist forces who originally engaged the Wagner/FAMA contingent in July were able to identify and track Wagner's revenge convoy almost immediately, forcing the Russians to recalibrate and frame the operation as merely a body recovery effort.⁵⁸ Wagner's relationship with FAMA also appears to have deteriorated to the point where this limited operation was put in jeopardy.⁵⁹ Recent reporting from *The New York Times* highlighted this friction as "the Malian officers added that frustration with Wagner's behavior was growing within the country's military, and that they wanted partners who were more professional and disciplined."⁶⁰

Perhaps more concerning, JNIM militants launched a coordinated attack against two military targets in Bamako in September 2024, the first attack on Bamako since 2016.⁶¹ At least 50 Malian forces were killed, and the terrorists were able to set fire to the presidential plane. Given Wagner's primary base sits adjacent to the airport, the attack only amplified Wagner's limitations. Moscow immediately tried to assuage any concerns from their Sahelian partners. Just two days after the attack in Bamako, *Russia Times* reported of a meeting between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Niger's ambassador to Moscow, Abdou Sidikou Isa, in which the two allegedly discussed security cooperation in the fight against Islamic terrorism in the Sahel.⁶²

One can easily connect Wagner's recent failures in Mali with similar failures in Mozambique and Syria, where defeats and casualties on the battlefield forced Wagner to remove itself from these deployments. While Russia may hope to explain away such failures as a symptom of Wagner that will die once the Africa Corps takeover matures, Moscow will need to seriously invest in its Africa Corps project if it wants something akin to a durable relationship with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The fall of Assad in Syria has the potential to complicate such investments, given the logistical challenges Moscow may face in supplying Africa Corps. Syria provided an ideal refueling stop along the routes from Russia to Libya and other sub-Saharan final destinations, along with friendly

airspace for military flights.⁶³ Perhaps more importantly, while Russia was able to prop up Assad for years, its inability to sustain Assad indefinitely raises questions about Africa Corps' ability to fulfil its role as a regime survival package. As it stands, the ruling juntas in those countries will likely determine that Africa Corps is not effective enough or they themselves will lose power. Regimes in Ouagadougou and Bamako already seem to be hedging their bets, with reports that Turkish private military outfits are present in both countries.⁶⁴

The Way Forward for U.S. Policy

In the April 2023 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, these authors argued:

*Near-peer competition in Africa and counterterrorism cannot, and should not, be decoupled. In order to compete with other powers, the United States will have to conduct security assistance well, especially in the counterterrorism space. Policymakers will need to be much more intentional, building unique regional strategies, while determining the degree to which a military approach is even necessary.*⁶⁵

The authors' assessment still rings true today, but it is critically important to recognize the risks associated with defining U.S. CT support narrowly through the lens of great power competition. At the forefront, couching support as a means to compete with Russia can, unintentionally or otherwise, discount the agency of African partners and become a self-defeating prospect.⁶⁶

Africa Corps is not the biggest threat to U.S. and European interests in Africa by a longshot. However, there are serious risks associated with letting Africa Corps run amok. The Sahel's authoritarian leaders might benefit from a praetorian guard, but they and their neighbors are now even more vulnerable to transnational terrorism. The sudden removal of traditional security partners in favor of Russian security forces is entrenching jihadism and authoritarian governance, two much more serious problems for the United States and its partners.⁶⁷ Even if recent events in Syria make Russia's presence untenable in the near term, which remains to be seen, there is little hope of turning back the clock to a more cooperative era. In other words, there is still high demand across the Sahel for security providers like Africa Corps.

There are few good options for improving the security force assistance model in the Sahel. The region's shifting politics makes collaboration difficult. The junta-led regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger had large, public fallouts with the European Union, United Nations, ECOWAS, the United States, and France, making large security assistance missions with thousands of personnel unlikely in the future. Relying on contractors, a solution almost exclusively suggested by former and current contractors, does not offer a clear solution either. Even if the United States and its partners tried to promote Western-aligned contractor firms, the impact of contractors without the weight of Western security partners backing them has yet to be seen. As seen with both Wagner and Africa Corps, contractors often lack the size and scope to stabilize the security situation and can provoke the worst instincts of their host regimes, which could have grievous long-term effects on Sahelian populations.

Revamping U.S. policy in the Sahel and West Africa will require congressional budgetary support, an area where lawmakers have recently made important gains. For instance, one aspect of the 2019 Global anti-Fragility Act in particular aims to deter coups

before they happen by addressing the causes of instability.⁶⁸ This act is supported by a 10-year U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS), which includes seven African nations of the nine total countries—Libya, Mozambique, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo. Although this legislation is plagued by bureaucratic yellow tape, it is an important step forward in addressing development challenges and improving interagency cooperation and involvement across these cases.⁶⁹

Cautiously, the United States might consider pragmatism on Section 7008 restrictions that block certain forms of aid to coup regimes. This legislation, put in place to avoid tying the United States to troubled, undemocratic regimes, still allows certain types of aid to continue. In general, U.S. State Department and USAID aid, including economic assistance, international security assistance, multilateral assistance, and export/investment assistance, as well as Department of Defense "train-and-equip programs under 10 U.S.C. §333," are banned for coup regimes. However, this only applies to aid given directly to governments, not aid given more vaguely to "promote democracy." Further, exceptions include "aid for certain specific purposes (e.g., humanitarian assistance, certain internal security force assistance, debt restructuring, and education)," or aid "that the President determines to be necessary for national security, subject to congressional notification."⁷⁰ Some have argued that it would be best to give junta leaders the tools to fight terrorism as they represent a less bad option compared to alternatives.⁷¹ That poses significant risks and puts the United States in a difficult position of balancing the defense of democracy with CT support. Analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies offer a middle ground, suggesting that any flexibility in Section 7008 should be geared toward non-lethal means and focused on improving civil-military relations.⁷²

The mishmash of legal authorizations defining U.S. action in the Sahel further demonstrates the critical need for a substantive Africa strategy. Left rudderless, the Department of State and U.S. Africa Command often tie actions in Africa to broader national priorities such as the global war on terror or great power competition. The collapse of U.S. efforts in the Sahel over the past four years serves as a wake-up call, but current U.S. engagement with littoral West Africa replicates the military-led, governance-agnostic style of Sahel engagement, with the exact same risks. Guinea has already undergone a coup in 2021, and public discontent in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire could make them risky partners. Littoral West Africa, particularly Benin and Togo, need urgent support, but U.S. efforts would be ill-advised to use the same unsuccessful formula that failed the people of the Sahel and enabled Russia's entrance.

Whatever the direction, the more U.S. policy locks African states into a zero-sum game of great power competition, the less it can promote the kinds of stable democracies that can address insecurity. As in the Cold War, African juntas will play foreign powers against each other to remain in power. Even Western-aligned states such as Chad can take advantage to evade a proper democratic transition. The recent appearance of approximately 200 Russian forces under the banner of Africa Corps, this time in Equatorial Guinea, shows how African leaders will play great power politics to insulate themselves from calls to leave power.⁷³ It also appears to reflect the business model of Africa Corps, which continues to resemble a coup-proofing mechanism first and foremost. **CTC**

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