

**Wagner Group**

## China snubbed Wagner arms request, says US intelligence leak

Classified document suggests Beijing did not respond to Russian paramilitary group's request for weapons in early 2023



A building destroyed by a Russian missile strike in Kharkiv, Ukraine. The US has publicly claimed China is considering supplying Russia with lethal arms to replace stocks of ammunition, artillery and missiles © Sofia Gatilova/Reuters

**Mehul Srivastava** in London, **Max Seddon** in Riga and **Felicia Schwartz** in Washington  
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Russian paramilitary group Wagner, notorious for its brutal role in Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, unsuccessfully asked China for supplies of weapons earlier this year, according to a leaked US intelligence report.

Representatives from [Wagner](#), which is controlled by close Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, "sought munitions and equipment" from China in "early 2023", according to the previously unreported document.

Wagner's direct request to China indicates it had some confidence Beijing would be open to arming Moscow, going beyond other non-lethal forms of support for the military campaign provided by Chinese companies.

But as of early January, China "had not sent [Wagner] any weapons, not even for testing, and had no contact with [Wagner] regarding weapons deliveries", according to the report.

The US has publicly claimed China is considering supplying Russia with lethal arms to replace crucial stocks of ammunition, artillery and missiles, but there is no

evidence Beijing has provided such assistance.

Top officials in charge of Russia's armaments industry, however, were prominent at Xi Jinping's state visit to Moscow last month, while China's defence minister lavishly praised Putin at a rare meeting in the Kremlin earlier this week.

The meetings have raised concerns among western officials that China, which has already given Russia an economic lifeline to weather the effects of western sanctions, may be closer to helping Russia's war effort directly.



Russian president Vladimir Putin gives a speech as China's president Xi Jinping listens during a reception following their talks in Moscow in March © Sputnik/AFP via Getty Images

The Kremlin declined to comment. Beijing did not immediately have any comment on the US claims that Wagner had approached it for arms. But China has repeatedly denied that it has plans to supply weapons to Russia and has instead accused Nato of fuelling the conflict by providing lethal support to Ukraine.

US intelligence listed Wagner's appeal to China alongside successful attempts to buy arms from Russia's two closest allies, Belarus and Syria.

The US report said Belarus "already delivered 50 per cent of unspecified weapons promised" by early January and offered to send Wagner 300,000 VOG-17 grenade launcher rounds. Wagner also bought six SPG-9 grenade launchers and 180 grenades

in Syria at an unspecified time, according to the report. Wagner's personnel were "uncertain where they would be sent beyond Syria", where the paramilitary force has had a presence since 2015, the report said.

The document also provided more detail on contacts between Wagner and Turkey on weapons sales, a relationship mentioned in other leaked intelligence reports.

According to the US assessment, Wagner sent affiliates to Ankara to seek drones, electronic warfare systems, counter-battery systems and howitzer artillery. Their Turkish contacts informed Wagner they could not export some of the requested weapons and equipment, such as howitzers, counter-battery systems and some counter-drone weapons.

The report is part of more than 100 highly classified documents alleged to have been posted online by a 21-year-old member of the Massachusetts Air National Guard who was working as a systems administrator in an intelligence unit.



Wagner group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. Wagner's direct request to China indicates it had some confidence Beijing would be open to arming Moscow © Yulia Morozova/Reuters

The leak has prompted a raft of investigations across the US government. Airman Jack Teixeira is imprisoned in Massachusetts after being charged with illegally sharing top secret national defence information. The Pentagon, Air Force and the US intelligence community are all probing what went wrong and the potential fallout.



Wagner was founded in 2014 by Prigozhin, a caterer known as “Putin’s chef” for his work supplying Kremlin banquets, following Russia’s initial covert invasion of eastern Ukraine. It has taken on an outsized role after Russia’s regular army failed to deliver the blitzkrieg victory Putin hoped for.

Prigozhin regularly offers withering public criticism of the army’s top brass — something unthinkable without Putin’s personal approval — and has heavily recruited for Wagner from Russia’s prisons, a move that requires that Putin pardon the convicts himself.

But Wagner, which made its name as a mercenary force in conflicts from Syria to the Central African Republic, has also struggled to turn the tide in Ukraine and has sustained high casualties.

Another report included in the documents said Wagner personnel met in early February with Turkish contacts to purchase weapons and equipment for Wagner’s efforts in Mali and Ukraine, citing signals intelligence. It said Mali’s president confirmed Mali could acquire weapons from Turkey on Wagner’s behalf.

Other leaked US intelligence assessments detail splits between Russia’s military establishment and Prigozhin over his allegations that the defence ministry was failing to supply sufficient arms to his troops in Ukraine. The documents, in an indication of the ways the US is spying on Russian officials, said the officials considered that his complaints could be legitimate and were looking to increase munitions to the group.

Another previously unreported intelligence document suggests Wagner is planning to resume recruiting prisoners for “Project 42174”, an effort to recruit, train and integrate Russian convicts into Wagner units inside Ukraine. It says senior Wagner officials were working to address disparities between the treatment of Wagner contractors and convict recruits who are wounded in action.

The CIA and National Security Council declined to comment.

