Private companies engage in Russia’s non-linear warfare

Moscow has deployed private military contractors to support its military operations in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Syria. James Bingham and Konrad Muzyka examine the rationale behind the use of these non-state and often deniable forces.

On 17 January 2018, RT’s Russian-language website reported that the Russian First Deputy Chairman of the State Construction and Legislation Committee, Mikhail Yemelyanov, was planning to introduce a draft bill into the State Duma legalising private military companies (PMCs). With the Syrian conflict having shown the “relevance” of PMCs, according to Yemelyanov, the law would enable such companies to engage in “counter-terrorism operations abroad” as well as to “protect the sovereignty of allied states from external aggression”, in addition to providing protective security.

The concept of such a bill had first emerged in 2011, when Russian President Vladimir Putin (then prime minister) gave support to the idea of legalising PMCs when delivering a report to the State Duma. The draft bill, scheduled to enter the Duma in February 2018, will cover Russian citizens in Russian and foreign PMCs, according to RT.

With Russia’s experience of using private contractors in Syria and Ukraine seemingly to be written into statute, the use of PMCs as a Kremlin asset is almost certain to become more entrenched in coming years. PMCs are part of an evolving conception of Russian military and intelligence operations, and Jane’s has charted their evolution in support of the Kremlin’s foreign policy objectives.

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Russian Navy Project 1124M frigates Suzdalets and Povorino fire RGB-60 anti-submarine rockets during Russia’s Navy Day celebration in Sevastopol in Crimea on 30 July 2017. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 was achieved not through displays of overwhelming military force but instead through the effective use of irregular forces, a shift that suggests an evolution in the Kremlin’s thinking about the best way to achieve its politico-military goals. (AFP/Getty Images)

Problems definitions

In his 2007 book Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars, Frank Hoffman stated that hybrid operations were a fusion of different approaches such as terrorist acts, violence, irregular tactics, or conventional capabilities that can be state- or non-state run, or both. Russia has taken this concept to a completely new level, combining it with other tools that the state has at its disposal. Notably, however, Russia itself does not consider its approach to constitute ‘hybrid warfare’, which it deems a Western concept and approach.

The tools of this irregular warfighting include political and social agitation, propaganda, cyber-attacks, economic and diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and information and electronic warfare. This approach can simultaneously utilise kinetic and non-kinetic approaches to confuse enemies, and consequently to make success more achievable and less costly.

Although such a non-linear approach does not have a specific doctrinal underpinning, two essays published in early 2013 and early 2014 indicated aspects of thinking in Moscow politico-military circles. The first article – widely misinterpreted in the West – was written by Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, General Valery Gerasimov, in the weekly Russian trade paper Voenny-Promyshlenny Kurier (Military Industrial Courier).

Gerasimov asserted that in the 21st century there had been a tendency “toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace”; he held that the rules of war had changed, and claimed that policy objectives were better achieved by primarily non-military approaches. Much Western misinterpretation of Gerasimov’s article assumed that it was a programmatic syllabus for adoption, whereas Jane’s assesses that Gerasimov was describing his conception of an emergent Western approach that demanded Russian resistance.

Shifting realities

The difficulties in defining a universally acceptable concept of hybrid, non-linear, or irregular warfare are compounded by disagreement about whether this is an emergent approach that is largely applicable to Russia or more simply an evolution of earlier phenomena such as asymmetric warfare. Regardless, Moscow’s adoption of a multifaceted approach is not in doubt: states or organisations targeted by this evolving Russian approach are constantly confused, and unable to effectively respond.

Russian operations against Ukraine in early 2014 showcased this perspective: at least initially, there was a lack of clarity about the intruder forces’ identity and their goals. The ultimate politico-military goal remains to ‘win’ the war, albeit not necessarily in a classical sense implying territorial control: in Crimea, victory indeed demanded the seizure of the peninsula; in eastern Ukraine, the goal was forcing Kiev to accept its place within Moscow’s sphere of influence, even if this was not comprehensively achieved.
Russian President Vladimir Putin and Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu arrive at a ceremony to bestow state awards on military personnel who fought in Syria, at the Kremlin, Moscow, on 28 December 2017. Shoigu is reported to be ambivalent or opposed to the use of PMCs in Russian military operations. (Kirill Kudryavtsev/AFP/Getty Images)

Within such an approach, the armed forces use their capabilities more freely in pursuit of policy objectives, including the active use of electronic warfare units for information-psychological operations and cyber attacks, and of dedicated intelligence-gathering platforms and units.

The structure of the Russian armed forces is also evolving to meet contemporary challenges and threats, although in many cases this is unrelated to non-linear capabilities and is simply a conventional restructuring. In the Western Military District, for example, the 2nd Guards Motor Rifle ‘Tamanskaya’ Division and the 4th Guards ‘Kantemirovskaya’ Tank Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army have been reinstated to provide greater firepower and a more appropriate response to NATO deployments in the Baltic States and Poland.

The decision to morph brigades into divisions does not mean that all brigades will be disbanded: for example, within the 1st Guards Tank Army, alongside the above motorised and tank divisions, the 6th Tank Brigade remains stationed in Mulino, 300 km east of Moscow. By not converting this brigade into a division, Russia will – in purely conventional warfare terms – maintain a mix of divisions and brigades in order to better tailor its responses to future threats.

Further south, at the start of conflict with Ukraine, Russia had almost no military presence near the border between the two states. Needing to execute the campaign with competent, all-professional troops, the Russian General Staff forward-deployed battalion tactical groups (BTGs) that were composite units of professional soldiers drafted from existing mixed professional-conscription brigades. This allowed the exclusion of conscripts – desirable for practical, legal, and political reasons – and enabled political, military, and psychological pressure to be exerted on the Ukrainian government.
However, despite this being the model still in use in eastern Ukraine, continuous force rotations of BTGs are not sustainable or efficient in the long run.

A photograph added to VK.com on 14 February 2017 showing Konstantin Zadorozhnyi, a contractor for Wagner Group killed in January 2017 along with other PMC personnel. The associated caption refers to his experience fighting in Donbass and “hotter places”. (VK.com) 1717256

Separately, to increase its conventional ‘punch-through’ capabilities in the event of a full-scale war, two combined arms armies (the 20th and 8th) were established near Ukraine. If necessary, these could provide enough manpower and capability to form a main advancing force, should the conflict escalate.

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Police officers stand guard as activists call for Ukrainian deputies to recognise Russia as an aggressor state during a rally in front of the Ukrainian parliament in Kiev on 16 January 2018. During Russia’s operations in Crimea in 2014 there was, at least initially, a lack of clarity about the intruder forces’ identity and their goals, a state of affairs which was to the Kremlin’s advantage. (Sergei Supinsky/AFP/Getty Images)

Defining PMCs

Another aspect of non-linear warfare that has risen in importance is the use of irregular non-state forces in combat theatres, including private contractors that are sometimes wrongly referred to interchangeably. These are PMCs, private security companies (PSCs), or simply ‘mercenaries’. In legal terms, PSCs in Russia – as in many other countries, such as the UK – are legal, whereas PMCs are not. The confusion in labelling may be an attempt to ‘professionalise’ the use of paid soldiers, or conversely to smear the reputation of individuals and companies employing private individuals using lethal force.

Among other definitions, a mercenary is described by Article 47 of the First Additional Protocol 1997 to the Geneva Conventions as an individual who is “neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict”. This is a categorisation that arguably does not apply to Russian individuals working for PMCs in Syria and Ukraine.

A photograph added to VK.com on 14 February 2017 showing Konstantin Zadorozhnyi (left) with other personnel believed to be Wagner Group contractors. The CEO of Wagner Group, Dmitry Utkin, is a former lieutenant-colonel in the Main Intelligence Directorate (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye: GRU). (VK.com)

This uncertainty is complicated by Russia’s deliberately ambiguous involvement in the conflicts in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Syria, to differing degrees. In particular, the Kremlin has steadfastly refused to acknowledge Russian involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, with the Russian leadership claiming that such fighters are individuals acting out of financial incentive or ideology, rather than agents of Russian government policy.

Although a wide variety of private companies perform combat support roles, such as logistics, construction, and base operations, PMCs are defined as companies that operate on the battlefield...
with an offensive posture. This can either be in lieu of or directly supporting the front-line combat troops of states.

PMC forces are used to engage and to defeat enemy forces akin to a state’s combat forces, and their deployments may include combined-arms operations involving air and armour assets, in addition to special forces-type personnel and specialist intelligence, communications, and electronic-warfare units. Although PSCs perform some of the same tasks as PMCs – including guarding convoys and responding tactically to enemy engagements – their role is operationally protective and defensive in nature.

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Integration of PMCs

A number of independent open-source intelligence (OSINT) investigations – such as those by Bellingcat and the Moscow-based Conflict Investigation Team (CIT) – have identified Russian PMCs operating as deniable units in Syria and Ukraine, in addition to being used as adjunct forces in Afghanistan and Libya. The deployment of Russian PMCs enables the Kremlin to manage public opinion about military action abroad through shielding casualty counts; to add a layer of deniability to ‘volunteer’ forces operating ostensibly outside Russian government direction; and to bolster available forces at the state’s disposal.

A photograph uploaded to VK.com on 3 March 2017 purporting to show Aleksandr Tychinin, killed in February 2017 in Syria according to the associated caption. CIT confirmed through Tychinin’s friends that he had worked as a Wagner Group contractor, and had previously served in the 12th Special Purpose Brigade of the Main Intelligence Directorate (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye: GRU). (VK.com)

According to a report by RIA Novosti in April 2011, Putin stated that PMCs offered “a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state”. Deniable non-state forces may have been a factor in the abortive coup attempt in Montenegro in October 2016, although
direct Russian involvement has not been proven and the Kremlin has denied any role in the events. According to Blank, “[Private contractors] can be used, as appears to be the case in Serbia and Montenegro, to carry out sabotage, diversionary, and even assassination missions, as in the [attempted] coup in Montenegro, while allowing the Russian state to keep its distance.”

The first indications of Russia’s contemporary use of PMCs came in 2013, with the deployment of the ‘Slavonic Corps’ to seize Syrian government oil and gas facilities from the Islamic State. St Petersburg-based newspaper Fontanka reported on 15 November 2013 that this agreement was brokered in Hong Kong by Russian PMC Moran Security Group.

According to Fontanka, Moran Security Group’s deputy director Vadim Gusev was deployed to Syria as commander of the Slavonic Corps. Jane’s has seen an address listing indicating that the Slavonic Corps was registered at an address on Duddell Street Central in Hong Kong in 2013. However, Jane’s is unable to independently confirm the link between the Slavonic Corps and the Moran Security Group.

It is unclear whether this initial deployment was at the behest of the Russian government, or resulted from a financial incentive for the companies involved on the condition that the oil and gas facilities were returned to Syrian government control. However, according to Fontanka, this deployment ended disastrously for the Slavonic Corps, with the company’s forces ambushed and forced to retreat. A Moran Security Group employee, Aleksei Malyuta, appeared to have dropped his identity card, describing him as a ‘security officer’ during this episode. This subsequently fell into the hands of Islamic State fighters and was published on the EA Worldview website on 18 November 2013.

Company personnel are then assessed to have operated in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions as part of a private company known as the Wagner Group. The group’s leader is Dmitry Utkin, a retired lieutenant-colonel who served in a special forces brigade of the military Main Intelligence Directorate (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye: GRU). Utkin was named in a United States Treasury sanctions list in June 2017, as well as the company itself, for having “recruited and sent soldiers to fight alongside separatists in eastern Ukraine”.

The use of unidentified armed soldiers to gain control of Ukrainian bases in Crimea in 2014 was initially attributed by media outlets such as the BBC, Reuters, and The Washington Post to Russian special forces. In theory, Russian forces’ ranks could have been bolstered in some way by individual PMC personnel, although Jane’s has seen no direct evidence of this and the most likely composition of the force remains Russian troops and local volunteers. In contrast, evidence from social media does indicate that a number of Wagner Group personnel were deployed to eastern Ukraine before being sent to Syria.

Casualties documented by CIT and published online on 22 March 2017 identified the deaths of at least 15 PMC-linked Russian individuals in Syria in 2017, with evidence indicating their employment by the Wagner Group dating to 2015. CIT linked these individuals’ VKontakte (VK) social media profiles to announcements, photographs, or other evidence of PMC individuals killed. A number of these operatives also frequently posted photographs of themselves in military fatigues, training, or seemingly deployed in a Middle Eastern environment.
Dmitry Utkin (far right), leader of the Wagner Group, meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Day of Heroes of the Fatherland on 9 December 2016, in a photograph uploaded to VK.com on 12 January 2017. The Russian government has not acknowledged the Wagner Group’s role in Syria. (VK.com)

Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Centre recorded on 8 September 2017 that Alexei Didayev, assessed to be a Wagner Group contractor, was killed in Syria’s Deir al-Zour governorate. As the deaths of these operatives – and possibly many more that cannot be corroborated – are not reported by the Russian Ministry of Defence, and given the secrecy surrounding their operations in Syria, the Russian public is not exposed to the human cost associated with their deployment and thus the full cost of the Kremlin’s military operations in Syria.

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Intelligence angles

Although independently instrumentalised as tools of Russian non-linear warfare, Russian PMCs are very likely to have a close operational relationship with Russian special forces and intelligence structures. In terms of foreign collection, the three services with an interest in PMC activities are the GRU, the Federal Security Service (Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti: FSB), and the Foreign Intelligence Service (Sluzhba vneshney razvedki: SVR).

Galeotti told Jane’s that the FSB had played a crucial role in the creation of first the Slavonic Corps and then its later incarnation, the Wagner Group. Moreover, the Wagner Group is co-located at a Russian military base in Molkino, where the 10th Special Purpose Brigade of the GRU is based.
Airbus Defence and Space imagery showing training areas adjacent to the 1st Missile Brigade, an Iskander-M unit, near Molkino in southwestern Russia. (CNES 2017, Distribution Airbus DS) 1718847

This base was significantly expanded between 2013 and 2017 in line with the company’s growing role, particularly ‘temporary’ areas to the north and northwest of the main military garrison. Western and Russian press reports suggest that the selection and training of Wagner Group forces takes place at the Molkino Base.
Airbus Defence and Space imagery showing significant changes to the training area at Molkino between 2013 and 2017, suggesting a more permanent level of occupation. (CNES 2013, Distribution Airbus DS)

The intelligence provenance for Russian PMCs likely stems from the close relationship between the GRU, special forces, and PMCs, with many of the senior leadership of PMCs having spent time in various special forces units. Indeed, many remain in the reserves for such units, according to the websites of Moran Security Group and of RSB Group, another Russian PMC. Operational activity by PMCs may therefore be co-ordinated by communication between members of Russian special forces or intelligence services, with the PMCs directed to specific objectives.

Jane’s has not seen evidence of Russian PMCs operating in a specialised technical intelligence collection role, such as signals intelligence (SIGINT) or electronic intelligence (ELINT) collection. However, the presence of PMCs on the ground – without the political ramifications of the deployment of Russian forces – could theoretically aid some aspects of intelligence collection, akin to state intelligence agencies’ use or attempted use of any on-the-ground sources (such as aid workers or journalists) in areas that are difficult to access.

Mikhail Nefyodov, believed to be a Wagner Group contractor, in a photograph uploaded to VK.com on 28 February 2017. According to the associated caption, he was killed in Syria in February 2017. (VK.com)

An example of deploying a PMC to areas that would be sensitive for Russian special forces or conventional units is the RSB Group’s deployment to eastern Libya. Self-described on its website as a PMC undertaking actions “required to be supported by the military forces of the country, according to instructions [sic]”, the company purportedly provides maritime and terrestrial security services, intelligence and analytical services, mine-clearing, and training provision, according to company literature.
Non-Russian PMCs and PSCs

PMCs are not solely confined to those of Russia. The US remains, overall, the largest user of both PMCs and PSCs to support its foreign operations, and there are well-documented cases of Western private contractors being used in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq in a variety of roles. Evidence of contractors' involvement in other conflicts is extensive, such as Australian, British, and Colombian mercenaries fighting for profit in Yemen.

Away from the spotlight that inevitably falls on visible PMC/PSC operations by states such as Russia and the US, there are lesser-reported instances of private contractors operating in a quasi-state role. For example, South African firm Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection (STTEP) International has been involved in the training of Nigerian forces, as well as fighting the insurgent group Boko Haram in Nigeria, according to a 10 May 2015 report in The Daily Telegraph. Chaired by Eeben Barlow, STTEP International was hired in early 2015 to train and assist a spearhead Nigerian military unit in the north of the country.

In addition to the training mission, the Telegraph also reported that the company had operated attack helicopters and armoured vehicles, and had taken part in kinetic operations. Based out of Maiduguri in northeastern Borno state, the South Africa contractors supplied their own Mil Mi-24 ‘Hind’ attack helicopters and undertook night operations using night-vision equipment to gain an advantage over the Islamist extremist fighters, according to Jakkie Cilliers, executive director of the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies, quoted in The New York Times on 12 March 2015.

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