

Opinion – The Return of Erik Prince

Written by Rishab Rathi

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RISHAB RATHI, MAY 1 2025

The recent deal between Erik Prince and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has reignited global debate about the role of private military companies (PMCs) in fragile states. Framed as a logistics and mineral taxation reform initiative, the agreement places Prince at the center of one of Africa's most volatile yet resource-rich nations. Amid concerns over sovereignty and security, the move signals the latest chapter in Prince's controversial career and reflects the broader resurgence of privatized warfare across the continent.

Erik Prince, founder of the controversial Blackwater, has been a key and divisive figure in private security and armed conflict. His career trajectory reveals not only the transformation of warfare into a privatized enterprise but also the risks of outsourcing state functions to corporate interests. Established in 1995, it quickly rose to prominence during the U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. At a time when the U.S. Department of Defense was overstretched, Prince offered a solution: a private army capable of protecting diplomats, embassies, and assets in war zones. One of his most notable early contracts was a \$21 million deal in 2003 to protect Ambassador Paul Bremer in Iraq. He also secured a \$92 million contract with the CIA for paramilitary support providing training, logistics, and assistance with covert operations. This also included drone targeting, rendition missions, and training foreign assets. This contract marked one of the first confirmed links between Blackwater and the CIA's controversial targeted-killing program.

However, Blackwater soon became notorious for its excessive use of force and lack of accountability. The 2007 Nisour Square massacre, in which Blackwater guards killed 14 civilians in Baghdad, including two children, drew global condemnation. Although four members of the firm were convicted in U.S. courts, they were later pardoned by President Donald Trump, sparking outrage and renewing concerns over the impunity enjoyed by private military contractors. Intensifying its controversial reputation, Blackwater Worldwide reportedly set up a network of over 30 shell companies or subsidiaries, as revealed by Congressional investigators and former insiders. This network was, in part, designed to help secure millions of dollars in government contracts despite the growing scrutiny surrounding its conduct in Iraq. While it remains unclear how many of these entities obtained contracts, at least three reportedly had deals with the U.S. military or the CIA. Since 2001, Blackwater and its affiliates are believed to have obtained up to \$600 million in classified contracts from the intelligence community, according to a U.S. government official.

Despite the sale of Blackwater in 2010 and its subsequent rebranding—first as XE Services, then as Academi, and later under the umbrella of Constellis Holdings—Prince has remained a powerful and controversial figure in global security networks. He went on to establish new ventures such as Reflex Responses, a UAE-backed force, and the Frontier Services Group (FSG), which operated in Africa and supported Chinese commercial interests. In 2023, the U.S. government imposed sanctions on Frontier Services Group (FSG) over allegations that it was involved in training Chinese military pilots, adding another layer of controversy to Erik Prince's already complex public reputation. Additionally, the United Nations investigated him for a suspected role in a failed mercenary operation in Libya, which included alleged arms trafficking violations. Prince has rejected these accusations, asserting that he has had no involvement in any activities related to Libya.

These incidents reflect a consistent pattern in Prince's career: an ability to remain active and influential in military and security spaces despite recurrent legal and ethical controversies. His public persona continues to be closely linked to Blackwater, even years after divesting from the company, owing to both his foundational role and his continued

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involvement in security-related ventures.

Prince's trajectory is emblematic of a larger trend: the resurgence and normalization of private military contractors, particularly across Africa. With more than 35 ongoing non-international armed conflicts on the continent, and state militaries often lacking capacity, African governments have increasingly turned to PMCs to fill security vacuums. Libya, for instance, has hosted over 20,000 foreign fighters in recent years. In the Central African Republic, roughly 2,000 private soldiers have been deployed to support government forces. Similar developments have taken place in Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, and Burkina Faso. In many of these contexts, PMCs operate in opaque legal environments, with minimal oversight and significant operational freedom. Their growing presence reflects the internationalization of African conflicts and the continent's rising strategic importance—particularly in terms of critical resources such as rare earth minerals and energy reserves.

Prince's return to Africa in 2025 through a controversial deal with the DRC marks a significant development in this broader trend. The DRC is the largest producer of cobalt and critical supplier copper—minerals vital for the global green energy transition. The country has long struggled with smuggling, under-invoicing, and illicit trade, making it a prime target for external actors promising efficiency and control. However, Prince's involvement has sparked concern. Past UN reports accused him of planning to deploy thousands of Latin American mercenaries to North Kivu to protect mining operations—an accusation that continues to cast a shadow over his current efforts. Given Prince's history of operating in ways that blur the lines between military engagement and commercial interest, skepticism around the true intent of the DRC deal is warranted.

For the DRC, the immediate appeal of improved security and tighter control over mineral revenues must be weighed against the long-term implications of deepening ties with private security actors. Prince's involvement introduces risks related to national sovereignty, the potential for human rights violations, and the possible empowerment of unaccountable forces in an already fragile state. His prior ventures have shown that "logistics" can be a euphemism for much broader operational ambitions, often including armed protection and control over access to valuable resources. Moreover, his capacity to attract geopolitical backing—from China in earlier efforts, or via silent partnerships with other state and corporate actors—suggests that his operations are rarely isolated from broader strategic interests.

Prince's influence also reflects the increasing geopolitical competition in Africa. As global powers compete for access to critical minerals and strategic footholds, private military companies serve as intermediaries—offering a mix of deniability, efficiency, and on-the-ground impact that traditional statecraft often cannot. In such an environment, actors like Prince thrive. Their operations not only reshape the security landscape but also redefine what it means to exert control in resource-rich, politically volatile areas. While some African governments may view these arrangements as necessary evils, the longer-term consequences could include weakened state institutions, eroded public trust, and heightened conflict.

About the author:

Rishab Rath is a Research Assistant at the Centre of Policy Research and Governance (CPRG), leading the Conflict Studies vertical with a special emphasis on Africa. With an academic background in international relations and political science, his work explores geopolitical dynamics, post-colonial governance, and conflict resolution across diverse global contexts.