

The Role of Private Security Companies in International Security

Written by Christopher Kinsey

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CHRISTOPHER KINSEY, AUG 6 2008

There has been a lot written about the role of private security in international relations since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Much of it is emotional outpouring that either demonises the private security industry or represents it as a silver bullet that can transform humanitarian interventions.[1] What such work invariably lacks is a critical assessment of the potential utility offered by private security companies (PSC) in expeditionary warfare.[2] It is impossible to do justice to the topic in a short piece such as this, especially given its controversial nature. However, the author will attempt to do his best; if only in outlining some of the major themes that governments and international organisations will need to address in the coming years concerning PSCs and international security.

There is nothing new about the use of private actors in war. They have been a significant player in warfare throughout the ages. Indeed, only over the last 150 years has the state managed to maintain some type of monopoly over violence. Even so, since the end of the Cold War the market has gradually eroded that monopoly. At the start of the 21st Century, private actors are once more an important feature on the battlefield. As armies have become more specialised they have outsourced more mission tasks to the private sector, while the complex nature of expeditionary warfare has left governments with few alternatives to harnessing the capabilities of the market. States' institutions are no longer able to cope with the range of tasks associated with humanitarian intervention. Rather a new set of institutional arrangements has gradually emerged to manage complex humanitarian interventions, including government agencies, non-governmental organisations, international organisations and the private sector. Importantly, new ways have had to be found to project power through networks that are non-territorial and transcend the public-private divide. Implicit in such arrangements is an understanding that planning and execution must be coordinated across government departments and non-governmental participants. Consequently, the military must now share the battlefield with other actors, including those from the private sector.

The recent explosion of private security companies operating in Afghanistan and Iraq has fuelled the debate on the future shape of the battlefield. They offer the type of services that would have previously been provided by state militaries. Nor is demand for their services slowing down, though the Iraqi bubble is gradually deflating. These services include static guarding of facilities and installations, close protection of high profile individuals, protecting convoys in Iraq, military and security training to government agencies, intelligence support and humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, as long as the UK and US governments, in particular, continue to reduce their force protection, leaving them with a capability gap, PSCs will try to fill the space.

During the Cold War security was the preserve of the military, notably because the country's survival was at stake. No government was going to outsource the survival of the state to the private sector. Today, we no longer face such a threat. Instead a new threat has emerged; global terrorism. To counter this threat, the UK is developing an expeditionary warfare capability. Such a capability means taking on functions that are also non-warfighting. Stabilisation operations and Post-conflict reconstruction are now vital parts of humanitarian interventions. They also lend themselves to outsourcing; one reason for the growth in PSCs over the last decade. The problem for the military is that it is ill-equipped for many of the tasks involved in stabilisation and post-conflict operations. Nor does it have the necessary manpower; another reason for the growth in PSCs. Other government agencies, such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID), face a similar problem

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with manpower shortages in crucial areas of expertise. The US government is in the same situation. Even so, each government has taken a different approach towards PSCs. While the US government appears to have embraced the idea of using PSCs as enablers and force multipliers for US military commanders, this is not the case with the UK government. They have tried to keep some distance between them and have been much slower in reacting to their presence on the battlefield.

The FCO and DFID were forced to use PSCs to protect their employees in Afghanistan and Iraq after the MoD said it could not afford the manpower to undertake the task itself. The relationship between the two groups appears to be working however. At the same time, the FCO is very strict about the procedures the companies must follow and whom companies may employ for contracts. The MoD, on the other hand, has only used them once. This was to protect the Palace in Basra after the army had pulled out and before the building was handed over to the Iraqis. PSCs have also created problems for the military.[3] Helicopters have had to be dispatched to pick up wounded contractors placing an additional burden on limited military resources. Part of the problem has been the military's refusal to officially sanction communications between force commanders and PSCs, though this is now finally changing.[4] Better communications between the two groups should help prevent contractors getting into trouble and consequently having to rely on the military to extract them.

Many officers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan believe PSCs can make a contribution to the operations in these theatres. One task PSCs could take over is static guarding of camps, but under the close scrutiny of the military, leaving them free to concentrate on combat operations. The problem is, the UK military sees security as a warfighting function. This may also be the reason why they have refused to outsource convoy protection in Iraq for low value equipment. Ultimately though, while attitudes are changing towards the use of PSCs the UK military still has some way to go if it is to match the attitude of the US military.

The US military has a far more robust attitude towards PSCs. The Department of Defence even went as far as telling other government agencies involved in Iraq that they would be responsible for their own security after the combat phase of operations, forcing them to hire security contractors. This is another reason why so many armed contractors have been employed. PSCs have been contracted to protect US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, US government officials working in these countries and to protect convoys carrying supplies to US forces in Iraq. But the relationship has not always been on friendly terms with some officers accusing PSCs of undermining their efforts in the country. Incidents involving armed contractors shooting at Iraq civilians make the job of the US much harder notably because the local population retaliates against the military since they do not make a distinction between the two groups. Ultimately however, it is very unlikely that the DoD will do away with their services, though, they are likely to impose great restrictions on what they can do, while strengthening oversight mechanisms and changing the law so those who work for PSCs can be held accountable for their actions.

What of the future? It is unlikely that we will see the same level of PSC use by the US as we saw during the first few years of the Iraq war. That said, they are not going away anytime soon. The US government's decision to set up a civilian contingency force that can be deployed to help in post-conflict reconstruction projects anywhere in the world is likely to increase demand for protection which the industry will provide. There may even be a greater role for them in UN peace support operations; guarding refugee camps for example. However, it is doubtful whether UN member states would tolerate them participating in combat operations.

Another market is the oil and extraction industry. As governments start to look at ways of protecting their access to strategic resources, such as oil and gas, PSCs will be seen as a valuable tool in safeguarding such access.

In the case of the US, it is clear that PSCs have a role in international security for the foreseeable future, supporting both the civilian element of peace support operations and the military. With regards to the UK, the MoD is also likely to turn to PSCs in the future in order that troops might be released for combat operations.

Other international organisations are likely to follow the US and UK lead and employ PSCs to undertake mundane tasks, such as perimeter security, but will stay away from using them in combat or direct combat support roles. What must now be done is for the establishment of a set of international standards to which PSCs must adhere. There is

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also a need for greater oversight of the industry and the introduction of national mechanisms that can hold employees of PSCs to account for their actions. The reason for national mechanisms is because an international mechanism is very unlikely at present. Importantly, only with the introduction of such a mechanism will the international community start to feel comfortable with the PSC concept.

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[1] For an excellent account of the philosophical arguments surrounding humanitarian intervention see Nicholas Wheeler, *Saving Stranger: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000.

[2] The term 'expeditionary warfare is interchangeable with the term humanitarian intervention.

[3] Brian Brady, 'Britain could hire mercenaries to guard bases in combat zones', *Independent*, 6 July 2008.

[4] Military doctrine on how commanders should react to PSCs has now been published. See MoD, *Military Interaction with Private Military and Security Companies*, London: MoD Publication