

Vanessa Marquette:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm Vanessa Marquette, media relations specialist at Syracuse University.

Our guest today on the podcast is Sean McFate, who is a professor at Syracuse University's Maxwell School in Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

Sean is one of the world's leading experts on mercenaries. He is the author of the book *The New Rules of War: How America Can Win--Against Russia, China, and Other Threats*. This book was named Book of the Year by *The Economist*, was an Amazon bestseller and Editors' Pick, and is included on the West Point Commandant's Reading List.

Sean began his career by serving as a paratrooper, an officer in the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division, where he served under Stan McChrystal and David Petraeus. He also graduated from elite training programs where he became a jumpmaster and also went through Jungle Warfare School in Panama.

This is just a glimpse into Sean's impressive professional and personal life. So let's dig into our discussion today, where we focus on the war in Ukraine. February 24th, 2023 marks one year since Russia invaded Ukraine.

Sean, thank you so much for joining us today. Can you start off by telling us a bit more about you and what led you to what you do today?

Sean McFate:

Sure. Thanks, Vanessa. It's great to be on the podcast. So my name is Sean McFate, and I began life sort of a... I was a paratrooper. I joined the Army. I served under Stan McChrystal and David Petraeus when they were just young officers. Later, they became big generals. And they've always been a bit of a mentor to me, especially Stan McChrystal.

And then, I left the world of the US Army, and I went private sector. I joined a private military company. I became a military contractor, which many consider to be a euphemism for a mercenary. I initially took contracts just for the US government in places like Africa and other places globally because that's where the wars are. It's not in the Middle East. It's in Africa.

And then, I left that to work sort of full-time freelance. And I worked for big oil companies. I worked for all sorts of entities that would surprise and shock some of your listeners, I'm sure.

And then, one day, in Bujumbura, Burundi, which is, like, in the middle of Africa, I had this epiphany that will... To your listeners, like, "Well, that's duh." But the epiphany was that there are no old people in my industry. And I began to question some of my life choices.

And I got out of that world. It was not easy. Ended up getting a PhD, and now, I research and study modern warfare, the future of war. And I'm a professor at Syracuse University's Maxwell School.

Vanessa Marquette:

Thank you so much for providing a bit more background, Sean. So I know your work on the war in Ukraine focuses on Russia's Wagner Group and mercenaries. Can you first give our listeners a bit of a background on both of those in regard to the war and what we need to know on what's going on right now?

Sean McFate:

Yeah, so I started to track Wagner Group back when it started in 2014. There was a couple Russian mercenary groups. Before that, there was the Slavonic Corps. But Wagner came on the scene late in the 2014 Ukraine War.

The Group was founded by a retired Russian special forces colonel whose name is Dmitry Utkin. And he was, by all counts, a pretty good combat leader. After the Ukraine War in 2014, where they played a role, they became the Kremlin's weapon of choice around the world. So they took contracts, Kremlin contracts, in Syria and across Africa, from Madagascar in the south all the way to Libya in the north, places like Central African Republic, Mali, sort of my old thoughts, if you will.

They began to show up in force, literally. And the reason why the Kremlin really leaned on them is two reasons. One is because they were relatively effective. I mean, Utkin recruited... He's a former special forces colonel. He recruited mostly from the former Soviet Republics, not just Russian and their special forces world, their paratroopers, their more elite forces.

These weren't rag-tag guys. And they were all guys. Let's be clear about this. The second reason why the Kremlin liked them is that they gave the Kremlin a lot of latitude, strategic latitude, because mercenaries... One of the chief selling points of mercenaries is plausible deniability.

So that means that you can send these guys into really dangerous spots, and if bad things happen, you can, as Putin, say, "Well, it wasn't us. We didn't know those. They were war tourists. They spoke Russian. That's all we can tell you." Even though we might know for sure, they... You know. But the point is it gives them plausible deniability.

And it's not just Moscow who uses that plausible deniability. It's Washington too. So, for example, in 2018, in February, in eastern Syria, the Wagner Group, about 300 to 400 Wagner Group guys, went up against American Delta Force, Green Berets, you know, special operations forces. And it was kind of a surprise.

And, of course, these Wagner guys showed up, not just guys with AK-47s. They showed up with tanks and artillery. Mercenaries is no longer the world of Jean-Claude Van Damme or the lone dude in the jungle of the Congo with a Kalashnikov.

That night, though, Delta shellacked Wagner. I mean, the US killed more Russians that night than any single night during the Cold War, over 200. And we suffered no casualties. Now, the reason why that didn't go to World War III is because it wasn't Russian soldiers that we killed. It was Russian mercenaries or contractors.

And both Moscow and Washington, they walked it back from the cliff. They both said, "Hey, these are contractors. They're not Russian." They both invoked the plausible deniability of mercenaries. So that's one reason we're seeing, in fact, mercenary warfare expand around the world.

I mean, about two years ago, somebody assassinated the sitting president of Haiti and got away with it. And the reason that happened is because they hired a bunch of Columbian mercenaries. We caught the mercenaries, but even they didn't know who hired them. There's all the shells and cutouts and stuff like that.

So that shows you the power of mercenary warfare. If you want to assassinate a president of a country or invade a country or do a regime change, hire mercenaries because of good plausible deniability.

So, up to this day, the Wagner Group has been one of Kremlin's favorite arrows in their quiver because they've been very effective, they've had good plausible deniability, and, by and large, the West underestimates the mercenaries, and that gives them even better cover. Until this past year, which we can talk about. But the Wagner Group has featured very prominently in Kremlin antics around the world.

Vanessa Marquette:

So what has changed for the Wagner Group and the war in Ukraine?

Sean McFate:

So the Wagner Group has... As the war in Ukraine has changed for Russia, it has also twisted up the Wagner Group in some very interesting ways. So, before... As your listeners will remember, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 24th, 2022, everybody, including America, including all these pundits on TV like Fox and CNN, expected the war would last just three days. They thought, "It started on a Thursday. It'll be done by Monday at the latest." And here we are.

The war is a stalemate. It may go on to become a stalemate for the next year or two or three. And this has impacted the Wagner Group. So initially, they were part of the initial assault. Again, mercenaries have always offered good plausible deniability. Russian society is just like American society, where they hate seeing their soldiers come home in body bags, but they don't care about dead contractors.

So Putin hired most of the Wagner Group to go invade with some conscripts from the periphery of Russia, not from core Russia. And when that didn't go well, by week four, by the end of March, early April, Putin changed up the strategy. Heads rolled inside the Kremlin, inside the GRU, which is the Russian military intelligence branch.

And Putin leaned on the oligarch who owns the Wagner Group. His name is Prigozhin. And they've known each other since the early 1990s. And he says, "I need bodies. This is going to take a long time. I need bodies." And Prigozhin said, "Well, okay, but for me to do that, I can't live in the shadows anymore. I got to come out." Because Prigozhin always denied he had anything to do with the Wagner group, even though it was like an open secret.

So, at that point, they started to come out of the shadows. Prigozhin came out of the shadows, said, "Yes, it was me all the time. I own it." They started to advertise on billboards in Russia, "Join the Wagner Group." They went around to jails all over Russia and emptied out the jails and said, "Look, we will commute your sentence if you serve six months in the Wagner Group. And you get dignity as well." And so a lot of people took up on that.

And the Wagner Group went from being a fairly elite force to the dregs of society in a few months. Dmitry Utkin, who used to lead from the front as a battle commander, was seen as just now a business guy. And I used to talk to Wagner Group guys. They would contact me because of my background. And I'll tell you that nobody in Wagner Group is happy about being in the Wagner Group.

They're always trying to learn ways to leave, but they would complain about the old guard versus the new guard. The old guard, which is professional mercenary soldiers, versus the new guard, which is these dregs of society.

And Wagner has totally changed. The old guard still wanted to go back to Africa, where they were basically coup-proofing regimes for money that also sort of looked towards Moscow and away from the West. They wanted to get away from Ukraine. They didn't like the war in Ukraine. Many of them then got sucked back into Ukraine. Many of them died in Ukraine.

But I think the coming out party for Wagner came in January this past year when Wagner Group mercenaries took the town of Soledar in the Donbas region area. And they took it without Russian army support. And they're now out of the shadows. I mean, mercenaries have been skulking in the shadows for the last 30 years. This is open mercenary warfare like the Middle Ages.

And it caused huge consternation within the Kremlin because mercenaries and professional soldiers, like the Russian national army, have always hated each other. And this goes back throughout time. And the reason why professional... I mean, in the Middle Ages, mercenaries and knights hated each other.

The reason they hate each other is because we think of soldiers as wives and mercenaries as prostitutes who commercialize the act of love or war. And each is an affront to the other. And so, this ancient and timeless feud between knight and mercenary or soldier and mercenary is playing out right now in the Russian military.

And if we had a savvy strategist in Washington or Kiev, they could exploit that division through disinformation or misinformation so that perhaps they start to fight each other, which happened a lot in antiquity and in medieval warfare.

Vanessa Marquette:

And I actually want to jump back to your point about the media. You said news networks like Fox and CNN and others thought this war was going to happen for three days and then be done. And with all the misinformation going on right now, can you kind of tell us how media plays a role in this war?

Sean McFate:

There's a problem with the expert class. And I don't want to sound too political here. I know certain politicians have made much of this. That's not my argument. But I think your listeners will remember that February of last year, almost a year ago from when we're having this podcast, all these ex-generals and experts from think tanks were on Fox and CNN both. I mean, it's not a Republican versus Democrat thing. It's a question about our professional expert class, who also agreed that if Russia was to invade Ukraine, it would be a done deal.

And then, lo and behold, they were all wrong. And these people are on the airwaves now saying, "If China wants to take Taiwan, they'll just take it." And I think that's naive. And it kind of reminds me of all those experts, well-paid experts in Wall Street who failed to predict the financial crash of 2008-2009.

I mean, frankly, what are we paying them for? What makes you an expert is your predictions. They have to be better than chance. If you can be outsmarted by flipping a coin, then you're not really an expert. And experts who don't want to make predictions should be avoided. So I think it really exposes, frankly, the low strategic IQ we have in Washington, D.C.

And the solution to that is strategic education, like national security strategic education. And it's kind of rare. We have a couple public policy schools, Maxwell being one of the top ones, but most political science departments don't do this justice. The war colleges have problems. There's a lot of groupthink out there, and media tends to spin that groupthink.

And a lot of people in media who are journalists also sometimes think that they're experts. And that's a problem too. There's a lot of confirmation bias in the media, which means that if you're a media person, you invite people on who sound and say things that you think are true rather than diverse perspectives.

So we have that problem inside the national security establishment in Washington, which is extremely dangerous when you're facing a belligerent China, a belligerent Russia, Iran, and others around the world. And it especially becomes a problem when we're spending \$853 billion a year on our military. And we have to ask, "Do we have the right strategy?" Or, "Are we buying the tools we need with all that money?"

So I think that there's a lot of reasons why taxpayers should be concerned. One is their own future security, and second is the gargantuan amounts of money. Because, again, \$853 billion for one department, that's a lot more than Saudi Arabia's GDP. So it's astounding if you think about it.

Vanessa Marquette:

Yeah. And that also makes me think of the military recruitment crisis we have going on right now. And it's certainly a national security issue. So thank you for explaining all of that.

Now I want to dive into a little bit on modern warfare. Whenever you and I have spoken on this topic, you've posed the question, "Is conventional war still conventional?" Can you elaborate on that?

Sean McFate:

Yeah, so this is something I'm working on inside the Beltway, where I reside. It's conventional war. When we think of a conventional war, we think of wars that look like World War II. It's sort of like military on military. These types of wars, everybody wears uniforms. It's industrial-strength melter tanks and planes and battleships.

And battlefield victory wins the day. I mean, if you think of great battles like Midway or Stalingrad that turn the tide of war, that shift the destiny and fate of whole nation-states for decades to come, rearrange maps... It's a kind of warfare that we call conventional warfare.

And in conventional warfare, it's exclusively state on state. So it's not state on terrorists or state on guerrillas or stuff like that. They are industrial-strength armies. Battlefield victory is how you win.

And they nominally have a code of honor. And that code is now codified into what we consider the laws of armed conflict or international humanitarian law, human rights violations. You don't shoot civilians. Stuff like that.

And we think of this type of warfare as timeless and universal. It's what we learn about in sixth grade. But in fact, that is not true. It's a form of warfare that's only 200 years old. It had a beginning. Its beginning was Napoleon. It had a middle. The middle was the Crimea Wars in the 1850s. And the end was Hiroshima in 1945. So really, 150 years.

The atomic bomb, nuclear weapons have made conventional wars obsolete because the nature of war is to escalate. Something I teach my students at Maxwell. And this is the problem that the Soviets and the US feared during the Cold War and why they avoided putting their troops in the same grid square. It's because a shooting war could suddenly escalate into a nuclear war in one afternoon that could destroy the world.

And for this reason, the Soviets and the Americans, because they feared mutually assured destruction, they didn't ever put their soldiers in a position where they can actually go to war. Except for things like the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was extremely close call. But they fought through irregular warfare, like through proxy wars and political warfare.

And so, nuclear weapons makes conventional war obsolete. And if you look at all the conventional wars since 1945, since the end of World War II... And there's social science data that I use that shows us very clearly. And troops will tell you this. They know this intuitively. Is that there's nothing more unconventional today than a conventional war. Only 6% of all armed conflicts since the end of World War II have been conventional. Only 6%. Everything else is unconventional.

So unconventional war, especially between great powers like China and Russia, is non-existent or will become nuclear within hours or days. Now, here's the problem, and here's why we should care.

Remember I was saying how the Department of Defense is getting \$853 billion? Obscene. We're buying aircraft carriers for 13 billion a copy. We're buying five of them.

And are they even relevant in an era where... If you talk to a sailor and an aircraft carrier in the South China Sea, they're pretty sure that if there is an open fight between China and the US, they will be on the bottom of the South China Sea in 20 minutes. Because China will swarm hypersonic missiles at the carriers, and boom... There's not much defense.

So why are we building more of these? We're spending \$1.7 trillion on an F-35 program, a fighter jet program. The last time we had a strategic dogfight was the Korean War. These things didn't do much for us in the last 20 years of war. Drones did all the work. And why are we even having manned aircraft?

I mean, \$1.7 trillion on an aircraft, an F-35, which has zero combat missions. Zero. After 20 years of war. \$1.7 trillion is more than Russia's GDP. On an airplane that doesn't go to war. I'm an old paratrooper. We would say, "That dog don't hunt." It's a waste of money. We are preparing for the wrong type of war.

There's a saying... I'm sure your listeners have heard it. "Generals always fight the last war, especially if they won it." The last war that the US won, if we're being honest with ourselves, is World War II. And we are fighting some version of that.

If you look at war games inside the Pentagon today, war games inside of think tanks inside the Beltway, like at CNAS or CSIS, which has become its own sort of cottage industry, they imagine this battle on the streets of Taiwan that looks exactly like Midway with better aircraft carriers, world-class carriers, and F-35s. It's basically World War II with better technology. It is stupid.

So we're spending all this money on our version of the Maginot Line, where our enemies are innovating ahead of us using things like disinformation, irregular warfare. They know that conventional war is dead.

And yes, China does saber-rattle with its military, but if you look at how it's winning the world, it's not with its military. It's doing economic warfare through Belt and Road Initiative. It's doing disinformation warfare through the three-wars strategy. Putin has been doing disinformation for a long time, tries to hack our elections.

I mean, there are many ways to win, and we are fixated on a way of war that looks like the 1940s, which is why all those ex-generals on Fox and CNN thought, "Well, if Russia wants to take Ukraine with all their tanks, it'll be a cakewalk." It's because those generals are locked into World War II with better technology.

And so, it's one of my missions at Syracuse to try to train the next generation of strategic thinkers who are not paradigm prisoners to what worked a century ago and can think broadly about, "How do you weaponize information without losing your souls of democracy?" Questions like that. That's what we have to wrestle with, not how many F-35 planes we need.

Vanessa Marquette:

Sean, you bring up some great questions, and I think it's super important for the students you're teaching and all of those who are going into a career in national security to really think about that perspective of war and what's happening now and what can happen in the future. So thank you for that.

And with that said, what kind of lessons do you think we've learned in this past year of war? And then, what are some implications for the future?

Sean McFate:

Well, what I fear is that the Beltway, the Washington, D.C., is learning all the wrong lessons. They look at tanks, fighting tanks in Ukraine, tubed artillery, fighting tube artillery, and they think conventional war. Because they associate those weapon systems with World War II.

Now, you can use a tank in an unconventional way. So, for example, in 2016, Russia used its air force in Syria to deliberately bomb civilian refugees and civilians in Syria. And the reason they did this is because they wanted to help create a flood of refugees that would flood into the European Union and create the Brexit.

Because Russia, the Soviet Union, has always been trying to break up the European Union and NATO. That's always been their goal. And they did it by using a conventional weapon like a bomber in an unconventional way, bombing civilians. It's horrific, but it worked.

And that's what they're doing today. They're using artillery to wantedly lob shells into cities indiscriminately to kill people so that civilians go to their leadership in Kiev and say, "Look, we're tired of this. Go talk to Putin." And Putin wants to punish the people so that Zelensky, the president of Ukraine, crawls to Putin and seeks peace on Putin's terms, not Zelensky's terms.

So, the problem, though, is that our military establishment congress, they look at artillery and tanks, and they don't have the strategic imagination to realize that, okay, you associate those things with World War II and conventional warfare, but they're not being used that way right now. And as a result, we're buying all this... One reason why the defense budget's so big is we're giving away all of our conventional weapons so Lockheed Martin and Raytheon can buy new stuff and make new stuff for us.

And so it's kind of been like an arms bazaar, but the things that we should be learning... And some of it we kind of are, but I think Americans know it better than the defense establishment, ironically, in Washington. Are at least two things.

One is the amazing resiliency of the Ukrainian people to stand up to Putin. I mean, that's been covered to death. And they're not perfect, but wow, they really are... I mean, after the disappointments of Iraq and Afghanistan, and Vietnam, here's a people who are willing to fight for their cause, right? And they've inspired the world. I mean, you go outside, and you see blue and gold flags everywhere. And not just in our country, around the world. And that's a really... It's a good news story in the beginning of the 21st century.

The second is something that I've been saying for 20 years now is that mercenaries are back. I mean, mercenaries, it's the second-oldest profession. And they only went away... Again, it's tied with conventional warfare. The rise of conventional warfare state on state also presided over the extinction of mercenaries, which is how most wars were fought in antiquity and the Middle Ages. I mean, popes hired mercenary armies in the Middle Ages. That's how you got wars done. For lots of reasons.

And the last 200 years, they've kind of gone underground. And they never went away, but during the height of conventional war, like in the beginning of the 20th century, they were very rare. You saw them in the Cold War, again, as proxies for great powers.

But after the Berlin Wall fell, they started to come back. And we hiring Blackwater in Iraq did not help them in. Many people around the world consider American private military companies like Blackwater are mercenaries, and I think they have a strong point to make there.

And then the Wagner Group came out, and they've been used in the shadows, but now they're not in the shadows anymore. They're taking whole cities, like Soledar. They're winning where the Russian army cannot. They're outcompeting the Russian military.

And I think it just shows you that mercenaries are going to come back. And I think, by the middle of the 21st century, there's no reason to think they won't be back in international relations the same way they have been for the last 3,000, 4,000 years.

I mean, even the Old Testament talks about mercenaries all the time, seven times at least, and never with any scorn. So that's going to change international relations as we know it.

And let me explain how. If mercenaries become a major force in international relations, well, then, suddenly, the super-rich can become superpowers. People like Elon Musk or ExxonMobil can have their own private militaries, their own private CIAs.

They already exist, by the way. I've worked in private CIAs. I've worked in private militaries and private special operations. But now, they'll go more and more mainstream.

And as the norm against mercenary dissolves... And it's dissolving. Let's face it. I mean, the US used Blackwater 15 years ago. Russia's using Wagner Group now. Who's stopping them? Shame is not stopping them. They're just growing. And people around the world will imitate success. Iran might start hiring them. Others will start hiring them.

So here's what's going to happen is that when you introduce mercenaries into warfare, it blends military strategy with economic strategy. Suddenly, the strategies of the market, the strategies that you use on eBay or in the souk to outbid your opponent, to bribe out, to do all sorts of things, that now works in warfare. And our four-stars are clueless about this.

Although, Machiavelli in *The Prince* talks about this. He rails against the mercenaries. He totally hates them. He's like, "They're disloyal. They'll do..." Because, honestly, they played him. He was a very bad consumer of mercenaries. So mercenary private warfare, it's an ancient form of warfare that we have forgotten. It's coming back.

Nobody's looking at it for the same reason that nobody... Many of the experts got the war in Ukraine wrong. They think they're looking forward, but they're really looking in their rearview mirror. They're stuck on conventional war. And we need a better class of strategists in Washington, D.C.

Vanessa Marquette:

So I know there's been a lot of things we've covered in this conversation. What are some key takeaways you'd like our listeners to get from this episode?

Sean McFate:

Sure. There's two. I mean, let's talk about the Ukraine War, what to look for in this year coming up. I believe the war... I believe this since March of last year, that this war is not going to be quick. That Russia will launch a spring offensive. Ukraine will launch a spring counter-offensive. A lot of people will die.

Russia doesn't need to win. All it needs to do is basically make Ukraine a landlocked country with one side the Western border on NATO and the other three borders in Russia, and just cook it the way that, say, UK used to cook Northern Ireland. And they can outlast Ukraine, and at some point, the West will have Ukraine fatigue. We'll see what happens then.

I think to also watch is the space of Prigozhin. Because what happens historically is that, right now, Putin is leaning on Prigozhin, who owns the Wagner Group, because Prigozhin's delivering success. If Prigozhin stops delivering success, or the Siloviki, which is the Russian elite security forces, assassinate him at a jealousy, or Prigozhin starts to become very political and starts to threaten Putin, Prigozhin will be killed.

And this happens throughout mercenary history. If you think back to The Thirty Years' War, Wallenstein, who was the greatest mercenary producer for the Holy Roman Empire, started to actually threaten the emperor, and then he got himself speared to death in his sleep at night.

So if Prigozhin is axed, sort of like axed through the head, like Mexico City and Trotsky type, will Putin put somebody in place who can keep Wagner up and running? If not, will Wagner dissipate? Will they start to trickle out? Or will they start to fight the Russian army? Or who knows what. I mean, these are free radicals. These are not national soldiers.

And anybody who thinks of Russia... Sorry, of the Wagner Group as an extension of the Russian military, is fundamentally ignorant about what's going on here. So, let's watch that space. And again, a clever strategist in the West or in Kiev can use sort of information to drive that wedge to create the illusion to Putin that Prigozhin wants a palace coup, wants to kill Putin with his Wagner Group so that maybe Putin takes out Prigozhin for us.

We can be sneaky. And I think we should be sneaky. So rather than spending all this money on useless war junk, let's be a little bit more strategic and a little bit more effective. And so, I would say, watch that space, watch the mercenaries. And if the mercenaries do leave the Wagner Group... Many of them will get hunted down and killed, but many of them will survive. Where will they show up? In the Middle East? In Africa?

I mean, think about that. All these tens of thousands of mercenaries will come out of this war seeking new contracts, and they're going to go to the most conflict-prone continents in the world, and they will stir up more trouble. And we have a lot of military history, mercenary history that shows us just this.

So the larger implication here is that there's a war, but there's this larger trend of private force that threatens all of us and will change international relations as we know it by the middle of this century.

Vanessa Marquette:

Thank you so much, Sean, for talking with me today on this 'Cuse Conversations podcast and for sharing all of your expertise. It's certainly captivating. And, like you said, we'll see what happens in this next year in the war in Ukraine.

Sean McFate:

Thank you, Vanessa. It's been a pleasure to be on the podcast.

Vanessa Marquette:

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