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RUSSIA & UKRAINE GAIN A FOOTHOLD IN AFRICA

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Some unlikely names are beginning to appear in Syria, Egypt, Libya and countries which lie south of the Sahel belt of Africa. Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC) which won its spurs in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine and in Syria where it guards oil facilities, has spread its wings to the Central African Republic, where a hundred of its men are training the army which is being rebooted after free elections brought a new man, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, to the presidency two years ago. Russia had already agreed to sell weapons to the country despite a UN embargo which followed severe rioting in 2013, to the consternation of the United States and France.

Wagner is also suspected of being involved in protecting gold, diamond and uranium mines controlled by the northern Sudanese president Omar al Bashir. Another Russian PMC, RSB has been active in clearing explosive ordnance around Benghazi, in Libya and unnamed Russians are training – on the Egyptian base of Sidi Barrani, soldiers and officers working for the strong man of eastern Libya, Field Marshall Belqassim Haftar.

Ukrainian PMCs are not far behind: the Omega Group is active in Burkina Fasso and is not shy in recruiting ex-francophone soldiers with solid combat experience. French indeed remains the lingua franca in North West Africa. The company Ukrainian Helicopters for its part is active in Ivory Coast, Congo and Mali where it helps evacuate wounded soldiers who belong to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Mission in Mali established in 2013.

The three traditional leading players in the region are unhappy, but for different reasons. The US is not happy about the appearance of Russian PMCs but only has itself to blame. Indeed the report published in April by the Pentagon on the ambush which on 1st October 2017 cost nine soldiers (including four members of a special US force) their lives in eastern Niger shows photos of an American PMC, Erickson evacuating the wounded. Another US company Berry Aviation is also involved in the region, helping out with operations which come under the command of AFRICOM, one of the ten United States Armed Forces commands whose remit to combat terrorism and drugs trafficking covers all of Africa bar Egypt. Twenty one American PMCs are officially listed on the AFRICOM website.

Such companies proliferated after the fall of the Berlin Wall with the likes of Blackwater and Dyncorp becoming household names after the US-led invasion of Iraq

in 2003. But PMCs go back to the Congo crisis in the 1960s which ended with Joseph Mobutu seizing power to protect the interests of *Union Minière* in the province of Katanga. The first PMC was Watch Guard International, formed in 1965 by David Sterling, the founder of British Special Air Services (SAS). Their activities seemed to decline in the 1980s.

The end of the Cold War however produced a perfect storm of market conditions that forged a new private military industry. As the world became more unstable, the United States was simultaneously downsizing its massive military by 40% in order to reap a “peace dividend”. When it came to office in 1993, the Clinton administration reduced the US armed forces from 2.2m to 1.4m while cutting troops stationed overseas from approximately 600,000 to 250,000. The US conducted 10 operational events outside normal alliance commitments between 1960 and 1991. However the number rose to 26 between 1991 and 1998.

Mission creep led the State Department to contract Dyncorp international to provide “peace verifiers” in Kosovo and eradicate coca plants as part of Plan Colombia. Mission creep was given a huge boost by live footage on CNN of United States troops being killed in Somalia which encouraged Western governments to commit to foreign conflicts.

France for its part is unhappy at new intruders poaching on what it considers its traditional hunting grounds but is desperate to share mounting costs. It has thus turned, among others to Saudi Arabia. The irony of that country financing military operations against groups who practice a hard line Islam is not lost on seasoned observers who remember the kingdom has spent \$200bn worldwide since 1979 promoting hard line Salafi Islam - in the Sahel countries it has trained thousands of imams and set up many Islamic madrassas whose religious teaching is alien to the local practises of Sufi Islam.

Having defeated a bloody Islamist insurgency in the 1990s, Algeria is even more upset than the US and France by the proliferation of hard line Islamist groups, weapons and foreign soldiers – be they on state or private payrolls, in its near-abroad. The country’s sheer land mass and well equipped armed forces make it an unavoidable security partner in North West Africa even if it is extremely reticent to send its troops across the country’s borders other than in very exceptional circumstances. Its security forces intervened in eastern Tunisia after 2012 to contain local guerrilla groups, with the full support of that country’s armed forces. Algeria de facto guarantees the security of Tunisia today much more than the US or France. Algerian commandos have operated in Libya since 2012, to insure the security of its frontiers and eastern oil and gas wells. Algerian diplomats argue that, because its mission is defined in narrow security terms, AFRICOM does not allow America a nuanced understanding of the complexity of regional issues. As the US defines the problem as a bed of nails, only a hammer will do. Many hard line Islamist groups easily morph into drug and gun running not to mention cigarette smuggling. Understanding the complex web of family, tribal and economic networks in Sahel countries is quite beyond the capacity of AFRICOM officers.

Senior Algerian diplomats and military also point to the NATO supported French led operation to bring down Muammar Gaddafi as opening a Pandora’s box which saw modern weapons flowing out of Libyan dumps and falling into dangerous hands. The lack of strategic thinking of France, the UK and the US turned Libya into a failed state. This made existing conflicts in the Sahel more intractable and aggravated the question of flows of illegal immigrants across the Mediterranean. The fall-out from Libya nearly brought down the regime in Mali. It has cost neighbouring Tunisia and Algeria dear as Libya has acted as an incubator for terrorism. Terrorists trained in Libya attacked the Algerian gas field of Tigentourine in January 2013 and Tunisian beach resorts in 2015, inflicting billions of dollars of lost foreign revenue for both countries.

Rather than pouring more weapons into the region, Algeria would prefer that all parties to the different conflicts be brought around the table. Until the appointment of Ghassan Salamé as Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya a year ago, former Gaddafi loyalists were excluded from the negotiations. At times senior Algerians have surmised some French and Americans would be happy for them to exercise a joint de facto control of Libya with Egypt, an idea they are opposed to. Algiers may be a prickly partner for Washington and Paris but neither capital can do without its cooperation.

France is concerned because the military operation Serval it launched to avoid the collapse of Mali in January 2013, which was renamed Barkhan in August 2014 remains the country's major military presence overseas. French and other African country soldiers are regularly ambushed; the expenses are a heavy burden on France. President Macron recently criticised his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to smash Libya but France now has to live with the consequences. France has 4,000 troops deployed in Mauretania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Fasso, of which 1,700 are in Mali. The US is currently building a drone base in Agadez in Niger which will increase the number of American troops in the region by 2000-4000 men.

Further militarising conflicts in Africa which have very deep and complex roots will not bring greater security to the region. As the US academic and former marine colonel Andrew Bacevich who is an unsparing critic of the militarisation of US foreign policy, has commented "the United States has a superb military that never gets things done". Recent history of American military engagement is being replayed in North West Africa.

In such a context, the recent decision of US Defence Secretary James Mattis to order a sweeping Pentagon [review of elite Unites States commando missions](#), which employ more than 7,3000 Special Operational troops world-wide, would appear to fly in the face of existing orthodoxy. The Africa command has been asked how it would conduct its counterterrorism on the continent if the number of commandos there was cut by 25% over 18 months and 50% over three years. That would cut existing numbers from 1,200 to 700 – roughly the same number as 2014.

What is not clear yet is whether such a cut, were it to be carried through, is a belated recognition that the increasing presence of sophisticated weapons and foreign troops and mercenaries is most unlikely to bring lasting peace to Africa. Whatever the answer, the growing US military footprint has helped attract Russian and Ukrainian PMCs to central Africa, which complicates an already very difficult situation.