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# Private Military Companies and International Security

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CHRISTOPHER WOOD, MAR 21 2013

## **Do Private Military Companies Undermine or Contribute to International Security? A Theoretical Approach**

Whilst the time-honoured profession of being a mercenary may be as old as the history of warfare itself, we are perhaps witnessing a 'golden age' for the soldier of fortune. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a proliferation of mercenary activity across the globe. Today's modern mercenary cohorts, the 'private military companies' (PMCs) that ply their services the world over, have become big business – since 2004, the total net worth of publically traded PMCs, excluding some less legitimate enterprises, exceeded \$100bn globally, and despite the prolonged economic malaise post-2008, the private security sector has maintained an impressive upward pattern of growth [1]. This emergence of the PMC as a key security actor within conflicts and regions of instability around the world has reinvigorated the age-old academic interest in the affairs of the mercenary.

Contemporary security scholars from a range of theoretical disciplines have sought to engage with the PMC, many posing serious questions regarding the capacity of the PMC to contribute to international security. However, thus far critics have generally failed to undertake any cross-theoretical assessment of the PMC as a contributor to international security, with the vast majority of existing literature falling foul of a clear polemical bias either in favour of one particular theory of international security, or otherwise in general opposition to the PMC as a security actor. This essay shall seek to present a comprehensive, structure-driven analysis of the PMC by engaging with the dialogues surrounding the theoretical approaches of Realism and Security Governance – two distinct and opposing theories of international security that offer valuable insights into the implications of integrating the PMC into existing state and international security structures. This essay shall argue that, despite the ideological differences of Realism and Governance theory, both theories share a degree of similarity in their approach to the PMC; whilst Governance and Realism contain inherent bias for and against the PMC as a security actor respectively, the two theories share the view that the PMC is capable of both positively contributing and undermining existing security structures. Given the inability of either Realism or Security Governance theory to divorce the negative attributes of PMC activity from its potential contribution, this essay ultimately argues that the PMC can only be seen as a potential threat to existing international security structures.

The increasing prevalence of the PMC as an international security actor over the past twenty years marks a departure away from the predominately state-centric perception of international security that prevailed amongst theorists during the Cold War period. The response on behalf of security scholars to the challenges posed by the PMC has varied between either candid opposition or a more concerted effort to integrate the PMC within existing structural interpretations of international security. The two theories that I shall consider in this treatment of the PMC – Realism and Security Governance – reflect the range of response to developments within post-Cold War security as a whole. Structural Realism remains set on a conservative state-centric interpretation of international security affairs, viewing developments outside of the structural paradigms of inter-state relations as being secondary or an aberration. Such a view is naturally opposed by that of Security Governance scholars, who regard the proliferation of non-state security actors in the post-Cold War era as arising from the inability of state actors to deal with the modern realities of security. These two differing approaches to international security reflect the response of these theories to the increasingly widespread use of PMC actors in the provision of security, both on behalf of states and non-state actors (NSAs).

# Private Military Companies and International Security

Written by Christopher Wood

Given the fundamental value attached to the notions of state centrality and the Weberian state monopoly over violent force by theoretical Realism, it is perhaps understandable that the response to increased PMC activity in international security affairs from Realist scholars has been predominately reactionary – although we shall see this neither necessarily implies the impossibility of integrating the PMC within existing theoretical security structures nor presumes a negative outcome as a result. Whilst critics such as Peter Singer contend that the state security monopoly is only a late aberration in international affairs, it is undeniable that the existence of the PMC as an actor employed to project violence force has the potential to destabilise state-centric security structures [2]. From a Realist perspective, the fundamental threat posed by the PMC emerges from the development of a structural ‘dependence’ upon the provision of security by private actors [3].

Let us first scrutinize this from the perspective of the ‘strong’ state actor within the international system, in possession of an extensive military apparatus and with undisputed hegemony over its domestic power structures. In such circumstances, it is entirely possible that the integration of PMC actors into existing state security structures results in a *positive* outcome for the state actor – after all, hiring the services of a PMC is essentially a process that materialises the economic power of the state actor into the tangible reality of ‘boots on the ground’. Employing PMC actors in this sense can be seen to enhance existing state power structures and augment force capabilities through either freeing resources expended on support roles or otherwise providing services not easily obtainable by the state actor [4]. There is one major caveat, however. It is arguable that the thorough integration of PMC actors into military structures renders the state actor logistically reliant upon the services of the PMC. Critics have argued that, such is the level of reliance upon the services of PMC security providers on behalf of some members of NATO – in particular, the US and UK – that it would be inherently impossible for these nations to go to war in the absence of PMC contractors [5].

From the perspective of Realist scholars, the PMC is, in the first instance, a corporate entity. The very nature of the PMC invariably means that private military contractors act in the manner of a private company – it must be fiscally responsible and profitable for shareholders, and, as such, is capable of possessing an nationalistic or ideological commitment to any particular State only insofar as it complies with its first priority of making money. This in turn has a number of implications for states seeking to employ the services of PMC actors. Relying upon the services of PMC forces is inherently hazardous insofar as that it is impossible, or at least problematic, to order the individual PMC employee to act on the grounds of national loyalty or duty [6]. What is more, it is clear that the PMC actor may seek to pursue aims contrary to that of the state that employs it. It is a commonly held assertion amongst Realist critics of the PMC that, due to its corporate nature, the PMC tends towards exercising whatever influence it has over its clientele to maximise profit- as such, there exists a vested interest on behalf of the PMC actor in nurturing not only a logistical reliance, but an epistemic ‘culture of dependence’ on behalf of client states [7]. It follows logically that, by surreptitiously undermining the capacity of the client state to provide its *own* security, the PMC maximises its political leverage and thus increases its chances of securing more profitable contract terms – the existence of a large body of critical literature that has adopted an inquiring eye into both the extent of ‘overspend’ on PMC services on behalf of state actors and the pervasive reach of corporate lobbying serves to suggest that Realist concerns over an abusive ‘culture of dependency’ between the PMC actor and the client state are strongly grounded in fact [8].

Whilst Security Governance theory similarly identifies an increasing structural dependence upon PMC services amongst state actors, Governance scholars embrace the growing integration of PMC actors into state security structures as both a desirable and inevitable ‘delegation’ of security away from the state [9]. For Governance scholars, the increasing employment of PMC actors represents a logical decision on behalf of state actors in response to the realities of security in the post-Cold War period.

As part of this devolution of security, the PMC presents itself as a largely positive contributor to existing state-centric security structures. For Governance theorists, the widespread integration of the PMC within the military apparatus of state actors comes in the first instance as the result of a logical pursuit of economy and efficacy that echoes aspects of the Realist argument in favour of the PMC. For many states, resource scarcity presents itself as the main driver towards the economic incentive to employ PMC forces. Amongst the member states of NATO, for instance, the post-Cold War decline in the domestic political capital supporting the maintenance of large conventional militaries is a reality faced by many states in the transatlantic alliance [10]. In this context, the delegation of non-combat roles to

# Private Military Companies and International Security

Written by Christopher Wood

PMC actors can be seen as a cost-effective alternative to the expense of conventional forces that reflects public attitudes in favour of reduced military spending, although debates over the validity of such claims are still present amongst Governance scholars [11].

The second motivation towards the employment of PMC forces within state military structures is not one of simple economy, but rather can be encapsulated as a move towards capability procurement. The utility of the PMC to state actors lies as much in enhancement and capability provision as it does in economy. The use of the PMC has tremendous scope. For most states in possession of a 'large' professional military apparatus, this often takes the form of adopting capabilities offered by PMC actors in security sectors where the private sector has traditionally been strong – intelligence, communications and cyber security, for instance [12]. Changes in the conduct of military operations spurred on by civilian innovations and the convergence towards network-enabled warfare has led to the growing inclusion of corporate expertise in both research and development and military operations [13].

Such capability procurement is of course not limited solely to the auxiliary functions of logistics and communications. Where required, PMC actors are able to fill most if not any 'capability gap' that may emerge in a given sector of national security. It is entirely possible – and has been the case in the past – that a state actor lacking the prerequisite material or political capital to maintain a regular military force may seek the services of one or several PMC actors to provide an extensive military force. The last two decades have witnessed the proliferation of PMC employment not only on behalf of militaries where mercenary forces may adopt an incongruous and augmentative role within existing state security structures, but also at the behest of participants in a multitude of civil wars and military conflicts in the most volatile regions of the world. The past twenty years have witnessed several cases where the involvement of such forces have, during the course of their employment, has saved sovereign governments from potentially disastrous *coup* attempts and ended sustained periods of civil instability. It is widely acknowledged by security scholars from across the theoretical spectrum that the PMC Executive Outcomes (EO), alongside other mercenary organisations, played a pivotal role in engineering peace in Angola during its 1993 civil war, and was again influential in the 1995 cessation of conflict in Sierra Leone during its lengthy civil war [14]. The contribution of PMC actors in securing a resolution to internal conflicts has been noted in a number of cases spanning the globe from Eritrea, Sri Lanka and Croatia and the Balkans [15]. For Security Governance theorists, such cases have demonstrated the capacity of the PMC to reinforce and contribute to the domestic security of state actors faltering in the face of the rampant proliferation of militant actors engaged in violent force that so thoroughly undermines the Realist perception of a state-based monopoly of violence [16].

Whilst such success stories may appear to validate claims that the PMC can positively contribute to state-centric security, from the perspective of Realist scholars these favourable incidences are counterbalanced by the numerous cases where a dependency upon PMC actors for security has either weakened or fatally undermined state sovereignty. In regions suffering from civil strife or internecine war, employment is lucrative. Security scholars have oft suggested the possibility of PMC actors deliberately undermining client security interests through prolonging, or even aggravating, hostilities – at the very least, it is within the interests of the PMC actor to maximise its leverage with the client state [17]. The rewards for doing so may not be mere employment. In several notable cases, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Angola inclusive, mineral extraction rights have often been added as a form of collateral in the contract between PMC actors and the client state – in desperate circumstances, contract terms more favourable to the PMC may come to be negotiated [18].

Such motivations are difficult to substantiate with empirical evidence given the gravity of their implications and their inherently clandestine nature. However, we are able to assess the effect that the decision to hire mercenary forces as a sizeable contributor to state security has upon the stability of security in such regions. The potential for the PMC to assume a decisive and dangerous centrality to the power relations within the client state in such situations is clear [19]. In cases where 'weak' or 'failing' client states have hired the services of PMC forces with military capabilities in quantitative and qualitative excess of their own, the sovereignty of the state actor is put at risk of being compromised through extortion or a simple refusal to fight. In the case of Sierra Leone, for instance, it was the sudden departure of a separate PMC contingent in 1994 that removed any capacity of government forces to respond to the original uprising [20]. In such instances where the departure of mercenary forces would critically compromise security efforts, the possibility arises for the PMC to dictate the terms of the state-PMC relationship through the threat of defection –

# Private Military Companies and International Security

Written by Christopher Wood

or even violence. There have been several documented or suspected instances where PMC actors have 'switched sides' in a conflict, or otherwise sought to conspire with malcontents to overthrow a sovereign government for their own gain [21].

The 'profit motive' is ultimately difficult to dispel from any Realist critique of the PMC. It necessarily taints all association between private military actors and the client states, and is thus rendered all the more tangible in cases where private military actors become deeply entrenched as key security contributors. As such, there remains a profound reluctance on behalf of Realism to recognise the PMC as a legitimate contributor to state security solutions in regions of instability and 'weak' government. For Security Governance scholars, however, this is certainly not the case.

For Governance theorists, the proliferation of security actors on the international scene has not been limited to PMC and armed militant groups. In the absence or failure of state activity, the post-Cold War era has witnessed a proliferation of NGOs such as international aid charities and civil society groups that are actively engaging in security affairs [22]. Such non-state actors are assuming an ever-greater importance in matters of humanitarian relief and conflict resolution that inevitably have an impact on international security. In regions of chronic instability or military conflict where no one state possesses political hegemony, or where ideologically 'friendly' states otherwise lack the resources to adequately protect the interests of NSAs, increased levels of PMC activity can be accounted for by the desire of NSAs to protect their employees and assets.

Governance scholars have thus come to view the PMC as a positive enabler of NSA activity. Perhaps the most profound and oft-cited example of this exists in the advocacy on behalf of the UN of the utility of PMC forces in a peacekeeping and peace building capacity. Historically an organisation trenchant in its opposition to mercenary forces, the UN has shifted towards a growing recognition of the potential value of PMC forces in peacekeeping operations in light of the events in Rwanda, and the organisation itself has, in recent years, demonstrated an increasing willingness to deploy PMC actors to provide security for its multinational operations [23]. Underlying this change of heart, scholars argue, is a normative and qualitative appreciation of the PMC as a security contributor during peacekeeping operations. Critics forward the notion that PMC actors, when appropriately employed, have the potential to act as an impartial force devoid of the provocative ethnic, religious or political prejudices central to the conflict, and can likewise be expected to act in an appropriately restrained and impersonal manner [24]. The advantages are not solely normative; the logistical homogeneity and professionalism provided by PMC forces may prove superior to a disparate multinational force relying on conscripts and obsolete equipment.

This being said, Governance theory is far from recognising the integration of PMC forces into humanitarian and civil society security activity as a perfect marriage of convenience. Qualms exist amongst Governance theorists that the increasing trend of hiring PMC actors to provide security presents a dangerous and debilitating 'militarisation' of aid organisations and civil society [25]. What is more, some governance theorists argue that the potential benefits rendered by NSA activity in regions of instability can be undermined by difficulties in distinguishing between NSA details protected by foreign PMC forces, alongside an association with the PMC that can lead to accusations of forwarding exploitative corporate interests or the interests of foreign governments [26]. Such concerns are only propagated by the questionable legal status and accountability of foreign PMC actors whilst operating under NSA clients which can, at best, lead to a mutual suspicion between local society and PMC actors – at worst, it can lead to situations where indigenous laws and customs have flouted with a casual and inflammatory disregard in the name of providing security to clients [27]. The legacy of the past hangs heavy around the neck of the PMC and those that associate with it – whilst the provision of security to non-state organisations may enable them to carry out their work in some of the most unstable regions of the world, the employment of private military actors not only undermines the constructive engagement between NSAs and civil society, but also serves to create an atmosphere of distrust and uncertainty.

There are, of course, substantial difficulties in reconciling the disparate approaches of Realist and Security Governance theorists to international security. The PMC is no exception, however it is clear that there exist several commonalities between the two theories. For both theoretical approaches, PMC actors can both contribute to *and* undermine the idealised security architectures forwarded by scholars. Realism may present the most timid approval

# Private Military Companies and International Security

Written by Christopher Wood

and the most vigorous critique of the PMC, but whilst Security Governance offers an engaging argument in suggesting that the PMC is capable of both contributing to state security structures and enabling the positive proliferation of non-state security actors, it ultimately embraces Realist concerns over the motivation and reliability of PMC actors. It is the common inability of both theories to reconcile the negative aspects of PMC activity from a potentially positive contribution to international security that leads this author to suggest that the PMC ultimately undermines the structural interpretations of international security proposed by both Realists and Security Governance theorists. Given the diametrical nature of these two theories of international security, it would suggest that such a conclusion could be reached generally across a broad spectrum of security theory – however, given the nature of this essay, it must be said that an assertion remains unsubstantiated. It is clear that there remains much scope for applying other theoretical approaches to the PMC as a security actor, particularly in terms of normative approaches to security affairs, which in turn may yield a more comprehensive answer to the question at hand.

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# Private Military Companies and International Security

Written by Christopher Wood

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