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The Emergence of the Wagner Group in Mali: An Overview from the Perspective of Conventional Constructivism

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ABSTRACT

Wagner Group is a Russian private military company that provides security services in conflict-affected countries. Mali stands out as Wagner Group's key security partners because Wagner entered an already fragmented rebellion, while replacing France as the state's principal security partner. The interaction of these two actors is a complex dynamic in international relations. Wagner Group, as a non-state actor, signed a security agreement with the Malian government following the military coups of 2020 and 2021. The emergence of the Wagner Group in Mali raises serious concerns about the legitimacy of private military company operations in conflict areas. The purpose of this research is to investigate the reasons or motives for the Wagner Group's presence in Mali by looking at international norms governing private military companies, as well as the Malian state's national identity and interests through the lens of conventional constructivism that emphasises the dialectical relationship between actors and structures. The study employs a qualitative research method with an analytical descriptive approach. Data were gathered through online research, literature reviews, and documentation. To ensure data validity, triangulation techniques were used to increase the reliability and depth of the study. The findings show that Wagner Group operates in the normative grey areas of international law, reconstructing the narrative of the self-defense norm to legitimize security privatization. Furthermore, a shift in Mali's national identity based on anti-colonial perception has allowed political elites to justify the Wagner Group's presence as a means of safeguarding national sovereignty against terrorism and internal instability.

INTRODUCTION

In the 20th century, mercenaries began to be employed in conflict zones as an alternative to national armies. However, the international legal status of mercenaries falls into the "grey" category as there is no clear categorisation of combatant or non-combatant status in the field. Additional Protocol I to the 1977 Geneva Conventions Article 47 Paragraph (1) explicitly states that mercenaries are not entitled to combatant or prisoner of war status (ICRC, 1977). Those who can sanction mercenaries are state actors under the jurisdiction of the national law under which they operate, if they are involved in war crimes. International legal regulations regarding mercenaries themselves have been regulated in the sub-section of international humanitarian law in Protocol I Additional to the Geneva Conventions 1977, Article 47 Paragraph (1) which reads "A mercenary shall not have the right to be a combatant or a prisoner of war". This means that mercenaries do not have the right to combatant or prisoner of war status (ICRC, 1977). The main characteristics of mercenaries are the dominant financial motivation and the absence of nationality ties with the parties to the conflict.

The increasing escalation of international conflicts has led to a transformation in warfare into a hybrid form of warfare that involves the combined power of state and non-state actors simultaneously outside the conventional military paradigm. This dynamic gives rise to a new phenomenon of military commercialisation when a corporate entity offers private security services carried out by a private military company (PMC). PMCs have a variety of tasks, ranging from ensuring the safety of local political officials, assisting in warfare, and can even be an alternative to the leadership of operating military squads (Shearer, 2020). They also protect critical energy infrastructure, such as oil, gas, mining, and train local forces. The presence of private military companies (PMCs) in armed conflicts faces complex challenges related to operational legitimacy and legal accountability. Unlike national armed forces that have clear operational standards, PMC activities on the battlefield pose ethical dilemmas regarding their status and accountability as non-state actors. International normative frameworks have developed the principle of anti-mercenary norms that aim to limit the space for PMCs through strict state oversight and international humanitarian law. These norms are rooted in a moral critique of the financial motives that are the main drivers of mercenary engagement, in contrast to conventional militaries that have a basis in legal and constitutional legitimacy (Percy, 2007).

The international anti-mercenary norm, which originally had a monopoly on state use of force since the 19th century, is now undergoing normative reconstruction due to the presence of Private Military Companies (PMCs) as non-state actors with organised command structures and corporate entities. Although international norms of PMCs affirm the state's monopoly on the use of force, the opposite shows a significant expansion in the use of PMC services (Tracol, 2012). This phenomenon is evident in the context of national economic interests where actors such as failed states, international organisations, and multinational corporations increasingly rely on private security services. The expansion of the use of PMCs reflects the fragmentation of the multipolar order where the predictability of global security is increasingly volatile as new types of conflicts develop.

The private military company Wagner Group is one of the PMCs that manifests Russia's hybrid warfare strategy in expanding its influence in international politics. The Wagner Group differs from many PMCs by functioning more as a direct state-proxy instrument for coercion, political influence, and surrogate warfare (Marten, 2019). For example, the United States PMCs in Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts fulfilled logistics, static protection, maintenance, surveillance, and transport roles. (Potočňák, 2022). Historially, Wagner Group's emergence was first noted during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Wagner Group is a paramilitary company that aims to seek business benefits in realising the Kremlin's foreign policy to counter the hegemony of the United States (Rondeaux, 2019). Wagner quickly evolved into a special forces group that integrates Russia's geopolitical, energy and economic interests. They provide political protection services and security assistance to other countries' military forces in combat zones.

Wagner's military personnel are recruited from former soldiers, deserters, and prison inmates who are offered fantastic salaries many times that of regular military troops. The Wagner Group's financial resources are controlled by Yevgheny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch often dubbed "Putin's chef" for his catering business for the Kremlin (Kim, 2022). Wagner Group's security operations cover at least 30 countries across four continents. In the African region alone, Wagner is actively expanding its network of military security service activities in various countries, one of which is Mali. Africa is the most promising security business field for Russia because it is rich in natural resources and has political regime instability under authoritarian governments. Mali is the target of Wagner Group's security business interests that capitalise on post-colonialism anti-French sentiment and rich natural resources of gold (Bangura, 2022). Mali gained its independence on 22 September 1960 from

French colonialism in the 19th century. Mali's long occupation made French the official national language, and Islam is practised by most of the population with historical roots in the medieval Mali Empire.

Mali's conflict is a rooted crisis that predates the involvement of the Wagner Group. The conflict is originating from a history of northern uprisings, weak state authority, elite gatekeeping, and unaddressed grievances (Gaasholt, 2020). Unlike other Wagner deployments focused primarily on regime protection, Mali's security vacuum is shaped by a legacy of Tuareg insurgencies, jihadist coalitions, and local militias (Cline, 2013; Baldaro, 2020). This conflict operates through rivalries among diverse actors, which include Tuareg rebels, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-linked groups, Ansar Dine, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and local militias (Neethling, 2023; Baldaro, 2020). The insurgency has recently entered an even substantial violent phase as clashes between rival Al-Qaeda- and Islamic State-linked coalitions intensify in central Mali (Baldaro, 2020).

Wagner's massive influence in Africa cannot be separated from their military training capabilities in adapting to fight rebel groups or terrorism. Furthermore, Wagner's operations began to suffer setbacks due to the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 which split the Kremlin's military focus into several parts, one of which was the Wagner Group PMC tasked with helping the Russian armed forces take over several important cities in Eastern Ukraine, such as Bakhmut. The lack of logistical weaponry and the deaths of several Wagner troops, which the Kremlin did not take seriously, led Prigozhin to launch a military coup attempt against Putin in June 2023 (Heintz, 2023). Wagner's rebellion failed after Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko mediated between the two sides. Two months later, the Wagner Group's elite leadership was found dead, including Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin, after their private jet was shot down around north-west Moscow in August 2023. The incident led Putin to restructure the control of private military companies by unifying the Wagner Group command structure under the control of the Russian defence ministry.

Wagner Group's involvement in various countries is inseparable from changes in the country's perception of the use of PMCs, which is certainly different from mercenaries both operationally and strategically. In accordance with the constructivist approach, non-state actors or in this case the Wagner Group normatively change the views of actors regarding the use of PMC services in constructing the security agenda. The United Nations (UN), International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and large corporations use PMCs for offensive and peace missions. Based on contemporary security studies, this research will focus on the process of interaction between the Malian state and Wagner Group PMCs. Wagner's presence challenges the traditional discourse of security in terms of international norms where previously only states have legitimacy in the use of armed force.

To find out how this interaction occurs, researchers use a conventional constructivism perspective that examines the normative factors of international law on PMCs as well as Mali's shifting national identity that penetrates the traditional boundaries of state sovereignty. The selection of Mali as the object of research is based on the recent 2020-2021 military coup that created space for private military company actors to enter the country, taking advantage of the instability of security conditions due to terrorism groups in Northern Mali and looking at the historical context of Mali, which was once a colony of France. The results of this research will answer the implications of the Wagner Group's emergence in Mali related to the reasons and justifications of PMC using conventional constructivism theory by looking at two main key concepts, namely international norms and national identity.

Alternative sources of security both at the domestic and international levels are carried out by Wagner Group PMC in accordance with contemporary security studies that analyse the nature of warfare and forms of asymmetrical or irregular conflict in finding out the latest sources of threats to global security issues. Research related to the operationalisation of the Wagner Group is generally still limited to foreign policy relations between states and PMCs, private security functional debates, and international legal discourse (Petersohn, 2014; Amoah, 2023; Górka, 2023; Indrawan, 2014; Johannes et al., 2022). The commonality of some of the previous literature lies in the phenomenon of PMCs as new non-state security actors that provide changes in the meaning and function of the military in modern conflicts. There is a significant research gap regarding the non-material aspects that influence actors in interacting, especially in terms of security cooperation.

In this case, there is a construction of PMC international law and a shift in Mali's national identity that underlies the presence of the Wagner Group there. The research scope is limited to 2020-2023, considering that the Malian military coup took place within this timeframe and marked the emergence of the Wagner Group in Mali in December 2021. Therefore, researchers will provide novelty in explaining the phenomenon of security privatisation, especially in Mali, by applying a conventional constructivism lens to understand the interaction process and Russia's interests through Wagner Group with Mali in terms of security cooperation. Conventional constructivism utilizes common social science methods to explain how existing norms and identities shape state interests (Hopf, 1998). That in contrast with critical constructivism that adopts an interpretive stance to interrogate how those identities and meanings are discursively produced in the first place (Fierke, 2013). With the stance on common social science methods, the conventional constructivism treats identity as a static explanation to complement rationalist choice, while the critical variant treats identity and power as fluid structures that must themselves be unpacked and explained (Adler, 1997). The findings of the constructivism approach aim to explore the dynamics and perspectives of contemporary security, especially private security privatisation in post-colonial Africa, which is proxy or hybrid warfare.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses qualitative methods as the main instrument of analysis of the phenomenon to be studied. Qualitative methods are methods that reveal the deep meaning of socio-political phenomena through non-numerical data analysis by focusing on the meaning, interpretation and context of international politics (Lamont, 2020). This method allows researchers to understand the complexity of interactions between state and non-state actors through holistic inductive reasoning across all variables. Then, a descriptive-analytic approach is used by researchers in qualitative methods. This approach emphasises a comprehensive understanding according to the reality of facts in the field to describe the relationship between variables (Sugiyono, 2010). The advantage of the descriptive-analytic approach lies in its ability to contextualise the Wagner Group PMC security privatisation issue in Mali in a deep and specific manner.

The data sources in this research consist of primary data that was obtained from official international legal documents and codes of conduct in the regulation of mercenaries or private military companies, including the Montreux Document 2008 and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoC) 2010. Both documents were ratified by more than 50 countries and became the main code of conduct framework in regulating the limits of private military companies' activities in conflict zones according to the principles of international humanitarian law in Geneva, Switzerland by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). In addition,

researchers also utilised secondary data in the form of books, journal articles, online sources and news channels relevant to the research objectives.

The conventional constructivism perspective serves as the theoretical framework in this research to analyse the legitimacy of the Wagner Group's presence in Mali by focusing on two key concepts, namely international norms and national identity. As argued by Hopf (1998), conventional constructivism emphasises the dialectical relationship between actors and structures, where identities encompassing both material and non-material aspects play an important role in shaping actors' behaviour in the international system. The constructivist lens allows for an in-depth interpretation of the dynamics of interaction as well as national interests in the agent-structure relationship relevant to the case of Wagner Group's security privatisation with Mali's national identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wagner Group Dynamics in the Malian Conflict

The origins of Wagner Group can be traced back to the formation of Slavonic Corps in 2013 in Hong Kong by Dmitry Utkin, a former Spetsnaz GRU (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye) officer of the Russian Intelligence Directorate and veteran of the Chechen war. Utkin maintains close ties with the GRU having initially been tasked with deploying the Slavonic Corps in the Syrian Civil War to seize an oil refinery from ISIS, although this operation ultimately failed. The failure was the catalyst for the transformation of Slavonic Corps into the private military company Wagner Group, named after the famous German composer Richard Wagner (The Economist, 2022). The Wagner Group's emergence was first seen in Russia's annexation of Crimea to provide additional troop support to separatist groups in Luhansk, Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Wagner coordinated with GRU superior Colonel Oleg Ivannikov and the chief of staff of Russia's 58th army, Major General Evgeny Nikiforov (Bellingcat, 2020). The Wagner Group looks like an ordinary private security company entity from a corporate perspective, but its operational structure is closely linked to the Russian Ministry of Defence. The bureaucratic framework of Wagner's paramilitary command is placed into the Kremlin's "proxy army". There are three layers of Wagner Group's functional command sequence that are coordinated and integrated with the Russian military, including (Dalton & Rondeaux, 2024):

(1) Strategic Level

(2) Joint Task Force Level

(3) Operational Coordination and Tactical Command Level

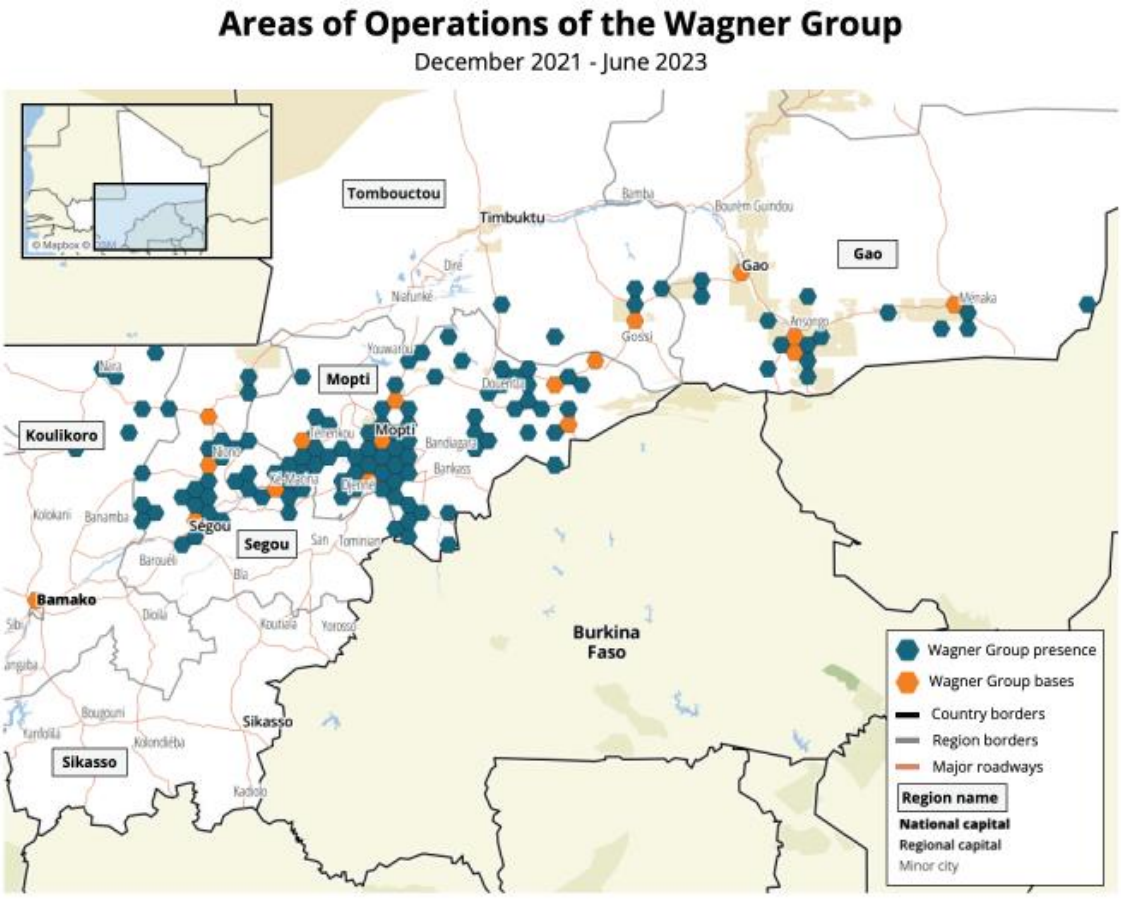
Each command level provides a clear picture of how structured the company's organisational hierarchy is from the highest to the lowest level. Unlike traditional private military companies, Wagner functions as a paramilitary force directed by Putin and his cronies, such as the defence ministry, military commanders and Russian intelligence agencies. Two important Wagner figures, Yevgeny Prigozhin, are crucial threads in this chain of command structure to oversee the Wagner Group's global missions in Ukraine, Syria and the African continent. The organisational hierarchy of the private military company Wagner Group reveals an organised structure within the Russian security apparatus. Prighozin is an important individual who connects Wagner's operations with the Kremlin (especially Putin's oligarchic circle) based on the Gerasimov Doctrine of non-linear warfare strategies to achieve Russian national interests using non-military approaches (Schnaufer, 2017).

The Wagner Group's activities in Africa were initiated when Putin held the first Russia-Africa Conference in the city of Sochi in 2019. The president stated that Africa is a "geopolitical strategic priority" for the Kremlin (President of Russia, 2019). This is evidenced by the Wagner Group's expansion as a Russian proxy actor in various African countries, including Libya, Sudan, the African Republic, and most recently Mali. Wagner's modus operandi is mutualistic by providing security assistance to political elites threatened by rebel groups or separatist movements in exchange for which the state is obliged to provide access to control over natural resources, such as diamonds, uranium, and gold.

In the case of Mali, the Wagner Group, through its Russian security representative, has tried to lobby intensively with Defence Minister Sadio Camara during his visit to Russia in August 2019 to sign a defence pact between the two countries (Reuters, 2025). This co-operation was further strengthened when Mali experienced successive military coups from 2020-2021 in which the leadership transitioned from a civilian regime to a military junta. The current leader and president of Mali, Colonel Assimi Goïta, wanted to find alternative security assistance following France's failure to stabilise security conditions in Northern Mali. Finally, a cooperation agreement was reached secretly behind the scenes through a telephone call between the Malian military junta government and the Wagner Group paramilitary group in September 2021. Russia delivered L-39 Albatross and Sukhoi Su-25 fighter aircraft to the Malian armed forces (FAMA) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024). Wagner's main tasks are allegedly to train local militias, quell rebellions, and protect Malian government officials.

An estimated 1,000 Wagner troops were launched by Russia in December 2021 in Mali's capital, Bamako, using military aircraft in 10 different locations in different parts of the country. On the other hand, the Russian Foreign Ministry led by Sergey Lavrov has publicly acknowledged Wagner's involvement in Mali (Radio France Internationale, 2022). In contrast, their presence has never been officially recognised by the Malian military junta, instead Wagner members use the pseudonyms "Instructors" or "Additional Forces". The Wagner Group's private paramilitaries were hired to quell rebellions using scorched earth tactics as well as perform various security tasks, such as local troops and protecting Malian government officials. Wagner Group employees were rewarded with a wage of US$10.8 million or the equivalent of 9.1 million CFA francs per month in return for their security services (Jeune Afrique, 2021). Following the withdrawal of French troops from Mali, Wagner began to populate former military bases in the Gossi, Timbuktu, Menaka and Gao regions. In addition, the ACLED report (2023) shows that Wagner has built up to thirteen military posts in various strategic locations to support counter-terrorism operations in the region.

Figure 1. Map of Wagner Group's Area of Operations in Mali in December 2021 - June 2023
Source: ACLED (2023)



The Malian junta government appointed Russia to strengthen its political position rather than simply eradicating terrorist groups. The intervention of Wagner's forces in Mali similarly displaced France's conventional security role in the West African region following France's decision to scale back its military activities, thereby strengthening wider inter-state geopolitical competition in Africa. In March 2022, Malian and Russian soldiers killed around 300 people in the village of Moura (Banchereau, 2024). Some of those killed were terrorists, but many were civilians. By mid-April 2022, Wagner had been involved in more than a dozen incidents that left nearly 500 people dead (Walsh, 2022). Wagner is not expected to succeed in eliminating the jihadist threat in Mali. The Wagner Group's lack of combat experience and poor preparation against domestic root causes prevented it from carrying out comprehensive counterterrorism and security restoration operations.

Transformation of International Norms of Private Military Companies: Exploiting International Law Loopholes and Legitimising Self-Defence Norms

Private military companies initially evolved from mercenary forces that were often seen as outside the conventional military command structure of the state. The placement of mercenaries as a third or independent party makes their arbitrary actions unpredictable and difficult to regulate by international law (Thomson, 1990). In addition, the primary motivation of mercenaries is for profit without a full commitment to real security stabilisation in a conflict, making the behavioural aspect of their morality foundation questionable. The ambiguity of morality makes mercenaries perceived as not "legitimate" for military operational instruments historically over time.

To assert control over the legitimacy and concrete purpose of armed forces, the anti-mercenary norm was established, which influenced the formation of international law during the Cold War era. This norm is the basis for the restriction of mercenaries who have "selfish" motives for profit alone which are considered to threaten the control of state sovereignty. In Sarah Percy's (2007) book Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations, she traces the historical evolution of the anti-mercenary norm and the influence of international norms on states and vice versa. According to her, the emergence of the anti-mercenary norm is due to the idea that mercenaries have morality problems due to the use of violence outside the control of sovereign states and fighting wars solely based on economic motives. However mercenaries frame or attempt to rebrand themselves in terms of their superiority in providing skilled armed forces in the field, the anti- mercenary norm will always bind them if the principle of state sovereignty exists (Percy, 2007). Percy contrasts the terminology of "mercenaries" and "private military companies" from the past by focusing on who contracts them, whether it is a financially motivated sub-military organisation or under the watchful eye of state authorities.

There is not much difference between mercenaries and PMCs, but the anti- mercenary norm still applies to PMCs because it is still categorised into a "grey area" which still questions the original purpose of PMCs and how much the state controls the use of PMCs. If aspects of international anti-mercenary norms can shape a new discourse according to the national interests of the state, then the wide-scale use of private armies cannot be equated with mercenary functions (Petersohn, 2014). Private military companies have very different criteria from mercenaries. These criteria are having market-oriented targets, demonstrating a high level of professionalism with trained military, getting contracts based on achieving security stabilisation, helping to complement military tasks, being a private legal entity, and being legally registered. An academic in the field of PMCs, Carlos Ortiz (2010) refers to "PMCs as legally established international firms offering services that involve the potential to exercise force in a systematic way and by military or paramilitary means, as well as the enhancement, the transfer, the facilitation, the deterrence, or the defusing of this potential, or the knowledge required to implement it, to clients" (PMCs as legally established international military companies that offer services involving the potential to use violence systematically and by military or paramilitary means, as well as the enhancement, the transfer, the facilitation, the deterrence, or the defusing of this potential, or the knowledge required to implement it, to their clients).

The process of shifting the discourse of international norms of private military companies from anti-mercenary norms began to be navigated to change the notion of mercenaries through the establishment of normative legitimacy of international law. The constructivist perspective emphasises the role of norms in shaping the interactions of international actors, where norms serve as a frame of reference for behaviour that is considered legitimate and reasonable in the global community (Finnemore, 1996). Norms not only guide actors' actions but also shape their identities and interests through an ongoing process of socialisation. The main function of norms is to create a consensus-based collective order, as well as an instrument of legitimacy for state behaviour in the international arena. Adherence to norms results in recognition of the legitimacy of a state's actions, which in turn influences the construction of national identity and foreign policy preferences. As such, international norms serve as a key variable in understanding the dynamics of interactor relations, both state and non-state.

Under international law, private military companies do not have concrete and clear rules regarding the extent to which their activities can be restricted or their classification into combatants or non-combatants in conflict zones. Previously, the 1949 Geneva Conventions did not mention the term "mercenary" at all, focusing instead on casualties and the treatment of prisoners of war. The

ICRC considers that Article 47 of Additional Protocol I already covers the definition of mercenaries. According to the provisions of Article 47 (1) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, it is stated that personnel who fulfil the criteria of mercenaries are not allowed to obtain combatant status or protection as prisoners of war (ICRC, 1977). The legal paradox in Additional Protocol I in Article 43 (2) and Article 47 (2) makes the determination of the combatant element of a mercenary ambiguous. Article 43 (2) clearly mentions combatants as armed members of the parties to the conflict (except for religionists and medical personnel). On the other hand, Article 47 (2) confirms that mercenaries are not part of the armed forces and are outside the definition of combatants in Article 43.

According to Article 43(1) of Protocol I, combatants are defined as "armed forces of a party to the conflict under a command responsible to its subordinates". PMCs do not belong to the military chain of command and are even outside the military institution. Another article, Article 43.3 of Protocol I states, "if a party to the conflict incorporates paramilitary bodies or security forces into its armed forces, it shall notify the other party to the conflict" (ICRC, 1977). From this rule, it is possible to include PMCs in the armed forces category, but states are often not responsible for the involvement of PMCs as auxiliary joint forces when the state needs qualified and skilled personnel.

The Wagner Group operates independently of conventional military structures in international norms. Through the shifting anti-military norms of PMCs, Wagner Group gained justification in the legitimacy of security operations in Mali. According to the constructivist perspective, the basis or motive of the Malian state to decide on foreign policy and interact with other actors is constructed according to the beliefs, values, and international norms of the PMC itself. Farrell (2002) explains that international norms can be dynamic and reinterpreted depending on who and how actors perceive a security practice. The gaps in the PMC's international norms, which are grey in terms of international legal status, led Mali to construct a "legitimacy" or legitimate security cooperation policy with the Wagner Group. This legitimacy is perceived by actors as normatively "acceptable" behaviour in Mali's security policy, despite having relatively different conditions from the perception of countries that oppose the Wagner Group.

However, a constructivist reading of the Wagner Group may reveals that it is a hybrid actor characterized by norm-contesting state enmeshment. That means the apparent autonomy of the actor is a socially and politically produced legal fiction (Marten, 2019; Poposka, 2025; Larsen, 2025). The ambiguous status of Wagner Group is actively produced with discourse, legal gray areas, and informal governance networks to preserve Russian plausible deniability and projecting geopolitical influence in the Mali at the same time (Chinagoromo, 2025; Da Silva Ferreira, 2022; Larsen, 2023). In addition to that, Wagner position in the conflict is blurring the boundaries between state and non-state conflicts by challenging traditional frameworks of sovereignty and accountability and maximising gaps in international attribution rules to externalize state coercion (Patricheev, 2024; Elhaw, 2026).

The emergence of Wagner Group as a military company entity opens a new chapter for the discourse on the monopoly of state violence where security is increasingly privatised through state sovereignty. As a military business entity operating in the grey area between the state and the private sector, PMC has opened a new chapter in the discourse on the privatisation of security and the transformation of the character of contemporary war. The legal paradox between the illegality of mercenaries in Article 47 of Additional Protocol I and the acceptance of Wagner Group soldiers in Mali calls for a reassessment of the normative legal boundaries of the use of military force. Wagner Group can be said to have successfully crossed the grey line of international norms by considering the perception and identity of the Malian state towards the services of private military companies.

According to the constructivist perspective, Mali normatively constructs its approval of Wagner Group's activities in the country. In the context of the private military industry in the country, the Malian government has the prerogative or in this case the military junta gives legitimacy recognition to Wagner Group.

Mali, through the military junta government, has an incentive to reduce their defence budget by allocating the national armed forces of Mali (FAMA) to more strategic tasks for greater efficiency (Parens, 2022). The Wagner Group was then placed in secondary functions, such as protecting Mali's political elite and securing gold mines. The placement of the Wagner Group's private military company in secondary functions resulted in the change of the anti-mercenary norm into a new self-defence norm because of their interaction with Malian military leaders. The self-defence norm is the norm for any armed force to kill an aggressor to avoid loss of life, health, liberty, or even property (Petersohn, 2014).

To overcome the negative labelling of private military companies, the Wagner Group changed the discursive norms relating to the past record of mercenary treatment by prioritising economic motives for Mali as a weak state. Wagner Group's portrayal as an independent actor and prioritisation of defensive functions became an accepted principle in the delivery of security services within Mali's sovereign zone. As such, the unclear boundaries of mercenaries and private military companies mean that Wagner Group interacts with Mali within the international norm of self-defence. It is due to normative and moral constructs that Wagner Group's operations are justified in the eyes of the Malian government as a "private army" that uses its armed violence for purely defensive purposes. By emphasising that their actions fall under the norm of self-defence, Wagner's actions do not constitute combat but legitimate acts of defence, such as protecting convoys and training local militias in the normative view of the Malian military elite. The implication is that the norm of self-defence has become a key element in the security policy cooperation between the Wagner Group and Mali that allows both actors to cross the grey area of international law and gain recognition of security legitimacy from both the government and Malian society itself.

Mali's National Identity Shift from Mande to Anti-Colonial as Justification for the Wagner Group's Presence

The history of Mali's identity as a developing country initially began when France made the region called French Soudan a part of the French West Africa Federation. Mali's first president, Modibo Keita, called for Pan-Africanism as a reflection of Mali's glorious imperial era against imperialism. Keita formed a national movement through the political organisation Union Sudanese-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (US-RDA) with the jargon "African Unity and Independence" (Chafer, 2002). This approach explains the Malian elite's preference for independence in the form of a federation rather than a separate state. There were a variety of factors, ranging from the limited organisational autonomy of the US-RDA, which was only dominant in Bamako, economic dependence on France, and the instability of security conditions due to rampant inter-ethnic conflict at the time (Schmidt, 2009). Eventually, the Françafrique federation, which was supposed to be a united front in defence of French military intervention, had to be dissolved, leading Mali to declare independence on 22 September 1960.

The unification of national identity in post-independence Mali has its own challenges due to its multicultural society, which includes many ethnicities and religions. To overcome national fragmentation, the political elite, especially President Modibo Keita, introduced the value of "Mande" as a new national identity based on building ethno-political nationalism while supporting the Pan-

Africanism movement. The characteristics of the "Mande" identity range from adopting the cultural values of the Mande ethnic groups (Bambara, Dyula, Malinke, Soninke), politically legitimising the narrative of the military dictatorship (1968-1991), and becoming a symbol of romanticism for the pre-colonial past (De Jorio, 2006). Through the foregoing, the Malian Mande identity has two key cores in the unity of the inter-ethnic multicultural outlook and nationalism that legitimised Mali's historical identity until the 21st century.

The 2012 coup d'état due to the Malian military's defeat of terrorist groups worsened the security situation. Then, transitional President Dioncounda Traore called on France to help restore security in Northern Mali through Operation Serval (Bergamaschi, 2013). After Operation Serval, French military intervention turned into Operation Barkhane and the Takuba Task Force until 2021. The successor to Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane, had a motive to prolong French dominance in Mali. The reduction of French troops led to Malian public dissatisfaction of 90% in 2019 as France did not really meet expectations in stabilising security conditions (Cumming et al., 2022). The narrative of discontent was mobilised by Malian political elites, religious leaders, and democracy activists who questioned the relevance of French troops as a former colonial power operating in Malian territory. The spread of this narrative developed in the mass media and the internet with the framing that French policies towards Mali were divisive and exploited the country's economy (Tull, 2021). The reaffirmation of nationalism is a response to the separatism movement in populist rhetoric that Malians believe in through the historical identity of colonialism.

Malians saw the French intervention as a failure to stabilise domestic conditions, and the Malian military seemed unable to contribute further. Instead, France conducted temporary peace negotiations with the MNLA to avoid conflict escalation in the north (Sheehan & Siegel, 2021). The emergence of negative narratives among Malian political elites and the public led to increased suspicion of the French presence. This reflects Malians' memories of the French colonisation era where the Tuareg were granted special autonomy that conflicted with Mande nationalism. The long duration of French counter-terrorism operations further reinforced the narrative of domination among Malian society and political elites. The escalation led people to mobilise for demonstrations in the centre of the capital Bamako through the coalition Mouvement du 5 Juin-Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques or M5-RPF. The main demands of the protests centred on stopping Operation Barkhane to expel French troops. The public perceived that the Malian government was being used as a "puppet" by France, culminating in a military coup in August 2020 that was fully supported by the public thanks to anti-colonial identity.

The relevance of the anti-colonial identity over time began to decrease the public's attraction to the Mande identity because it was associated with the military dictatorship regime since Mali's independence until the late 1990s (Prasetyo, 2024). The implications of anti-colonial identity formation are reflected in Mali's exit from the security agreement with France in 2022. Mali's decision not only halted arms aid from France, but closed Mali's access to the European Union as a key partner in counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel region. The Malian government considered France to have violated the security agreement not to withdraw its Operation Barkhane troops prior to national military approval (Al-Jazeera, 2022).

As a result, Mali decided to expel France in August 2022, ending a decade of security co-operation in counter-terrorism operations. According to the constructivist approach, national identity can change how states act with other actors. In Mali's case, identity is perceived as dynamic and changes based on domestic social structures. History can be a determinant of a society's collective memory. This memory can explain the understanding of aspects of power, reputation, and even the

social status of national identity. Countries generally have national identities that are formed from communal identities based on the history that has been passed.

Figure 2. Anti-Colonial Identity Shifts Malian Public Perceptions of Russia
Source: Siegle & Eizenga (2021)



Mali perceives France as a neo-colonialist country and tends to act arbitrarily, while France still wants to establish its influence in the Sahel region without caring about the stability of democracy in it. Russia's intervention through the private military company Wagner Group fills the gap of power vacuum and provides an alternative new partner in controlling the security situation in Northern Mali. Russia became the main security partner replacing France through the services of the private military company Wagner Group in fighting Islamic terrorist groups. The concept of national identity makes changes in behaviour, values, or state interests according to the idea of constructivism theory. When actors decide to change the old identity into a new identity, there is a collective expectation of behaviour that suits the current conditions (Katzenstein, 1996). In the case of the Wagner Group's presence in Mali, there is a re-changing of national identity as a country that rejects Western (French) influence. Mali's military junta government deliberately cooperated with the Wagner Group to resist international pressure to strengthen its domestic legitimacy. Mali's national identity is not a fixed and given entity, but the result of the ongoing production of Mande national identity into an anti-colonial-based identity.

The Malian government legitimised the use of violence within the framework of national identity where the services of the Wagner Group military company were legitimised rather than in collaboration with France. This shift in perception of identity was described as "defence of national sovereignty" by the Malian military junta elite rather than a simple military operation (Neethling, 2023). Gradually, Mali's new national identity gained political legitimacy and acceptance by Malian society through the repetition of anti-Western narratives and disinformation of Russian government propaganda. The Wagner Group's presence was then justified as part of Mali's security identity through the narrative of "security independence" from French dependency. Wagner Group troops are deliberately placed under guard against Malian military elites and appear in state media to construct that they are a private military company and not mercenaries in violation of international law (Parens, 2022).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of the Wagner Group's arrival in Mali resonated with events at the West African regional level that had both experienced military coups, such as Burkina Faso and Niger, which led them to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as a form of anti-colonial resistance. The collective anti-colonial identity of states in the Sahel region shows the influence of interactions between external actors that can also affect Mali's national identity at the domestic level. Mali's military junta government views the security partnership with the Wagner Group as not only

a new way to stabilise security in northern Mali, but also a symbol of resistance and an assertion of independence from France. France has always been labelled negatively in the context of a "colonial power" which justifies Mali's need for an alternative security partner with the Wagner Group. According to Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) constructivist assumptions, the dynamics of reinterpretation of international norms is an inherent part of state behaviour at the domestic level. Mali in this case strategically constructed a new national identity narrative as an "anti-Western sovereign state" through historical collective mobilisation over French colonialism. As a result, the new anti-colonial national identity influenced Mali's national interests and foreign policy by agreeing and justifying a security cooperation agreement with Russia through the Wagner Group in December 2022 to date. At the same time, Mali's shifting anti-colonial national identity has led to a disregard for international norms that have grey ambiguities regarding the international legal regulation of private military companies.

CONCLUSION

The expansion of the Wagner Group private military company's involvement in Mali has a dynamic rationale or motive in the global security world. Wagner Group emerges as a non-state security actor that breaks the conventional warfare doctrine where only states have the legitimacy to use armed violence or become combatants. The Wagner Group's existence aims to fulfil Russia's national interests in spreading geopolitical influence, exploiting gold natural resources and assisting the Malian national army in the Northern Mali region after France failed to totally eradicate the insurgency movement of terrorist groups.

However, the emergence of the Wagner Group in Mali challenges the international normative discourse regarding the perception of mercenaries, which are banned by many countries legally and normatively because they do not adhere to human rights principles in the battlefield of conflict countries. Therefore, this research shows that the interaction between Russia through Wagner Group and Mali is not only due to materialist factors, such as military or economic. There are normative aspects of the international law of private military companies and the shift of Malian national identity from Mande identity to anti-colonial identity through the perspective of conventional constructivism theory. These two things both shape the Wagner Group's operational legitimacy because Russia has successfully utilised the loopholes of international law regarding private military companies in carrying out security operational activities in Mali.

Then, the aspect of Malian identity that was originally based on multicultural inter-ethnic nationalism (Mande) has shifted into an anti-colonial identity. This is due to the change of civilian government regime into a military junta regime in Mali after a coup. The values and identity of the historical experience of French colonialism are continuously narrated to the people by the Malian government. As a result, Mali's national identity shifted to anti-colonialism, which was implemented by ending the security cooperation agreement with France and replacing it with Russia through the Wagner Group. The military junta government mobilised changes in Malian perceptions to justify the presence of the Wagner Group, which was positioned as an equal actor to counter the geopolitical influence of Western countries. Mali's national identity was reconstructed with the discourse of a security sovereign state and provided political legitimacy to establish security cooperation with the Wagner Group.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher concludes that the complex interaction between the Wagner Group and Mali can be explained through conventional constructivism theory. Two key factors are the rational causes of the interaction behaviour between Mali and the Wagner

Group, namely international norms and national identity where there is a construction of new security operational legitimacy for the private military company Wagner Group in accordance with Russian and Malian national interests based on anti-colonial identity. The process of changing norms and identities was produced using grey zone loopholes in international law regarding the use of private military companies for defensive security activities. Strategically, Wagner Group was justified based on the logic of security stability and sovereignty of Mali.

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