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Private Military Companies, Foreign Legions and Counterterrorism in Mali and Central African Republic

Michael Amoah[1]

Abstract

The exacerbation of terrorism in Sahelian West and Central Africa and the presence of foreign legions in aid of counterterrorism has generated research interest in private military companies (PMCs) as legions, including drone legions. This article discusses the French Legion in Mali, PMC Wagner in Central Africa Republic (CAR) and United States (US) drone legions in Sahelian West and Central Africa which is entirely francophone. French Legion disengagements from counterterrorism assignments in Mali and CAR due to increasing operational challenges compounded by policy disagreements with host governments or political disenchantment, also ushered in PMC Wagner, while US drone PMCs provided surveillance and intelligence. The choreography between France's hard-line policy not to negotiate with terrorists and Mali's decision to negotiate with terrorists, points to a gradual development across governmental, non-governmental and military circles home and abroad rather than an overnight policy switch against the French. The consensus going forward is a cautious dialogue with the terrorists. Meanwhile, Wagner incursions across Africa have re-ignited Cold War East–West competition for African alliances. With the proliferation of legion presence, African militaries have become actors in the foreign policy agendas of whichever legions they host, whether French, Russian or American. However, there are no guarantees yet that drone operators would protect drone hosts from terrorist backlash.

Keywords

security studies, foreign policy analysis, drone bases, conflict, foreign legions, private military companies, counterterrorism

Introduction

The exacerbation of terrorism in Sahelian West and Central Africa in the last decade and the presence of foreign legions, whether as part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) since the attacks of September 11, 2001, or as foreign direct response by way of counterterrorism for the area, has

[1] Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

Corresponding Author:
Michael Amoah, Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa, The London School of Economics and Political Science, Pethick-Lawrence House, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: mamoah03@gmail.com

generated research interest in private military companies (PMCs), including drone PMCs. This article discuses legion and PMC activity as demonstrated by three external powers operating in Africa: France, Russia and the United States. I therefore discuss the French Legion, PMC Wagner and United States drone bases as legions. Mali and Central African Republic (CAR) are chosen as comparable cases because in both instances, the French Legion's departure ushered in PMC Wagner. United States drone legions are discussed for the simple reason that foreign-owned drone bases constitute legion presence and play a prominent role in the counterterrorism effort. Furthermore, the United States drone base locations are almost entirely in francophone countries and therefore derived peculiar interest in the French connection, both external powers being members of the Western Atlantic Alliance. Sahelian West and Central Africa happens to be entirely francophone.

Historically, it can be said that PMCs and their contractors have existed in various ways many centuries before the term itself gained recent popularity in the literature (Singer, 2002, pp. 190–192). Singer notes that 'in the grand scheme, the modern state is a relatively new form of governance, appearing only in the last 400 years, and did itself draw extensively from private military sources to consolidate its power' (pp. 190). The evolving nature of this public–private security partnership is discussed extensively by Galai (2019). However, a brief overview of the theoretical or conceptual evolution of the term PMCs would be useful for this article without going back 400 years. Let us therefore use the late 1990s as a convenient period from which to make a good sense of the terminological evolution still taking place. Notable from one horse's own mouth, was Lt Colonel Spicer's use of the expression 'Private Military Companies' (PMCs) to refer to his military firm Sandline International (Spicer, 1998, pp. 165) whose primary client was 'Governments', to which the company offered consultancy, military, intelligence, operational and post-conflict support packages, among other things. The term PMCs was quite in vogue, as governments had indeed cultivated the practice of engaging PMC services, for example: Sandline International in Papua New Guinea; Executive Outcomes in Angola and Sierra Leone; DynCorp, Military Professional Resources Inc (MPRI) and Pacific Architects and Engineers (PAE) engaged by the United States in its Africa policy (Aning, Jaye, & Atuobi, 2008). Singer applied the term private military firms (PMFs) concurrently with PMCs while denoting a slight tactical variation for the latter (Singer, 2002).[1] Alongside PMCs came the other expression private security firms or private security companies (PSCs) to denote the market aspects of these entities, aptly put by Singer as 'external military support … not from a state … but rather the global marketplace' (Singer, 2002, pp. 186). With time, PMCs became 'the most commonly used expression in the field' (Leander 2005b, pp. 804)[2] even though the distinctions have continued to blur.[3] However, something of the enduring element of 'security' offered by PMCs retained the expression PSCs in the discourse, leading to the emergence of the most recent term Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) in the literature as the more incorporating expression, succinctly defined as 'companies that buy and sell military and security services internationally' (Leander, 2009, pp. 200). Subsequently, the expressions PMSCs, PMCs and PSCs all appear to be ploughing their digital footprints in publications (Leander, 2019) as the overlapping and blurring in both theory and practice continue to persist (Galai, 2019; Tian, 2020; van Riet, 2020; Yuan, 2022).

That said, PMCs in general have made significant inroads into the legion arena, so that we now find PMC Wagner officially replacing traditional legions such as the French Legion in some countries, to carry out state tasks where the French Legion has retreated or disengaged. Wagner is closely linked to the Kremlin, the Russian Ministry of Defence and its intelligence and security services (Jones, Doxsee, Katz, McQueen, & Moye, 2021). The theoretical and practical circumstances of the military engagements are discussed, including what led to disengagement of one legion and replacement by another, the aftermath and the theoretical innovations these cases bring to the debate.

By Sahelian West and Central Africa, I mean Sahelian West Africa and Sahelian Central Africa. The methodological focus on the geographical area is deliberate. This research, primarily a qualitative study on recent foreign legion activity in the area and the emerging role of PMCs in that regard,

commenced with a look at the French Legion in Mali from 2013 (Operation Serval) which turned into Operation Barkhane in 2014, the circumstances leading to Barkhane's exit in 2021, and its official replacement by PMC Wagner in 2021. In the context, CAR emerged as another case where Wagner's entry into the fray occurred as a direct result of an exit by the French Legion in 2016 (Operation Sangaris 2013–2016). This automatically made the two cases comparable, in that, although Wagner is proliferating in Africa, these are the only two cases where Wagner had been officially invited to replace the French Legion due to the latter's exit. The research subsequently unfolded an American connection for the French Legion, as the French relied on United States drone services for their Sahelian surveillance and intelligence, principally because drones are inconspicuous and better equipped for surveilling than the French fighter jets. However, these drone bases are legions in themselves, and PMCs are specific foreign policy instruments of the United States–Africa policy (Aning, Jaye, & Atuobi, 2008). Hence, drone bases in Africa and drone PMCs assumed direct interest for the research, especially as the United States drone bases are almost entirely located in francophone Africa. It must be said that United States drone legions are principally for GWOT and not for French military pursuits per se, however, their legion status qualified for the research ambit on foreign legions in Sahelian West and Central Africa, and the French–American connection became a coincidence not to be discarded. Wagner presence in Mali is nascent and emerging, unlike in CAR where they are more established. Whereas the French retreat from Mali is very recent, their disengagement from CAR dates from 2016, had a different dynamic, and has more to say about Wagner in operational terms. This article therefore discusses Mali first, followed by CAR, then United States drone legions.

The article is structured by an introduction with a theoretical context on PMCs, PSCs, PMSCs, geographical focus and method, followed by a French foreign policy context, and three empirical sections on the French Legion in Mali, PMC Wagner in CAR, and United States drone legions in Sahelian West and Central Africa. The article argues that the French Legion disengaged from assignments in Mali and CAR after encountering increasing operational challenges coupled with military policy disagreements or political disenchantment with host governments that were not necessarily pro-France, and that the French disengagements also ushered in PMC Wagner. The article subsequently discusses the traditional hard-line policy of France not to negotiate with terrorists versus Mali's policy to want to negotiate with the terrorists, and argues that although the host country's decision undermined the French Legion's diktat, the decision to negotiate had developed over an appreciable time across governmental, non-governmental and military sectors, including implicating the French legionnaires along the way, while incorporating that critical stakeholder buy-in from the terrorists. The emerging consensus is that a cautious dialogue with the terrorists in Mali is a realistic option going forward even if what lies ahead is in uncharted waters. The article further highlights United States drone bases and drone PMCs as legions, and argues that by hosting traditional legions, PMCs or drone bases, African militaries became actors in the foreign policy agendas of whichever legions they hosted, whether French, Russian or American. The article also points out that although drone base locations incur terrorist backlash, hosting has not guaranteed protection by the drone operators when drone hosts incur terrorist backlash. But first, setting the French foreign policy context is useful for wading into the article.

The French Foreign Policy Context

As a result of French foreign policy towards its former colonies, francophone African countries signed bilateral defence and technical assistance agreements with France at independence, which allow for stationing French special forces and military facilities in these countries to intervene against coups and insurrections of any kind that threaten the sitting heads-of-state (Bienen, 1982, pp. 156; Lellouche & Moisi, 1979, pp. 110–118) and explains why these French kingpins often govern with impunity and yet manage to remain in power for so long. A byproduct of the phenomenon appears to be tactical

replacement by their offspring when they cease to be presidents. Examples of the phenomenon and instances of its byproduct over the last 60 years can be listed here, from the longest-served to date: Omar Bongo of Gabon (president for 42 years), whose son Ali Bongo replaced him after his passing in 2009; Paul Biya of Cameroon (41 years and counting); Denis Sassou-Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville (40 years over two separate presidential periods and counting - from 1979 to 1992 and from 1997 to date; Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo (38 years), whose son Faurre Gnassingbé replaced him after his passing in 2005 and was elected into a controversial fourth term in 2020; Ben Ali of Tunisia (34 years); Felix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire (33 years), in a country where the current president Alassane Ouattara was re-elected into a controversial third term in 2020; Idriss Déby of Chad (31 years), whose son Mahamat Déby replaced him after his passing in 2021; Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso (27 years); Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria (22 years); and many more.

The few francophone African heads-of-state who have not been obsequious to France, tend not to last long or are unsupported by France, as has been the case for Guinean heads-of-state since Ahmed Sekou Toure led Guinea as the first colony to leave the French empire in 1958, or Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire (Englebert & Tull, 2008, pp. 133; Inhofe, 2011), or Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso (Diallo, 2018), or Francois Bozizé of Central African Republic (BBC, 2012). Except for Guinea and Mali that did not sign the foreign policy defence agreements, all other francophone African states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Madagascar, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Togo) signed the agreements at one point or another (Lellouche & Moisi, 1979, pp. 111–115). These agreements have influenced the political and security arrangements in these countries in one way or another over the years, and still do.

Hence, a curious glance over the continent today will reveal that most of the recent or ongoing conflicts occur along a peculiar horseshoe of francophone next-door neighbours: Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Chad, CAR and Cameroon. Burkina Faso in the loop has been under attack because of the terrorist spill-over from Mali, and experienced two separate military takeovers in January and September 2022 due to presidential and security failures to sufficiently equip its military to engage the terrorist onslaught. Togo and Côte d'Ivoire protruding southwards from Burkina Faso have also recently emerged from civil war scenarios: the former experienced a period of protests against the constitution from August 2017 leading up to the February 2020 presidential elections in which current president Faurre Gnassingbé run for a controversial fourth term; and the latter experienced a civil war in the wake of the controversial 2010 elections that ushered in current president Alassane Ouattara. The francophone African countries appear to be the ones that are constantly in conflict, political turmoil or are demonstrating high potential for conflict. The reasons for this conflict-prone pattern are embedded in existential policies relating to France, and a French influence that nurtures the political contexts which engender the conflicts. The existing defence agreements (Lellouche & Moisi, 1979, pp. 110–118) and the ensuing protective arrangements for francophone African presidents underscore the conflict-prone pattern generated by prolonged presidencies and constitutional impunity to extend presidential tenures beyond term limits, which gestate political discontent and fester conflicts.

This pattern of prolonged presidencies in conflict-prone francophone Africa is so pervasive that currently all African heads-of-state in extended presidential tenures are francophone except for Uganda which is anglophone and Equatorial-Guinea which is lusophone. The historical trend is not dissimilar regarding the francophone majority of presidential extensions: out of at least 18 African countries known to have experienced extensions to presidential term limits, ten are francophone, three anglophone, three belgicophone, and two lusophone (Amoah, 2019, pp. 3–25). The trend has become so normal in the francophone countries that, in all five recent presidential elections in Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo in 2020, and Chad and Congo-Brazzaville in 2021, the incumbent imposed their extensions through highly contentious constitutional referendums proceeded by elections which they won. It is often the case 'that incumbents who run often win at the election' (Reytjens, 2020, pp. 275).

The issue of prolonged presidencies festering conflict is buttressed by the September 2021 military coup in Guinea less than a year after the incumbent extended his presidential tenure into a third term. Other ongoing conflicts on the continent such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Islamic terrorists in Mozambique, civil war in South Sudan, rebel militias in eastern DRC, or Al Shabaab and Tigrayan insurgencies in the Horn of Africa, have totally different reasons for their occurrence, and are not francophone.

The challenge posed by French military presence in Africa is its ambiguity. Yoroms 'identified France's policy on terrorism/insurgency as a means of protecting its interest in Africa' (Yoroms, 2021, pp. 266) and French 'peace enforcement as a measure of achieving its economic interest in Africa' (Yoroms, 2021, pp. 270) for the purposes of 'perpetuating *Francafrique policy, a* basis for re-laundering France power and image in Africa. *Francafrique* is a neo-colonialism policy, the imperialism of a kind but coloured with an assumption of a benign effort not to neglect its former colonies' (Yoroms, 2021, pp. 275). Consequently, we see periodic *volte face* whenever the political conditions no longer favour French military presence or economic interests, hence the pursuit of the former to fulfil the latter, as can be said for French involvement in the Sahel and parts of West Africa (Yoroms, 2021).[4] The examples of long-tenured francophone African presidents listed earlier demonstrate guaranteed French protection for those aligned with French economic and foreign policy interests. As Bienen points out, in the places where 'France retained bases … the absence of military takeovers … may well be related to the French commitment to the present civilian leaders' (Bienen, 1982, pp. 172). This article proceeds to discuss legionnaire and PMC activity in Mali, followed by CAR, then United States drone legions.

The French Legion in Mali

The paradoxical doctrine of legionnaires (Grasmeder, 2021, pp. 149) has served several nations very well across the globe at different epochs for myriad reasons under auspicious circumstances. The doctrine has a broad international appeal and remains popular. But it is equally stark that legionnaires are 'foreigners who are neither citizens nor subjects of the state whose military they serve' (Grasmeder, 2021, pp. 147). Hence the paradox of their usefulness, sustained popularity and international appeal characterizes a key tenet in international politics, that all nations do what they must to survive their interests even if that means bringing in foreigners to perform sensitive national military tasks.

Historically, the French Legion has a slightly different ethos for their operations in Africa, seeing themselves more like 'bringing "civilization" to the heathens of the desert' (Lellouche & Moisi, 1979, pp. 110)[5] even though infantry from citizens of the desert countries (principally Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) fought for France alongside the Allied Forces in the Second World War and in other wars prior such as the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856, mainly because the French legionnaires had been anachronistically based in Algeria for 130 years from 1831 until the 1954–1962 Algerian War of Independence finally brought their stationing to a close. Since then, France has seized every opportunity to make French legions relevant in African affairs, with military bases in the ex-colonies, and even in non-ex-colonies such as Rwanda, Burundi and DRC (Lellouche & Moisi, 1979, pp. 114),[6] plus a recent reinforcement of its military estate in Côte d'Ivoire with the new International Academy for the Fight Against Terrorism (AILCT). It is with this saviour mindset that France deemed it a golden opportunity to respond to the Malian government's invitation, and launched Operation Serval in January 2013 (Henke, 2017), to save the country from the Azawadi onslaught that had already ravaged in its path the cities of Kidal, Timbuktu, Gao and Douentza, and was heading for the capital Bamako. This intervention by France was particularly interesting in relation to Mali that had notoriously not signed the post-independence defence agreement with France from the independence period.

The French Legion remained in Mali while Operation Serval metamorphosed during July-August 2014 into Operation Barkhane that also linked up with the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FCG5S) which incorporates the five Sahelian nations of Mauritania, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso and of course Mali, to work alongside the United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Malian Armed Forces (MAF). Together, Barkhane, FC5GS, MINUSMA and MAF were to engage the broad enemy front that had equally metamorphosed from the initial secularist Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and Ansar Dine, into new terrorist affiliates such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Movement for the Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), Katibat Macina or Macina Liberation Front (MLF) and Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso.

With the ensuing metamorphosis of both allied and enemy forces, as well as their respective territories or jurisdictions of operation, the French legionnaires in Mali were tested to the limits regarding their presumed loyalty or paradoxical relationship with the host country. Despite a presumed common goal for Barkhane, FC5GS, MINUSMA and MAF, it was only the central Mali camp in Gao that Barkhane shared with the multinational forces. Barkhane operated largely on its own, with sole bases across Mali in Timbuktu, Kidal and Tessalit, and elite forces kitted with more sophisticated weaponry. It is reported that Barkhane comprised the 13th Parachute Dragoon Regiment (13e RDP) which is one of France's oldest and most prestigious airborne reconnaissance units, and was 'outfitted with an FN Scar-L or M16A2, drawing away from the service-issued Famas F1 and HK416 used by most French military personnel' (Martin, 2022) which was the standard assault rifles since France developed its Reinforcement of African Peace-Keeping Capacities (RECAMP) in the mid-1990s (Berman, 2003, pp. 206). There were also concerns about intelligence sharing between Barkhane and the multinational forces, confusion about the division of labour or which forces did what, as well as who really took the lead on surveillance and intelligence, which sometimes resulted in identification errors and target mishits. It has been reported that 'Paris has, for years, tried to internationalize the counter-terrorism effort in the Sahel, but with little success. The US provides surveillance and intelligence and the UN provides logistical support' (Munshi, 2021). A report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) stated that 'The recurrent coordination meetings must focus on establishing a division of labor and de-conflicting lines of action' (Devermont & Harris, 2020).

Operation Barkhane therefore assumed its own complexities, ranging from mission fatigue to identification errors, target mishits and arguments about eliminating terror targets that were deemed as innocent civilians by locals but otherwise by the French special forces (Maclean, 2021). This fuelled resentment from local populations, so that the French legionnaires who were once hailed as liberating heroes in January 2013 had become a neo-colonial enemy whose presence was no longer desired after eight years of occupation. Back home, the French Metropole had also become mission-weary, as Barkhane was not winning the war against the ever-changing terrorist formations. A French poll in January 2021 revealed that public opinion in France was against the intervention. It was reported in *Foreign Policy,* that 'although Barkhane rarely makes the headlines in France, except when a soldier dies (the official death toll is 56 deaths since 2013), the French public has grown weary of an operation that costs $708 million a year for few tangible results other than the occasional elimination of extremist leaders largely unknown at home' (Barbero, 2021) such as Abdelmalek Droukdel of AQIM (The Defense Post, 2020a), Ba ag Moussa of JNIM (The Defense Post, 2020b), and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi the head of ISGS (The Defense Post, 2021a). The last straw which broke the camel's back emerged in the form of a fundamental disagreement between France and the Malian government when the crunch point materialized officially in October 2020 that the latter now wished to negotiate with the terrorists (RFI, 2020). France echoed the traditional hard-line position that 'with terrorists, we do not discuss. We fight' (Pinault, 2020). Hence the official line for leaving Mali was clearly spelt out that the host country had crossed a red line to attempt negotiations with the terrorists (Diallo, 2021).

To Negotiate or Not with Terrorists

The traditional hard-line of not negotiating with terrorists has been eroding over the decades, particularly after the end of the Cold War when many more civil wars have ended in negotiated settlements rather than political defeat, expulsion or extermination of a losing side; the new norm of a negotiated settlement has been on the rise (Howard & Stark, 2018, pp. 127). We note that since 1968, terrorist groups are more likely to pursue or end up with negotiations (Jones & Libicki, 2008, pp. 19). Hence, the increasing reality is that governments are doing more negotiations than they care to admit, and key lessons from the playbook of diplomacy point to the fact that 'concessions have to be made to terrorists even if states pretend that nothing has been given to them' (Faure, 2008, pp. 189). Scholars and practitioners alike have become used to acknowledging that 'although many governments say that they will not negotiate with terrorists, in practice they often do' (Neumann, 2007, pp. 1). The key difference with the Malian case is that we have a foreign legion versus a host military whereby the latter is the one expressing the wish to negotiate with terrorists.

Although the ruling Malian junta have decided in the direction of what they think works for them or would work in their peculiar circumstances – to negotiate with the terrorists, the sequence of events leading up to this point does not make the outcome a surprise. The choreography between France's hard-line not to negotiate and the Malian host eventually agreeing to negotiate, portrays a systematic development rather than an overnight switch to upset the French Legion. As far back as 2018, policy forums, think tanks and civil society groups monitoring the situation had already formed an opinion that negotiating was a potential solution. This was reflected in Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa (AGRA)'s statement by Ambroise Dakouo that: 'every analysis of the Malian crisis shows that a purely military solution is not possible … we cannot be dogmatic. We must be open to dialogue with these groups to find out if conciliation is possible. We must find out what they want and what we can concede' (Hasseye, 2018). Meanwhile, military observers elsewhere within the Western Atlantic Alliance (Hoffmann, 1981) had also developed a similar opinion (Thurston, 2020). As the policy dilemma unfolded, France implicated itself controversially by supporting the Malian authorities to negotiate with JNIM for the release of a French hostage – 75-year old aid worker, founder and director of Aide à Gao, Sophie Pétronin, plus Father Pier Luigi Maccali and tourist Nicola Ciacchio who were two Italian hostages, along with Soumaïla Cissé the former Malian opposition leader who had been kidnapped by terrorists near Timbuktu on 25 March 2020 in the middle of his presidential campaign (Chanut, 2020). These hostages were released in exchange for the high price of 180 terrorist extremists held in prison by the Malian military (Ahmed, 2020). Meanwhile, waiting in the wings were two terrorist representatives who Mali (and Barkhane if it had remained) would be engaging at the negotiation table: JNIM's Iyad ag Ghaly and the MLF's Amadou Kouf. Both representatives belong to foremost terrorist organizations at the top of France's anti-terror list, and France would have no dealings with such enemy counterparts. It is worthy of note that the Malian decision to negotiate with the terrorists has an essential component – the buy-in of the terrorists as stakeholders.

It was widely known that 'the exchange of prisoners and terrorists has been a common practice since the arrival of the Jihadist groups in Mali, but ex-president IBK[7] was never in favour of open negotiations with the terrorists' (Cobo, 2020). What is more striking is that the controversial release of Sophie Pétronin was mediated by Ahmada Ag Bibi who is a Kidal Tuareg deputy acquainted with Iyad Ag Ghali of JNIM the hostage takers. It appears that the twists and turns within the ensuing anthropological context required a more astute response to the realities on the ground than the rigid policy of non-negotiation. The context had become rather fluid and murky for anyone to draw that risky hard-line in the desert sand to not negotiate. The Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) reported that even the JNIM and ISGS had been at each other's throats for quite some time (Zenn, 2021a), hence the enemy of your enemy could be your friend in auspicious circumstances. It is probable that the recognition of these nuances led the Malian authorities to adopt the pragmatic

approach of negotiating. This has been summarized as 'tapping into one of the country's highest religious authorities, Mahmoud Dicko of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), to engage JNIM because Dicko understands the government's redlines, such as ceding territory; has contacts in JNIM leadership; and is familiar with negotiation techniques' (Zenn, 2021a). The HCIM's role was confirmed by Moufa Haidara their current representative (Koffi, 2021). Mahamadou Koné the Malian Minister of Religious Affairs, Worship and Customs is himself in the loop and leading the government process. Both the authorities and the terrorists appear to have become more acquainted with each other over time and space.

However, the issue of France cooperating and agreeing to negotiations with terrorists for the release of French and European hostages but unwilling to negotiate with terrorists for the security of Mali, has played, and continues to play, on many subconscious minds with respect to the Metropole's aims and priorities. France has therefore been viewed suspiciously for its commitment to addressing the terrorist and security threat vis-a-vis military occupation for its geopolitical and foreign policy interests. The latter may be valid for France, but the military occupation for achieving it began to mean something different for the host, as the crisis worsened and the French mission looked increasingly impossible, coupled with the emergent local resentment against the legionnaires previously praised in 2013 as saviours. Most importantly, the development of starkly opposite and antagonistic policy options for resolving the crisis, respectively, the French diktat to never negotiate with terrorists versus Mali's willingness to negotiate with the terrorists, has been offered by France as the departure point.

The current Malian military junta is led by Colonel Assimi Goita and his trusted defence minister Colonel Sadio Camara who are both Russian-trained and had been in secret discussions with Wagner for a while. This became the subject of intense speculation at the UN General Assembly in September 2021 when their prior discussions with the mercenaries became apparent (Zenn, 2021b). With the imminent arrival of the mercenaries, the United States cautioned the Malian authorities in mid-December 2021 against doing business with Wagner (The Defense Post, 2021b) but the warning was too little too late as Wagner deployments in Mali occurred a few days afterwards before Christmas (France 24, 2021). It is reported that Wagner would earn $10.8 million per month to train MAF personnel and provide security to government officials, while also pursuing access to natural resources such as gold (Doxsee, Thompson & Harris, 2022) and uranium for Russia's nuclear programmes.

Exactly what happens from this point lies in uncharted waters despite the Malian government's clear position to want to negotiate. As is widely known, 'when it comes to negotiating with terrorists, there is a clear disconnect between what governments profess and what they actually do' (Neumann, 2007, pp. 1) since no government wants to be seen as paying ransoms to bandits. Indeed, observers confronting terrorist situations elsewhere on the African continent, particularly in the Horn of Africa, have their mouths agape at the very thought of negotiating with terrorists. The International Crisis Group (ICG) rightly identified Islamist militancy in Africa among the top ten conflicts to watch around the globe in 2022 and pointed out that: 'More controversial is talking to jihadis. It won't be easy: Somalia's neighbours, which contribute troops to AMISOM, oppose any engagement; and while Sahel governments have been more open, France rejects negotiations. No one knows whether compromise with militants is feasible, what it would entail, or how populations would view it' (Ero & Atwood, 2021).

Whether the situation in Mali offers a different dynamic that would allow negotiating with terrorists to be a successful formula remains the million-dollar question to be answered with time. The significant point to note is that the sum of analyses from both military and non-military sources has queried the approaches pursued so far towards the Sahelian crisis. A comprehensive analysis of the underlying assumptions for the multiplicity of ensuing approaches called for a recalibration and makes clear that 'It is imperative to reassess and reset the strategy toward the Sahel, casting aside faulty assumptions. Specifically, the international community and its Sahelian partners should prioritize governance, press for an expanded peace process, cautiously dialogue with militants, and rework the

division of labor between foreign and regional actors' (Devermont & Harris, 2020, pp. 1). The CSIS report concluded that 'It is foolhardy to "do more" when the underlying theory of change is flawed' (Devermont & Harris, 2020, pp. 9). A cautious dialogue with the terrorists resonates with the uncharted waters theory mentioned earlier in this article. In the meantime, Wagner would be 'coup-proofing' (Doxsee, Thompson & Harris, 2022) the Malian junta as was done for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in CAR.

PMC Wagner in Central African Republic

PMC Wagner has operated in, or currently plays official roles, in as many African countries as CAR, Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya, South Sudan, Sudan (Bax, 2021), Mozambique (Feldman, 2020; Warsan, 2019), Botswana, Burundi, Chad, Comoro, Congo, Equatorial-Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar and Nigeria. (Jones et al., 2021, pp. 15). We note that Wagner is procedurally referred to as 'Russian instructors' in UN Security Council reports (UNSC, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2020, 2021a).

Prior to Wagner's appearance in CAR, the French Legion had been operating there as Operation Sangaris from December 2013, at a period when the March 2013 coup which overthrew François Bozizé had left in its aftermath raging sectarian battles between Séléka coalition forces and anti-balaka militias, and had rendered the country unstable and ungovernable. The mandate of Sangaris was to deploy alongside the African Union (AU) International Support Mission to CAR (MISCA) to stabilize CAR, based on UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2127. In April 2014, MISCA transitioned to become the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA) with a Chapter VII mandate, but while it took up to September to become operational, Sangaris remained in the territory, until six months into the first term of president Touadéra who is not particularly pro-France. More practically, Sangaris and MINUSCA's assignment included engaging the notorious and extremely difficult PK5 and PK13 districts of Bangui which are Muslim enclaves for some of CAR's toughest rebel militias, and regular flashpoints where many peacekeepers and allied troops had fallen prey to militias from time to time (Amoah, 2019, pp. 83, 85 & 93; Yoroms, 2021, pp. 276).

The increasing challenge of keeping Bangui safe, the uncontrollable spiralling of militia activity across the country, plus a new francophone president who was not particularly minded about aligning politically with France disenchanted the French, amidst some rather distracting allegations of abusing underaged boys and girls by UN peacekeepers and Sangaris troops which continued to make television headlines. Yoroms notes that 'Operation Sangaris received the most damaging UN Report on the allegation of sexual abuses of young children perpetrated by French forces in the CAR's IDP. Accordingly, in April 2015 French troops in the IDP abused and exploited children by raping them and getting them involved in sodomy in exchange for food' (Yoroms, 2021, pp. 276). All these factors eventually led the French foreign minister to call his troops home in October 2016. As MINUSCA would be unable to handle the tough turf on its own, some other foreign partner such as Wagner was bound to take advantage and fill the gap sooner or later. There is an impression that the French Legion or Sangaris somewhat operated on their own despite being in the same environment with MINUSCA and FACA, as was also the case for Barkhane when they were in Mali with MINUSMA, MAF and FCG5S. As noted by other scholars, 'the French commanders acted alone and hardly consulted AFISMA or MINUSCA Force Commanders' and acted as if to 'pursue a quick fix operation without sustaining cooperation with the local forces' (Yoroms, 2021, pp. 275). Additionally, in both countries, the absence of overt political encouragement from host governments not particularly pro-France (as happens to be the case with President Touadéra of CAR and President Goita of Mali) led to French disenchantment. An opposite comparison can be made with Operation Licorne in Côte d'Ivoire where also the French Legion deployed alongside the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) when the Ivorian civil war began in September 2002, however, the French forces have remained to date, as former president Laurent Gbagbo who was not pro-France (Englebert & Tull, 2008, pp. 133; Inhofe, 2011)

is no longer in office and the current president Alassane Ouattara who assumed office during Operation Licorne-UNOCI is obsequious to France.

In the lead up to gaining foothold in CAR, some Wagner personnel were reportedly 'employed by the Central African private company Sewa Security and equipped with exempted weapons as requested by the Ministry of Defence of the Central African Republic, to reinforce the President's security' (UNSC, 2018b, pp. 39).[8] Wagner was by then orbiting CAR's political space, as the Russian Federation co-facilitated (together with the Government of Sudan) the African Union Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in the CAR which invited four armed groups including three main ex-Séléka factions to the negotiating table in Khartoum on 10 July and 28 August 2018 (UNSC, 2018b, pp. 7–8). The ex-Séléka factions were the Popular Front for the Renaissance of Central Africa (FPRC), Union for Progress and Reform (UPC) and Mouvement Patriotique Pour la Centrafrique (MPC). As Wagner's involvement in CAR evolved, we note that 175 Wagner personnel were deployed to Bambari, Bangassou, Bangui, Berengo, Bouar, Dekoa, Paoua and Sibut, to ensure the proper handling of weapons and ammunitions delivered to the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) in January and February 2018 (UNSC, 2018b, pp. 39). Subsequently at the first Russian Federation-Africa Summit held in Sochi on 23 October 2019, President Touadéra rolled out the red carpet and 'requested that FACA be provided with lethal weapons with a calibre larger than 14.5 mm, armoured personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, mortars and other artillery weapons … needed to build a stronger national army' (UNSC, 2019b, pp. 33). CAR became fair game for Wagner from this point onwards, and Touadéra's precise request would be granted in due course, because a Panel of Experts report published in 2021 stated that 'on 15 and 24 October, military aircraft from the Russian Federation arrived at M'Poko International Airport in Bangui to deliver 20 BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance and patrol vehicles, with 20 14.5 mm Vladimirov KPVT machine guns and 20 7.62 mm Kalashnikov PKT machine guns (to be installed on the BRDM-2) to the security forces of the Central African Republic' (UNSC 2021b, pp. 18–19). Wagner's involvement in CAR is now mainstreamed. As of June 2020, Wagner had trained 4,200 FACA soldiers, 300 gendarmes and 300 police officers (UNSC, 2020, pp. 16).

Wagner has been engaged in a wide variety of strategic roles including training FACA personnel, performing targeted security operations against rebel militias across the country, providing security for gold and diamond mines while offsetting resource-oriented and income-generating militia activity such as collecting 'security taxes' from companies (UNSC, 2021a, pp. 16), protecting senior government officials, training the Presidential Guard and operating alongside them (UNSC, 2018a, pp. 7; 2018b, pp. 39). Wagner activity therefore plays a significant role in coup-proofing with military structures parallel to the existing indigenous units. For example, although the Presidential Guard officially belongs to the army, recent Wagner training and recruitment for its expansion 'was not provided for in the national defence plan, nor was its role coordinated as part of the security sector reform process' (UNSC, 2020, pp. 16). Wagner personnel have also been implicated in indiscriminate killings, widespread looting of houses and buildings, various forms of theft and summary executions of alleged armed group elements (UNSC, 2021a, pp. 23).

To date, the most crucial role played by Wagner was during the period of the 2020 general elections which occurred on 27 December. The Khartoum process had not been that progressive. Not all of the 14 armed groups then operating in CAR were represented, and the few that were signatories (including the FPRC, UPC and MPC) later 'issued separate communiqués on 19 and 22 October 2018 declaring their disengagement from the Khartoum process' (UNSC, 2018b, pp. 8). Moreover, rebel militia activity on the ground did not reflect their commitments to the African Union Initiative reiterated at the discussion table, particularly as it was obvious to the militias that FACA, MINUSCA and Wagner were too outstretched to keep up with the totality of CAR territory that was ungoverned and proliferated with well-resourced rebels making money from gold and diamonds, tax collection and pillaging. The militias had a strong sense of ownership to their territorial enclaves and felt disenfranchised by

President Touadéra's attempt at inclusive government during his first term which resulted in conflicts of interest with FPRC, UPC, MPC and Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation (3R) representatives (UNSC, 2020, pp. 128; UNSC, 2019b, pp. 81). These representatives had earlier been appointed as special military advisers to the Prime Minister for the Special Mixed Security Units-USMS (UNSC, 2019a, pp. 8), and Abbas Sidiki the leader of 3R voluntarily abandoned his post soon after attending one USMS graduation ceremony in May 2020 (UNSC, 2020, pp. 15).

Hence a formidable coalition of armed groups motivated by political and financial interests did not want Touadéra to win a second term and were determined to wreck the elections, in particular: the MPC led by Mahamat Al-Khatim; 3R led by Abbas Sidiki; FPRC led by Noureddine Adam; and Kwa Na Kwa (KNK) led by former president François Bozizé whose candidature was rejected by the constitutional court. Sidiki, Adam and Bozizé were already on the UN sanctions list (UNSC, 2021a, pp. 2 & 8). Rebel encroachments towards Bangui from multiple directions encircled the capital with a siege that proved too challenging for FACA and MINUSCA. The CAR government requested troops from Russia and Rwanda (ICG, 2021) who arrived in the nick of time in December (ICG, 2020) including 300 specialist 'force protection troops' (Bax, 2021) from Rwanda. In the end, 'a combination of UN peacekeepers, Wagner personnel and Rwandan soldiers repelled the attack' (Bax, 2021) with the extra specialist support from Rwanda (Feldman, 2021).

It is significant to note that, although Wagner took up military roles in Mali and CAR where the French Legion retreated, Wagner's broader incursions across Africa symbolize a re-emergence of Cold War competition for military support being waged between the Atlantic Alliance (Hoffmann, 1981) and Russia. It will be recalled that there was fierce superpower competition for African alliances during the Cold War which forced most African states to join the Non-Aligned Movement just to avoid being mis-labelled for siding with the United States, the Soviet Union or neither, to avoid retribution for whichever side they aligned with or the lack thereof. This further explains the stiff reluctance from African countries to align with either NATO or Russia since the 2022 War in Ukraine. Suffice to say that although France is a junior partner (Heimann, Paikowsky, & Kedem, 2021, pp. 386) in the Atlantic Alliance (Kolodziej, 1980, pp. 116), Wagner encroachments into military spaces left vacant by France have contributed to re-enacting Cold War rivalries between the West and the East. That said, some observers view Wagner as motivated by resource extraction (Jones et al., 2021), and both Mali and CAR are well endowed with high value natural resources. Another recent example of Wagner activity in the area is in Burkina Faso that is reeling from the pro-France years of Blaise Compaoré which ended in 2014. Russia has secured recent mining and arms deals (Lyammouri & Eddazi, 2020, pp. 4) including three gold mines under Nordgold (Mining Review Africa, 2019) and Wagner offers protection for the Russian mining concerns and other government sites.

United States Drone Legions in Sahelian West and Central Africa

It appears therefore, that African militaries do host traditional legions such as the French Legion, as well as PMCs such as Wagner. As foreign-owned drone bases are effectively legions, we note the proliferation of United States drone estates in Africa as another frontier of legionnaire activity. African militaries are therefore held hostage by the foreign policy agendas of whichever legions they host, whether French, Russian or American. Aning et al. sated how PMCs 'have become part of broader structures and agendas and how they facilitate the pursuit of foreign policy by key states' (Aning et al., 2008, p. 613), and further discussed 'US foreign policy in Africa … the role of PMCs in the delivery of US military support to Africa' (p. 614) following the attacks of September 11, 2001. The authors emphasized that PMCs occupied a central place in the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) which in 2004 became the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA). Subsequently, Bachmann and several others sounded the alarm that drone bases were an emerging focus in the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)'s engagement in Africa. Bachmann's 2012–

2013 assessment on AFRICOM captured one drone base each in Ethiopia and Seychelles (Bachmann, 2014, pp. 130) which came under the command of the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HoA) with responsibility for surveillance on Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in the HoA and East Africa.

Currently, the United States has 13 drone bases in Africa, hence the 11 additional drone bases point to a significant increase from two in less than a decade, even if two of the Sahelian bases had existed before the HoA bases (2007 in Burkina Faso and 2008 in Mauritania). Currently, there are three United States drone bases in Niger, two in Djibouti, and one each in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mauritania, Seychelles and Tunisia. Except for Seychelles and Djibouti which together have three, the remaining eight United States drone bases are in that intense francophone patch of Sahelian West and Central Africa which has seen significant increase in terrorism since the 2012 insurgencies in Mali that have spiralled into the wider subregion. Drone activity prior to the troubles in Mali surveilled migrant and terrorist movements from the wars in Syria, Yemen and other parts of the Middle East transiting through HoA to Libya and heading across the Mediterranean to Europe. Since then, Sahelian West and Central Africa has attracted terrorist interests buoyed initially by the southward spill over of weapons from the 2011 Libyan Civil War, and subsequently spurred on by the insurgencies in Mali which have also spilled over into neighbouring countries including Burkina Faso. Bachmann's view is that drone activities 'disguise the USA's real security interests, namely, counter-terrorism' (Bachmann, 2014, pp. 120). Top drone PMCs on the global market which are United States-owned and contracted by the departments of défense, navy or air force include Northrop Grumman, General Atomics, Boeing, AeroVironment Inc and Lockheed Martin. (Fortune Business Insights, 2021). The MQ-9 Reaper drones operating from Nigerien Air Base 201 are manufactured by General Atomics and had been operating from Nigerien Air Base 101 in support of the French-led Operation Barkhane in Mali since 2014. Munshi (2021) stated earlier that 'the US provided surveillance and intelligence'.

It has been observed that hosting a United States drone base does not guarantee defence for the host country when it experiences backlash from terrorists, as currently in Burkina Faso which is facing terrorist blowback for its part in hosting the United States drone base at Ouagadougou airport (Amoah, 2019, pp. 34 & 41–42). AQIM, ISGS, JNIM, MLF, MUJAO and Ansarul Islam did not have any beef with Burkina Faso until the country hosted the United States drone base for GWOT. Most notably, the January 2016 terrorist attack at the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou which is popular with foreign diplomats, became the debut point of reference for the terrorist backlash against the American drone base. Scholars have argued that United States drone strikes cause blowback against United States-related targets locally, nationally or transnationally (Shah, 2018, pp. 47–48), and also 'generate a backlash effect by creating more terrorists than they eliminate at the local, national, and international levels' (Shah, 2018, p, 82). In the case of Burkina Faso, harmless citizens incapable of protecting themselves from the terrorist encroachment north of the country are at the receiving end of the blowback.

Incidentally, 11 out of the 13 United States drone bases in Africa are in francophone countries (apart from Ethiopia and Somalia). France and the United States are traditional partners of the Atlantic Alliance (Eznack, 2011; Heimann et al., 2021; Hoffmann, 1981; Kolodziej, 1980) for GWOT which serves as the *raison d'etre* for the drone bases. It has been observed that it is easier to gain cooperation with a francophone country to host a United States drone base (or any military facility) than their anglophone counterparts even when the latter happen to be under serious threat such as Nigeria under Boko Haram rampage. There is no United States base in Nigeria apart from the periodical offer of help from The White House (2014). An attempt by the United States in 2018 to establish a military base in neighbouring Ghana was robustly resisted by citizens[9] while the minority in parliament walked out against the Status of Forces Agreement. The result was a United States logistics hub and warehouse base with a hangar next to the Kotoka International Airport in Ghana's capital Accra (Williams, 2019), instead of the military base originally envisaged. There was no drama next-door in Côte d'Ivoire where the AILCT was built by France in 2021.

We can summarily deduce that African militaries have now become 'foreign policy actors' (Bienen, 1980, pp. 168) in one way or another for the Atlantic Alliance and other superpowers. Four decades ago, Bienen had concluded that African militaries did 'not seem to have a bias for particular policy stances … or appear as distinctive actors in the foreign policy process' (Bienen, 1980, pp. 186). But now, whether Wagner incursions in Africa are fuelled by superpower disenchantments with African host countries or not, they are tantamount to African militaries hosting Russia's foreign policy, just as with the French or American legions. In international politics, inviting or hosting a legion is tantamount to acting out the foreign policy agenda of that legion regardless of how the legion materialized. None of the African states decided to host legions as their specific or bona fide foreign policy agenda overtly espoused and implemented. Rather, extenuating circumstances has led them to host the legions. In effect, they are hosting the foreign policies of the external powers supplying the legions.

Conclusions

While the world is yet to find the perfect model for humanitarian interventions (Kuperman, 2013), and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) is not yet ready to intervene in all African situations that require intervention, legions and PMCs (including drone PMCs) do take on assignments well beyond their national borders. Among other things, this article has discussed legions, PMCs and counterterrorism in Mali and CAR, and highlighted that the French Legion disengaged from assignments in both countries after incurring increasing operational challenges compounded by policy disagreements with host governments that were not particularly pro-France, while French disengagements on both occasions ushered in Wagner. Subsequently, the article debated the choreography between the French policy not to negotiate with terrorists and the Malian decision to negotiate with the terrorists and reached the view that although the Malian junta's policy to want to negotiate undermined the French Legion's diktat, the decision to negotiate had developed over an appreciable time across non-governmental, governmental and military circles home and abroad, including implicating the French legionnaires along the way. Mali's pragmatic option to negotiate incorporates that critical stakeholder buy-in from the terrorists, with a well-supported view that a cautious dialogue with the terrorists is a realistic option going forward even if what lies ahead remains in uncharted waters. The article noted that Wagner incursions across Africa have re-ignited Cold War East–West competition for African alliances. The article further argued that United States drone bases are legions operated by drone PMCs, hence African militaries are held hostage by the foreign policy agendas of whichever legions they host, whether French, Russian or American. Meanwhile, there are no guarantees that drone operators would protect drone hosts from terrorist backlash.

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ORCID iD

Michael Amoah https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8720-2312

Notes

1. See footnote 2 on pp. 186–187.
2. See footnote 1 on this page, as well as footnote 1 in Leander, 2005a, pp. 606.
3. It is notable in Leander's 2010 article in *Security Dialogue* that the title of her paper says PMCs but the keywords say PSCs. Also, see footnote 1 on pp. 467 of this paper.
4. See pp. 276–277.
5. See footnote 6 on this page.
6. See Table 2 on this page.
7. The late Ibrahim Boubacar Keita who passed away on 16 January 2022.
8. Sewa Security Group happens to be another Russian-owned PMSC relatively less prominent in comparison with Wagner but working hand in hand with the latter.
9. The furore which the prospect of a US military base in Ghana's capital Accra generated across the nation was quite astonishing and rare in both content and intensity of public interest – a kind of reaction that has not gripped the nation in such a manner before. The era of social media might have contributed to the intensity and engagement of the issues, but it was rare nevertheless, and fostered its own drama over an appreciable period.

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Author Biography

Michael Amoah is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has held lecturing positions at SOAS and University of Bristol. He specializes in International Relations, Conflict and Security. His publications include: *Nationalism, Globalization, and Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); *The New Pan-Africanism: Globalism and the Nation State in Africa* (I B Tauris, 2019); *Reconstructing the Nation in Africa* (IB Tauris, 2021); 'Sleight is Right: Cyber control as a new battleground in African elections', *African Affairs* 119(474), 68–89; Public policy and election administration in Africa: A controlling or innovative environment. In G. Onyango (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Public Policy in Africa* (pp. 314–24). London: Routledge.