



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

States traditionally conduct military affairs through formal armed forces, guided by doctrines that prioritise national security objectives and operate within international legal frameworks. Conventional military strategies emphasise territorial defence and adherence to norms such as proportionality and the distinction between combatants and civilians under international humanitarian law.¹ However, Russia's approach since the 2010s has diverged sharply, blending conventional and unconventional tactics to offset systemic weakness and project influence in contested regions through the use of Private Military Companies such as the Wagner Group.² This divergence is not merely a matter of expediency but reflects a deeper layer of Russian strategic culture. Russian leaders have historically regarded the use of unconventional and deniable instruments as legitimate complements to conventional power. In this sense, Moscow's turn to private

¹ Potočnák, A., & Mareš, M. (2022). Russia's Private Military Enterprises as a Multipurpose Tool of Hybrid Warfare. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 35(2), 181–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2022.2132608>

² Gostev, Aleksandr, and Robert Coalson. "Russia's Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge from the Shadows." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, June 1, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-paramilitary-mercenaries-emerge-from-the-shadows-syria-ukraine/28180321.html>.

military companies is consistent with a broader cultural disposition that blurs the line between official state action and informal proxies.

In the recent decade, Private Military Companies (PMCs) have become an inseparable component of modern warfare.³ Particularly for states seeking to extend their military influence without the direct involvement of official armed forces, the Wagner Group, one of Russia's most prominent PMCs, first came to prominence for its role in the 2014 annexation of Crimea.⁴ At that time, the Russian government consistently denied any official connection to the group, exploiting one of the benefits of using PMC, which is plausible deniability, within this context we can see that Russia employing Wagner Group as a proxy to advance its geopolitical goals while maintaining an impression of separation from its action, this allows Russia to avoid direct accountability for controversial operations, evade international condemnation and hides their involvement in conflicts claiming that the individuals involved in these military operations were private citizens acting independently.⁵

One reason Russia relies on Private Military Companies to further its agenda is its systemic weakness compared to other major nations. Russia already

³ Sarjito, Aris. "The Role of Private Military Companies in Defense Policy and Military Operations." *Andalas Journal of International Studies (AJIS)* 12, no. 1 (May 1, 2023): 38. <https://doi.org/10.25077/ajis.12.1.38-53.2023>.

⁴ "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State: The Post-Soviet Post." CSIS. Accessed March 15, 2025. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>.

⁵ Faulkner, Christopher, and Marcel Plichta. "Win, Lose, or Draw, the Wagner Group Benefits from the War in Ukraine." Default, October 23, 2022. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/win-lose-or-draw-wagner-group-benefits-war-ukraine>.

has a weak hand, ranking significantly behind the United States and China by traditional measures of power, such as GDP, population size, overall health, and military might.⁶ Focusing more on GDP and military power, Russia's total Gross Domestic Product reached 2021.42 billion US dollars in 2023, while its main adversary, the United States of America, reached around 27720.71 billion US dollars.⁷ According to the SIPRI Military Expenditure Index, in 2022, Russia allocated a larger portion of its national budget to the military sector than the United States, allocating 16.1% to the military, while the United States allocated only 9.1%.⁸ Although Russia allocates more than the United States, the differences between both countries' economic power and Russia's notorious negative sentiment on the international stage make Russia unable to convert this military prowess into meaningful influence. To leverage those weaknesses, Russia seeks to improve its political, economic, and social development to extend its influence abroad, but it still faces significant challenges in these areas. Russia's reliance on PMCS to further its agenda results from those significant disparities in traditional power measures. Yet these material disparities were not understood in Moscow as neutral structural facts. Interpreted through Russia's strategic culture, relative decline became a threat to its self-image as a great power. Rather than accepting a subordinate position, Russian elites sought alternative instruments that could help

⁶ Russia GDP. Accessed February 28, 2025. <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/gdp>.

⁷ United States GDP. Accessed March 13, 2025. <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/gdp>

⁸ "Sipri Military Expenditure Database." SIPRI. Accessed March 14, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.55163/CQGC9685>

Russia “punch above its weight” and reaffirm its global relevance despite limited resources.

Wagner Group operations began to align more closely with Russian military and political objectives, making them more entangled with Russia’s geopolitical goals. The Russian government moved towards formalising the Wagner Group’s role within the Russian military operations framework.⁹ This process included greater integration of PMCS into state-led operations, as seen in the Wagner Group’s strategic deployment during the Ukraine conflict. In recent years, the Wagner Group has gained notoriety due to its activity during the Russian invasion of Ukraine,¹⁰ where the Russian Armed Forces launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Russian forces could capture large areas of territory and cities such as Kharkiv and Kherson, but those gains came at a high price, with heavy losses of lives and equipment. The Kremlin began relying on the Wagner Group to continue the offensive in Ukraine. The Wagner Group was associated with a successful military campaign for the Russian side with their capture of Severodonetsk and Popasna, and the one that brought them into the spotlight was their push toward Bakhmut.¹¹ The strategic deployment of Private Military Companies (PMCs) has evolved into a pivotal geopolitical instrument for modern

⁹ Pukhov, Ruslan N. “From ‘Special’ to ‘Military.’” *Russia in Global Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2024): 112–26. <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2024-22-2-112-126>.

¹⁰ Faulkner, Christopher, and Marcel Plichta. “Win, Lose, or Draw, the Wagner Group Benefits from the War in Ukraine.” *Default*, October 23, 2022. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/win-lose-or-draw-wagner-group-benefits-war-ukraine>.

¹¹ Axe, David. “Ukrainian Troops Tap Their Best Firepower to Kill Russians on Bakhmut’s Vulnerable Flanks.” *Forbes*, March 21, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2023/03/20/ukrainian-troops-tap-their-best-firepower-to-kill-russians-on-bakhmuts-vulnerable-flanks/>.

nation-states, with Russia's Wagner Group emerging as the paramilitary arm of the Russian state that operationalises Moscow's ambitions while operating in a grey area.¹²

This thesis explores Russia's use of the Wagner Group, tracing its trajectory from initial official denial to eventual recognition and formal integration within the Russian military structure. The analysis begins with the observation that Moscow initially benefited from the established advantages of employing private military companies (PMCs), such as maintaining plausible deniability, reducing political accountability, and extending influence beyond formal military boundaries. As Wagner's operations expanded from Crimea and Syria to Africa and Ukraine, the group gradually evolved from a deniable proxy into a semi-institutionalised arm of Russian state power. To understand this evolution, the study adopts strategic culture analysis as its central methodological approach. Rather than viewing Russia's decisions through external pressures or systemic factors, this approach focuses on how Russia's historical beliefs, norms, and experiences with warfare shape its recurring strategic preferences. Using Alastair Iain Johnston's three-variable model, the analysis examines Russia's perception of war as inevitable, its zero-sum understanding of international relations, and its long-standing belief in the legitimacy and efficacy of force. These dimensions provide a framework for interpreting the Wagner Group not as an isolated policy tool but as a behavioural

¹² Simone Rinaldi, Daniela Irrera. "The Influence of Private Military Companies on Global Security." The Loop, November 7, 2023. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/the-influence-of-private-military-companies-on-global-security/>.

expression of Russia's strategic culture, which values deniable coercion, centralised control, and the blending of formal and informal instruments of power.

Understanding this strategic culture is therefore crucial to explaining why Russia repeatedly turned to Wagner under systemic pressures. What might look like improvisation or opportunism from the outside was, in fact, a culturally legitimate choice rooted in Russia's enduring worldview about the use of force, proxies, and grey-zone operations.

Analysing how Russia's strategic culture has historically embraced a view that blurs the lines between war and peace, internal and external threats, and military and non-military means. This doctrine enables the decision-maker to view tools such as proxy forces and operations in "grey zones" as legitimate and effective means to project power and influence.¹³ Clarifying this strategic culture provides crucial insight into the deep-seated beliefs that inform Russia's specific strategic choices, especially the employment of Wagner Group.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The stark differences between Western countries' and Russia's policies regarding the usage of PMCs raise a big question about what circumstances force them to resort to employing PMCs like Wagner despite possessing a strong conventional military. Russia's defence policy has become increasingly dependent

¹³ Graeme P. Herd, *Understanding Russian Strategic Behavior: Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin's Operational Code* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022)

on Private Military Companies like the Wagner Group, enabling the Kremlin to project power and influence in conflict zones. This reliance raises questions about how a non-state actor can become a pivotal piece in a state's strategic move, as demonstrated by the Kremlin's deep operational reliance on Wagner. Analyzing this phenomenon through a Strategic Culture Analysis framework would explain how international systemic pressures on Russia are translated into their deep operational dependence on the Wagner Group. This specific case of integrating and advancing a non-state actor into a state's strategic toolkit raises crucial questions about the circumstances that drive such tactics and the pivotal role non-state actors can play in state foreign policy.

1.3 Research Question

How does Russia's strategic culture explain its employment of the Wagner Group?

1.4 Research Purpose

This research aims to explain how Russia's strategic culture shapes its decision to employ the Wagner Group as a tool of statecraft. By analysing Russia's historically conditioned beliefs about war, international relations, and the legitimacy of force, this study seeks to demonstrate that Wagner's use is not merely a tactical improvisation but an expression of enduring strategic preferences embedded in Russia's worldview.

1.5 Research Benefit

1.5.1 Academic Benefit

This research seeks to explain Russia's use of the Wagner Group by examining how the country's strategic culture shapes its interpretation of international pressures and available policy instruments. Rather than treating Wagner as a purely structural response, this study shows how deeply embedded historical beliefs about war, competition, and the utility of force made private military actors a culturally legitimate and strategically consistent tool of Russian statecraft.

1.5.2 Practical Benefit

In practice, this research can serve as a further reference for future scholars focusing on defence and non-state actors, specifically private military companies and the Wagner Group. It can also show how a country, particularly Russia, shapes its own decisions from enduring, predisposed beliefs of its nation.

1.6 Literature Review

To further research this topic on a much deeper scale, the writer has found five notable writings that can contextualize how Russia has utilized the Wagner Group as a state tool to offset conventional military limitations and leverage non-traditional methods in achieving its objectives, this sections surveys key writing

that examine the phenomenon of PMCs in 21st century, First writing that will be discussed will be an article titled “The Role of Private Military Companies in Defense Policy and Military Operations” written by Aris Sarjito, it contains a comprehensive analysis of how Private Military Companies operate within the defense sector. It also provides an understanding of the intricacies that PMCs follow to execute their operations. Most importantly, this article examines PMC’s global security impact on international relations and how it shapes its interactions with existing conflict dynamics.

The writer finds this article helpful in revealing how PMCS evolved from their origins as mercenaries to their current role as corporate entities that provide specialised military services to their clients. This contextualises how the Wagner Group’s relationship with the Russian government shows how PMCS became a critical tool for states facing resource constraints.

This article suggests how PMCs impact defense policy due to their flexibility and cost-effectiveness where it enables a state to contract PMCs to perform tasks that conventional armed forces cannot perform where it aligns with the writer’s current research with Russia deploys Wagner in high-risk or political sensitive environments that would lead into international repercussion if conventional armed forces were used to fulfill Russia foreign goals, this allows Russia to circumvent its limitations and enables them to pursue interventions in Ukraine, Syria and Africa without direct accountability.¹⁴

¹⁴ Sarjito, Aris. “The Role of Private Military Companies in Defense Policy and Military Operations.”

Sarjito also argues about the ethical and legal considerations of PMC operations within the grey areas of international and domestic law. This supports the writer's analysis of how Wagner operates within the legal grey zone, allowing Russia to deny responsibility for Wagner's controversial actions to fulfil its goals.¹⁵

As Sarjito's findings solely focused on a general overview of PMC's role in defense policy and military operations, this research will explore more specific case studies like Russia's Wagner Group, the privatization of security that argued by Sarjito lacks further analysis on how the patron-client relationship between states and PMCs as it only analyses on how state only use PMCs when it's necessary for them, but with this particular case of Wagner Group and Russia where PMCs are involved directly and working together with conventional armed forces will shed a light on how reciprocal relationship between both actors to accomplish its goals. To shed light on how Russia operationalises PMCS within its state arsenal, we read the second article, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group," by Kimberly Marten, published in Post-Soviet Affairs. It offers a clear, in-depth case-study of Russia's use of Wagner Group PMC from 2012 to 2018, it gave us the details that trace Wagner's roots from its earlier entities called "Antiterror-Orel" and "Moran Security Group" with Dmitrii Utkin emerge as the leader of the group above, in this article Marten notes that Wagner doesn't fit with any existing PMC categories, sometimes resembling as lethal expeditionary conflict entrepreneurs or military provider firms.

¹⁵ Sarjito, Aris "The Role of Private Military Companies in Defense Policy and Military Operations."

The article explains two main reasons why Russia continues to employ the Wagner Group while keeping it illegal: first, rational state behaviour, where Russia uses it like other states to achieve security goals at lower cost, keeping casualties off the public record, and maintaining plausible deniability. Still, it has become harder to maintain due to extensive journalist reporting. And second is the corrupt informal networks. This article argues that PMCS enhances the private wealth and interests of individuals closely connected to Putin and suggests that Wagner is trying to undermine state rationality by serving private interests.¹⁶

This article analyses the illegality of PMCs in Russia, which is considered unconstitutional, and of mercenarism, which is a criminal offence under Russia's criminal code. Despite all of that, PMCS performing military functions abroad remain legally unrecognised. At the same time, other UNSC permanent members have legalised and regulated PMCS on their way and are signatories to the Montreux Document.

This article proves helpful in this research as it contributes an understanding to the unique nature of Russia's usage of PMCs, this provides crucial evidence and analysis to understand the anomaly in a how seemingly a state with already strong military power 11elianc PMCs, but this research will fill in the gap since Marten only covers the denial and illegal status of said PMCs up to early 2019.¹⁷ In contrast, this research extends to 2023, filling a temporal gap in this article and

¹⁶ Marten, Kimberly. "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (March 26, 2019): 181–204.

¹⁷ Marten, Kimberly.

another gap, as Marten only covers the internal factors that drive Russia to rely on Wagner. This research will uncover external factors that depend on PMCS from outside Russia's government.

The third article to be reviewed is Christopher Spearin's "Wagner Group: Comparing and contextualising the Russian monster. Spearin's article aims to differentiate the Wagner Group from its Western counterpart to understand better what makes them unique from other existing PMCS. It explores three distinctions between those PMCS: defensive vs. offensive violence, access to crewed weapons, and an integrated team approach.

First distinction is the approach on using the PMCs, Western PMCs are typically used for defensive or protective purposes, often due to regulations such as "Montreux Document on pertinent international legal obligations and good practices for states related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict" that has been signed by most major western country at that time, meanwhile Russian military explores the opportunities to employ PMCs for offensive purposes through operations like the capture of Bakhmut, encroachments in Crimea, fighting to seize Tripoli in Libya and battling for mineral extraction sites in Africa, usually these mission would have been solely tasked to militaries if Western countries performed it.

The second distinction is their access to crewed weapons. Western states highly restrict PMCs' access to crewed weapons like heavy weaponry and vehicles, reserving them only for state military personnel. Spearin notes that the June 2023

mutiny revealed that the Wagner Group held sophisticated and potent crewed weaponry and had access to a state arsenal.

Third and last distinction is their Integrated Team Approach, where Spearin notes that Western PMCs are using “Total Force” concept where PMCs fight alongside uniformed military to ensure that it’s easy to point out that those Western states are currently employing PMCs, meanwhile Wagner Group does not involve an integrated team approach, where they will operate without unified planning of actions or command between Wagner and other Russian forces, as they operate as separate combat unit but still treated as one of state toolkit to further their agenda.¹⁸ This article would serve as a foundational source to describe the unique characteristics and operational profile of the Wagner Group when we compares it with traditional PMCs, providing the necessary context to analyses Russia reliance on these non-traditional methods, Spearin work confirms the distinct nature of Wagner and allows the writer to proceed with analyzing the drivers behind Russia’s reliance and the implication of integrating such actor.

The fourth article will be used to deepen understanding of Russia’s strategic culture, which underpins its reliance on the Wagner Group. This section reviews an article titled “Reconstructing Russian Strategic Culture: Narratives, Othering, and the West” by Dogachan Dagi published in the Journal of Strategic Security in 2025. This article offers a constructivist perspective emphasising the dynamic

¹⁸ Spearin, Christopher. “Wagner Group: Comparing and Contextualizing the Russian Monster.” Comparative Strategy 43, no. 3 (April 18, 2024): 153–163.

nature of Russian strategic culture, which is continuously reconstructed through elite discourse and strategic narratives rather than being a fixed historical legacy.

Dagi argues that Russian strategic culture is not static but a context actively shaped by narratives about the Russian self and its perceived others, particularly the West. These narratives constitute historical, civilizational, and ideological dimensions that collectively shape how Russian policymakers interpret threats and formulate strategic choices. The Kremlin's discursive practices effectively produce and reproduce norms and preferences related to national security, which creates a purposeful narrative reconstruction of strategic culture that legitimises Russia's confrontational and defensive posture toward the West.¹⁹

The article highlights the crucial role of historical narratives in framing Russia as a perpetually victimised and besieged nation, consistently threatened by Western hostility. Putin and the Russian political elite deploy historical references to past invasions to construct a continuous storyline that connects past traumas with contemporary threats such as NATO expansion and Western sanctions.

Civilizational narratives further deepen this understanding, positioning Russia as a morally superior and distinct civilization rooted in traditional Christian and conservative values opposed to a decadent and declining west. This civilizational othering fosters a sense of exceptionalism and frames Russia global role as the protector of these enduring values thus legitimizing its multipolar ambitions and resistance to western hegemony.

¹⁹ Dagi, Dogachan. "Reconstructing Russian Strategic Culture: Narratives, Othering, and the West." Journal of Strategic Security 18, no. 1 (2025)

Aside from civilizational narratives, this article also argued for an ideological narrative, portraying western liberalism as an existential threat to Russia's cultural and political sovereignty. The Kremlin propagates the notion of sovereign democracy as a distinctly Russian alternative to Western norms, positioning Russia as a defender of traditional values against Western "liberal totalitarianism." This ideological othering supports the broader strategic culture that sees confrontation with the West as inevitable and necessary.

Dagi analysis is valuable for this thesis because it shows that Russian strategic culture is a malleable, deliberately reconstructed set of narratives that provide the ideational foundation for Russia's strategic behaviour. While other works focus on structural or historical units, this article highlights the active role of political elites in shaping strategic culture in response to contemporary challenges.

However, the article's focus remains primarily on the narrative construction of strategic culture rather than its direct operationalisation in foreign policy tools like PMC. This research complements Dagi's work by empirically analysing how these reconstructed cultural narratives shape Russia's concrete reliance on Wagner as a deniable instrument of power projection, thereby bridging ideational context with practical state behaviour.

The last article was written by Tuuka Elonheimo and published in Strategic Studies Quarterly titled "Comprehensive Security Approach in Response to Russian Hybrid Warfare." It analyses Russian hybrid warfare methods and vulnerabilities of Western democracies to them. It assesses versatile overt and

cover mixed warfare methods in the modern environment and explains the broader concept and essence of Russian hybrid warfare,

This article highlights that deception, asymmetrical warfare, and propaganda have been part of Russia's strategic method for centuries. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia increased its clandestine operations below the armed conflict level, which many Western sources define as "Hybrid Warfare."

Russian hybrid warfare intentionally operates in a "grey zone," making it complicated to track the original perpetrator, thus enabling Russia to conceal its operations.

Elonheimo identifies several instruments of Russian hybrid warfare, including information warfare, cyber warfare, the threat or use of military forces, and non-military coercion and intimidation. Notably, the article explicitly includes the use of Private Military Companies as one of these instruments, allowing them to multiply effectiveness in performing their tasks while offering the guise of plausible deniability. This article states that Russia uses proxy forces to amplify its dominance, hide its tracks, and avoid legal accountability for its actions. It notes that this kind of intimidation and covert illegal influencing, which provides state-level deniability, is a growing part of hybrid warfare.²⁰

This article provides strategic context for the thesis by framing the use of PMCs, such as the Wagner Group, within Russia's strategic competition with the West. It explains Russia's reliance on non-traditional methods to overcome its

²⁰ Tuukka Elonheimo, "Comprehensive Security Approach in Response to Russian Hybrid Warfare," Strategic Studies Quarterly (Fall 2021)

systemic weaknesses and challenge other nations below the threshold of open conflict.

While it effectively positions PMCS within the Russian hybrid warfare framework, the article doesn't delve deeply into the specific evolution of the state-PMC relationship in Russia. It briefly mentions their use but doesn't specifically analyse the progression from denial to the formalisation of the Wagner Group into a military network, which is a key focus of this thesis.

Furthermore, this article's primary focus is on describing the hybrid threat and proposing Western countermeasures. Still, it doesn't explicitly explain the specific internal and external factors that drive Russia's reliance on it. This writing will build upon Elonheimo's strategic overview by providing a more in-depth case study of the Wagner Group and examining the specific drivers and implications of this shift.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

1.7.1 Strategic Culture Analysis

Strategic culture provides an interpretive framework for understanding how historically conditioned beliefs, experiences, and norms shape a state's use of force. It assumes that strategic behaviour does not emerge solely from material power or external threats, but from deeply embedded patterns of thought about war, power, and security that have developed through centuries

of historical experience.²¹ Among the theorists who formalised this approach, Alastair Iain Johnston offered the most systematic and operational model in Thinking About Strategic Culture and Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History. Johnston defines strategic culture as “an integrated system of symbols that consists of argumentation structures, languages, analogies, and metaphors that acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs.”²²

The concept of strategic culture has evolved considerably since its inception in the 1970s, initially introduced to explain variations in military behaviour among states. Early critiques of strategic culture pointed out its ambiguity and the risk of overgeneralization, questioning its empirical utility beyond case studies. Scholars like Colin Grey and Alastair Iain Johnston responded by refining the concept by emphasising strategic culture as a shared set of beliefs and assumptions deeply embedded within political and military elites, which shapes decision-making patterns over time rather than deterministic behaviour.²³ This evolution sought to balance the explanatory power of culture with methodological methods that allow for measurable variables and clearer causal links.

²¹ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995)

²² Alastair Iain Johnston, “Thinking About Strategic Culture,” *International Security* 19, no. 4

²³ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

More recent debates centre on the interaction among strategic cultures, material factors, and institutions. Some argue that strategic culture operates within a broader complex system that includes geopolitical realities and domestic politics, highlighting its dynamic, context-dependent nature.²⁴ Others advocate for integrating cognitive and social constructivist approaches, considering how strategic culture adapts and transforms under changing leadership and global pressures.²⁵ This ongoing dialogue underscores the importance of viewing strategic culture as both a framework of collective meaning and an essential influence on state behaviour, supporting its application in analysing Russia's nuanced use of the Wagner Group as a culturally grounded strategic choice.

Seeking to move the concept from abstract description to measurable explanation, Johnston operationalised strategic culture through three analytical variables that reveal a state's fundamental strategic beliefs:

1. The Nature of War in the International System

War is seen by the state either as an unavoidable aspect of international politics, or as an anomaly to be avoided. States that perceive war as inevitable are more likely to prepare for perpetual conflict and more inclined to use military instruments. In this view,

²⁴ Thomas M. Kane, "The Concept of Strategic Culture: A Lost Tradition," *Comparative Strategy* 25, no. 1 (2006)

²⁵ Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998)

strategic culture is a durable set of assumptions about the utility of violence, which determines if a state perceives war to be legitimate for achieving political ends or as a last resort limited by moral and practical constraints. Not only do material conditions provide inspiration for a state's strategic behaviour at a given time, but they also grow out of inherited ideas, the first concerning the role of war in sustaining order, the second, to uphold their identity.²⁶

2. The Nature of International Relations

State perceives global interaction as either a zero-sum competition or a cooperative arena. Zero-sum perspectives encourage strategic distrust, self-help, and competitive balancing; cooperative perceptions encourage multilateralism and restraint. These contrasting perspectives are born of a society's strategic culture, which incorporates common historical analogies and shared narratives about the operation and maintenance of security in the international system. From this perspective, cultural predispositions influence whether a state considers power politics as immutable or transformable and, in turn, how willing it is to pursue collective security or coercion.²⁷

Through this lens, cultural predispositions shape whether a state views

²⁶ Johnston, *Cultural Realism*

²⁷ Johnston, *Cultural Realism*

power politics as immutable or transformable, thus conditioning its willingness to engage in collective security or coercion.

3. The Legitimacy and Efficacy of Force

The degree of esteem and respect afforded to military power as a tool of statecraft. When elites consider force to be compelling and legitimate, its use is elevated higher in the hierarchy of preferred policy options. In contrast, when coercion is interpreted as limited or self-defeating, decision-makers behave more moderately and avoid violence.²⁸ Alastair Iain Johnston notes that such beliefs constitute the core of a strategic culture, encoding shared expectations about whether violence can achieve political objectives and under what circumstances its use is acceptable. These assumptions not only justify use of force, but the cognitive boundaries of strategy as well, by establishing what forms of coercion are thinkable, legitimate, and culturally resonant.

Together, these variables generate a “set of ordered strategic preferences” that shape how decision-makers define security interests, select instruments, and evaluate acceptable costs. In empirical research, these beliefs can be traced through historical experience and

²⁸ Johnston, *Cultural Realism*

doctrine, allowing scholars to connect a state's cultural predispositions to its concrete strategic choices.

This study adopts Johnston's three-variable framework to examine how Russia's strategic culture informs its reliance on the Wagner Group as an instrument of state policy. By analysing Russia's historical perception of war as cyclical and unavoidable, its zero-sum understanding of international relations, and its enduring use of military force as a source of status and legitimacy, the research demonstrates that Wagner's use represents the behavioural manifestation of these cultural preferences. In short, Johnston's paradigm provides the analytical scaffolding through which Russia's deep-seated strategic beliefs can be connected to its contemporary practice of employing deniable coercive power abroad.

1.8 Research Methodology

Research methodology is the approach the writer takes to analyse the research. Methodology is essential to provide a proper guide for conducting the study.

1.8.1 Type and Research Approach

This research employs a qualitative methodological approach grounded in strategic culture analysis. It focuses on interpreting the cultural, historical, and ideological foundations that shape Russia's pattern of behaviour in

deploying private military companies, such as the Wagner Group.²⁹ The study applies an interpretive form of process tracing to uncover how Russia's deeply rooted beliefs about war, international relations, and the legitimacy of force have influenced its gradual reliance on Wagner as a tool of statecraft. This method follows Alastair Iain Johnston's three-variable model of strategic culture, which examines a state's perceptions of the nature of war, international relations, and the utility of force. These variables serve as guiding lenses through which the research traces how Russian historical experiences and doctrines have translated cultural predispositions into concrete policy behaviour. The data for this research were collected from qualitative sources, including academic writings, official statements, reports, and analyses that document the evolution of Wagner's role in Russian military and foreign policy. Through this qualitative and interpretive approach, the study seeks to identify recurring themes and cultural continuities that explain why Wagner's use emerged as a consistent behavioural expression of Russia's strategic culture.

1.8.2 Research Limit

The writer limits this research from 2014 to 2023 because in June 2023, Wagner Group mutinied against Russia by doing "a march for justice" against

²⁹ Iskandar. Metodologi penelitian Pendidikan dan Sosial: Kualitatif dan Kuantitatif(Jakarta. Gaung Persamda Press. 2008),

the Russian Military; this event cast uncertainty over the group's future and led to its dismantling and replacement by the Russian Military.³⁰

1.8.3 Unit and Level of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this research is Russia's use of private military companies, specifically the Wagner Group, as a component of state power projection. This unit represents the phenomenon being observed, interpreted, and contextualised through its historical development, functions, and alignment with Russian strategic behaviour.

The unit of explanation in this research is Russia's strategic culture, which serves as the causal factor underlying the state's reliance on Wagner. Rather than functioning as a mediating filter between systemic and domestic variables, Russia's strategic culture is treated as an enduring set of beliefs, norms, and assumptions that directly shape how the state perceives security threats, defines appropriate uses of force, and legitimises deniable or indirect methods of warfare. By examining these cultural dispositions, this research seeks to explain why the Russian state consistently employs private military companies as an extension of its state apparatus.

The level of analysis for this study is the state level, as the phenomenon under examination concerns the strategic orientation, institutional choices, and

³⁰ "Wagner Uprising: A Year after Mutiny, Russia Controls Group's Remnants." BBC News. BBC, n.d. Accessed May 16, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4nn1p81q59o.amp>.

military behaviour of the Russian state. Through this focus, the study aims to demonstrate how Russia's historically rooted strategic culture manifests in concrete policy behaviour, specifically, the creation, management, and normalisation of the Wagner Group as an instrument of statecraft.

1.8.4 Data Collection

The writer uses a library research method to analyse this research by collecting facts and written data from various sources on Russia's use of PMCs, the operationalisation of the Wagner Group, and the internal and external pressures Russia faced in the geopolitical climate at that time. Due to difficulties in collecting primary data for this research, the writer resorted to secondary data from academic writings and second-hand reports related to the research topic.

1.8.5 Data Analysis and Processing

Method This study employs process tracing as its main qualitative approach to data analysis. The approach is employed because it contributes to the discovery of the causation linking Russian strategic culture with the activities of private military entities, such as the Wagner Group. Because the specific research question involved in this study is to understand how and why Russia's strategic culture creates such a consistent pattern of deniable coercion, process tracing will provide the researcher with the framework to reconstruct the pivotal processes, ideologies and institutional decisions that connect ideas

of strategy to practice. The approach looks at the source, at the evidence, and how Russia's core beliefs about war, international relations and the application of force figure in its security choices. By analysing these connections the study seeks to demonstrate that Russia's dependence on private military firms is not a momentary response to exogenous pressures but one that has been built into a persistent historical pattern linked to its strategic culture.

This study applies process tracing in an explaining-outcome format, beginning from the observable outcome, which is the creation and use of the Wagner Group, and working backwards to identify the cultural and institutional mechanisms that led to it.³¹ The focus is on building a clear, sufficient explanation rather than on generalisation. The evidence is drawn from qualitative sources, including policy documents, leadership speeches, academic writings, and credible reports. These materials are used to identify essential decision points and recurring cultural themes that reveal how Russia's strategic culture continues to shape its modern military and foreign policy behaviour.

1.9 Systematic Structure of Writing

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter will introduce the research topic, outlining the background and context of the state's traditional use of formal

³¹ Beach, Derek, and Rasmus Brun Pedersen. *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2016.

armed force and Russia's divergence, which blends conventional and unconventional tactics, particularly the employment of PMCs such as the Wagner Group.

CHAPTER II

RUSSIA'S USE OF PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES AND THE WAGNER GROUP

This section will delve deeper into Russia's utilisation of PMCs, focusing on Wagner Group as a case study. It'll explore the evolution of Russia's use of non-state security actors by tracing Wagner's roots and highlighting that it doesn't easily fit with existing PMC categories. This chapter will detail the reasons Russia relies on PMCs and operationalise Moscow's ambition in grey areas. It will examine Wagner's operational profile, distinguish it from Western PMCs, and discuss Wagner's involvement in conflicts such as Ukraine, Syria, and Africa.

CHAPTER III

RUSSIA STRATEGIC CULTURE

This chapter will articulate the Russian Strategic Culture to be used in the analysis. Strategic culture is theorized to influence the way a state perceives and adapts to systemic stimuli and structural shift in capabilities, in this research strategic culture is identified as a critical intervening variable to produce the specific outcome on the addition of PMCs in Russia state toolkit,

this section will establish what aspects of Russian strategic culture are relevant to this phenomenon, drawing from literature where it explains Russia strategic culture is already deep seated beliefs and worldviews regarding its role in the international system, its historical experience with the use of force, and a tolerance for operating in grey areas.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYZING RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC RELIANCE ON WAGNER GROUP

This chapter analyses Russia's strategic reliance on the Wagner Group through the lens of strategic culture. It applies the conceptual framework developed earlier to interpret how Russia's long-standing beliefs, historical experiences, and strategic traditions shape its use of private military companies in its statecraft. The goal of this chapter is to explain how Russia's established cultural perceptions of war, power, and the role of force have guided its decision to create, employ, and eventually formalize the Wagner Group within its broader military and political structure.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The final chapter will summarize the key findings of the research and address the research question of how external

pressure and internal characteristics drive Russia's strategic reliance on the Wagner Group. It will elaborate on the implications of this phenomenon for geopolitics and military strategy. The conclusion will discuss the significance of the Russia case in understanding the trends in state use of PMCs, particularly the integration of non-state actors into state toolkits.

