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Special Operations Forces a Strategic Resource: Public and Private Divides

CHRISTOPHER SPEARIN

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Since the late 1980s, and especially since the tragic events of 11 September 2001, two phenomena, both known for their pragmatic and controversial nature, have come together to pose challenges for US policymakers. The first phenomenon is the rise in importance of special operations forces (SOF). This is evident in the 1987 creation of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) later followed by the Bush Administration's 2004 decision, through the Unified Command Plan, to assign USSOCOM the primary responsibility for prosecuting the Global War on Terrorism. In light of the need for anti-terrorism and counterinsurgency expertise and the asymmetric nature of many current threats, SOF have been described as a "logical military response," one that, for General Peter Schoomaker, provides "an array of expanded options, strategic economy of force, [and] 'tailor to task' capabilities."¹

Despite the logicity, however, such an approach threatens to exacerbate divides, real and perceived, between the conventional and unconventional military communities. In addition to aggravating concerns related to shares of limited resources, the skimming of individuals with high leadership potential, and differing opinions regarding how military organizations should look and act, there is the possibility of antagonism as SOF are often presented as a panacea or a "silver bullet."² In the United States and other Western countries, these concerns regarding the utility and implications of SOF vis-à-vis their conventional brethren have existed since the creation of special units in World War II; it is not surprising that they continue today.

The second, and perhaps more surprising, phenomenon is the reshaping of the assumed state monopoly over the management and ownership of the means of violence. Several studies have examined the supply, demand, and ideational reasons, many linked to the end of the Cold War, which created the marketplace for the modern-day international private security company (PSC).³ From one standpoint, PSCs represent an economic response in a globalized marketplace at a time when states may not be able or willing to respond promptly to crises due to political or organizational restraints. PSCs can provide, as force multipliers, support to state militaries committed to particular operations. From another standpoint, however, the rise of PSCs is highly controversial because of potential negative implications related to political authority, military command and control, and maintenance of the military ethos. Moreover, many PSC employees were previously members of state security sectors, thus revealing the movement of uniformed personnel to the private sector.

This article draws attention to the fact that as SOF in the United States and elsewhere strain to meet the expanding operational tempo and as the PSC presence increases internationally, the “fortunes” of both state militaries and PSCs are linked to what is becoming a zero-sum game for SOF’s expertise. The article argues that to delink public and private actors from this game the US, as the main consumer of PSC services, must treat SOF expertise, whether in public or private hands, as a strategic resource. This is appropriate in order to lessen PSC’s focus on SOF personnel and to not aggravate relations between the conventional and unconventional US military communities. To make this argument, the article first describes the decline in SOF personnel and the related proclivity of many PSCs to rely on former SOF operators. It then suggests the rationale for US activism on the basis of increasing SOF demands, the nature of current SOF retention efforts, and consideration of how former SOF personnel are employed in the private sector.

Implications of the Decline in SOF Personnel

Because exit surveys for departing SOF personnel do not determine conclusively the nature of post-military employment, there are no exact statistics

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as to the rate and number of SOF personnel transfers from the US military to PSC employment. Nevertheless, it is clear that two main variables encourage this transfer—remuneration and operational tempo. With respect to remuneration, the Government Accountability Office reported in July 2005 that monthly salaries ranged between \$12,000 and \$13,000 were likely for former SOF personnel in Iraq; some PSC employees were paid as much as \$33,000 per month.⁴ Though such amounts are well above that normally paid to those in uniform, Rebecca Ulam Weiner contends this higher private sector remuneration should not come as a surprise because “the true value of labor . . . has been artificially under compensated due to the nation’s monopoly on military service.”⁵ Normatively, one can argue that such high payments are appealing to and accepted by former SOF personnel because charges of mercenarism in the most pejorative sense have not been forthcoming. Whereas such private activities were once taboo due to the rise of the citizen-army in the nineteenth century, the private presence is now increasingly welcomed and valued. For instance, the deaths of four Blackwater USA employees in Fallujah on 31 March 2004 served as one of the catalysts for large-scale US military operations against insurgents in the city the following month. Similarly, US government officials have publicly recognized the contributions and mourned the deaths of private sector personnel. As a result, official sanction, rather than abhorrence, of PSC activities implicitly underscores the apparent acceptability of the high salaries.

As for operational tempo, private employment offers some relief to SOF personnel. Over the course of the 1990s, the activities of US special operations forces gradually increased so that by 1997, approximately 4,760 personnel were deployed abroad every week, a threefold increase from 1991. With the advent of the Global War on Terrorism, USSOCOM personnel have become stretched even further. As an example, a US Navy sea-air-land team (SEAL) member currently spends six months abroad during an 18-month period rather than the previous standard of six out of every 24 months. In recent years, 100 percent of the US Army Special Operations Aviation Regiment and 90 percent of the Air Force Special Tactics Squadrons have been deployed to either Afghanistan or Iraq. In the Iraq case, some 9,000 to 10,000 US special operations forces personnel (including operators, administrators, and support staff) are deployed from a total contingent that is only 49,000 strong. In the face of this demand, one that obviously causes physical and mental strain and is disruptive to family life, PSC employment offers greater choice in assignments, a more flexible work schedule, and ample leave time.

Another complicating variable is that the maintenance of high standards for special operations forces personnel sometimes means that organizations are understaffed to avoid the dilution of expertise, a factor further exacerbated by the private manpower drain. Depending on the SOF tier under

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consideration, only 10 to 30 percent of recruits are successful in their attempts to join. As such, in 2001, US Army Special Forces were at 94 percent. Similarly, US Navy SEALs remained at 89 percent of required enlisted strength in 2005. In many cases, the positions left unfilled are those of operators with critical combat skills.⁶ Likewise, quickly filling these billets with experienced personnel is not an option given estimates that it takes five to six years to train and educate a fully qualified SOF soldier.⁷ To not respect the necessary growth time would undermine USSOCOM’s enduring truths: “Humans are more important than hardware. Quality is better than quantity. Special Operations Forces cannot be mass-produced. Competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.”⁸

In order to handle increasing responsibilities, the *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review* calls for a gradual expansion of SOF by 15 percent in FY2007. This expansion places particular emphasis on US Army Special Forces, US Navy SEALs, and personnel trained in civil affairs duties and psychological warfare. The challenge, however, is that more senior SOF personnel, those frequently tasked as trainers and mentors, are the individuals seeking earlier than expected release from service. While departure of individuals with only 20 years of service declined during 2002 and 2003, when stop loss policies were in place, the Government Accountability Office reported in 2005 that attrition returned to approximately 2001-levels upon relaxation of these policies. Given that markets for PSC services increased in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere during the stop loss years, and pressures on SOF personnel continue to mount, if not heightened, movement from government to the private sphere can be expected. Already, USSOCOM reports a possible undermining of its enduring truths: “[B]ecause the command is losing some of its most experienced personnel, younger less experienced servicemembers [sic] are being promoted to leadership positions more quickly than in the past.”⁹ The longer this drain continues the more difficult it becomes to manage and prevents USSOCOM from ensuring that the requisite quantity of skilled personnel are available for its increasing workload.

SOF and Private Actors

Special operations forces personnel have long been linked to private security companies, in some cases even before the end of the Cold War. For example, Sir David Stirling, one of the World War II founders of the British Special Air Service (SAS), formed Watchguard International in 1967, a private security company that Kevin O'Brien labels as "the model for all future" firms.¹⁰ Watchguard International offered security analyses, military training, and personal protection services to government clients, mostly in former British colonies in the Middle East and Africa. In the 1980s, another former SAS member, David Walker, operated the PSCs Saladin Securities Limited and Keeny Meeny Services. The name Keeny Meeny came from the Swahili phrase *keeni meeni*, meaning deadly snake in long grass, and is regularly used by the SAS to describe covert, stealthy, and dangerous operations. Perhaps even more direct in its SOF linkages was Special Advisory Services, a British PSC that functioned in the 1970s under the "SAS" acronym.

Arguably the best-known PSC from the 1990s, Executive Outcomes (EO) based in South Africa, was comprised mainly of SOF personnel (EO closed in 1999). Though many different nationalities rounded out EO's ranks, the bulk of its expertise was South African. With few exceptions, EO's South African personnel came from Apartheid-era counterinsurgency special operations forces, many having extensive operational experience in Southern Africa. A number of these units had been disbanded by 1994: the 1-5 Reconnaissance Commandos (Reccies), the 44th Parachute Brigade (Parabats), the paramilitary unit Koevoet (Crowbar), and the 32d Buffalo Battalion, the most decorated South African combat unit since the end of the Second World War. Of the pool of 2,000 personnel EO claimed it could draw upon for its operations, 70 to 75 percent were from the Buffalo Battalion. The PSC's founder and chief executive officer until July 1997, Eeban Barlow, was the second-in-command of the Buffalo Battalion in the mid-1980s. Other members of EO's hierarchy, Lafras Luitingh and Nic Van den Bergh, had links to the Reccies and Parabats respectively.¹¹

In more recent times, contemporary PSCs have advertised their capabilities by highlighting SOF expertise. A partial list of these PSCs includes the following firms, mostly based in the United States and United Kingdom: Aegis Specialist Risk Management, AKE Group, ArmorGroup, Blackwater USA, Britam Defence, Custer Battles, DME Risk Management, Erinys, Hart Security, ICP Group Limited, ISI Group, Meyer & Associates, Mi2International, Olive Group, Pilgrim Elite, Phoenix CP, RamOPS Risk Management Group, SOC-SMG, Triple Canopy, TOR International, Trojan Securities International, and Unity Resources Group LLC. The managers and employees of the US firms

boast expertise garnered from all three tiers of special operations forces, including the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment (Delta), Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, and Army Rangers. Along these lines, Triple Canopy, one of the better known companies, suggests it has “more former Tier One special operations professionals than any organization other than the US military.”¹² Similarly, PSCs also garner management and manpower from the SAS, the British Special Boat Service, and special operations forces from countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Overall, the PSC industry possesses a wealth of experience pertaining to counterterrorism, combat operations, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, and military training.

One can readily identify three specific reasons for the correlation between SOF and PSCs. The first relates to recruitment and reflects an observation made by James Wood, a former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, that PSCs manage by Rolodex.¹³ Because the permanent staffs of many PSCs are quite small, they rely heavily on manpower databases consisting primarily of former military personnel from which they can draw manpower to fulfill contractual obligations. While there are a number of ways in which these databases are compiled, such as job fairs and advertising through the internet and print media, informal links and networks often suffice. These informal methods permeate the SOF community and are directly related to the SOF roots of many PSC founders and managers. The tight links that exist amongst SOF operators because of their common experience and training provides additional incentive for joining PSCs.

Second, while some countries, the United States included, have implemented general regulatory policies regarding licensing and contract approval for PSCs, regulation is currently lacking regarding the qualitative standards of PSC personnel. As a result, PSC reliance on SOF-expertise serves as a regulatory surrogate due to the rigorous training and assessment required of uniformed SOF. Indeed, the high recruitment standards for special operations forces are well known throughout the military and recruits that are successful receive additional training to enhance their language skills, cultural understandings, adaptability, and martial capabilities. Additionally, SOF possess great leadership abilities, a point long recognized by conventional forces. For instance, Field Marshal Viscount Slim accused SOF of “skimming the cream” from conventional forces; military historian Philip Warner contends that SOF volunteers “are the most enterprising, energetic, and least dispensable.”¹⁴ The issue of dispensability now confronts SOF as one US military official asks rhetorically: “We have always had very capable, experienced, well-trained soldiers. . . . Guess what industry likes?”¹⁵

The third reason, also linked to qualitative factors, is the intangible benefits that PSCs seemingly accrue through reliance upon an “elite.” The se-

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curity marketplace, like any other, is a social construction in which participants place value on certain phenomena for both pragmatic and emotive reasons. In this regard, Eliot Cohen identifies the characteristics leading to elite status: “First, a unit becomes elite when it is perpetually assigned special or unusual missions. . . . Secondly, elite units conduct missions which require only a few men who must meet high standards of training and physical toughness. . . . Thirdly, an elite unit becomes elite only when it achieves a reputation—justified or not—for bravura and success.”¹⁶ At present, SOF have obtained this elite status given USSOCOM’s aforementioned rise in prominence, a prominence reinforced by the praise from public officials and the generally positive portrayal of SOF personnel in the popular news and entertainment media. For instance, Senator John Kerry, while campaigning in 2004 as the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate, called for a doubling of US Army Special Forces. The marketability of elite status that results from such acts is an important factor that PSCs rely on for promotional purposes.

Measures Taken

To maintain the strength of its SOF operators, USSOCOM launched a study in December 2003 to determine how to lessen the loss of such highly skilled personnel. Key issues included educational incentives, bonuses, retirement benefits, and salaries. This process culminated in December 2004 with USSOCOM’s announcement of a \$168 million remuneration plan. For approximately 7,000 operators of mid-level rank or higher, the plan increased monthly pay by \$375 and for senior-level grades the monthly increase was \$750. A select number of senior operators—1,500 individuals mostly at the rank of sergeant, petty officer, and warrant officer with a minimum 19 years of service—were entitled to sliding scale bonuses. These ranged from \$18,000 for agreeing to two more years of service to \$150,000 for six years. This plan hoped to build on the initial investment of between \$350,000 and \$500,000 to train a SOF operator, an investment magnified through extensive operational experience.

While perhaps a helpful incentive for many SOF operators, the particular emphasis on increased remuneration for continued service cannot halt the transition of SOF personnel to PSCs and may even lead to difficulties within the US military. By way of explanation, assessments have found the incentive program's results to be "modest."¹⁷ As outlined earlier, military pay and allowances will not match those in the private sector where annual salaries for experienced SOF operators may be in the six-figure range. As one former SOF operator explained, "[Y]ou can stay in the military if you are patriotic, but then your ideals are outweighing your pocket-book."¹⁸ What is more, the intangibles of military service—patriotism and recognition by the state—may also now imbue private employment. Consider the words of US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher in response to the deaths of four Blackwater USA employees in Iraq in March 2005: "They played a vital role in our mission to bring democracy, and opportunity to the people of Iraq. We will always remember their courage, dedication, and ultimate sacrifice for their country in the name of freedom. We mourn the loss of these brave men and extend our deepest sympathies to their families."¹⁹ In light of this praise, the line between sacrifice and service to country versus occupationalism, personal gain, and the sufficing of need becomes increasingly indistinct.²⁰

Additionally, pressures emanating from the conventional elements of the US military make it difficult for SOF to receive further beneficial treatment. The December 2004 plan was, in fact, a scaled down version of a much more generous SOF package. This reduction was due mainly to charges of favoritism and concerns that conventional forces would want similar treatment.²¹ In this regard, Representative Jim Saxton, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee's Unconventional Threats Panel, asserts that this was the most contentious issue in the debate regarding retention and bonuses: "The fear was we would cause a lot of angst with other enlisted personnel. . . . We were afraid they may have felt pushed aside because special forces were being treated differently. That was the biggest question in the entire process."²²

These responses are in line with the resistance to institutional change that has long been a feature of SOF's development (in the United States and elsewhere): "Animosity towards special operations forces is engendered as much by the competition for scarce resources as it is by philosophical differences in what constitutes an acceptable approach to military operations."²³ Whereas the money is still not sufficient for the military to compete successfully for the retention of SOF expertise, it already appears to be too much in the eyes of the conventional forces. The thought being that it makes SOF even more "special," it overemphasizes SOF's contribution, and it implies that other military contributions are somehow less remarkable.

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SOF Expertise—A Strategic Resource

In circumstances in which conventional expertise is not appropriate because of inadequate skillsets, political restrictions, and financial limitations, there are several functions that directly contribute to SOF’s strategic utility: the raising of public morale, the showcasing of military prowess in an effort to deter, the humiliation of the enemy, the reassuring of domestic and international audiences, the prevention of conflict escalation, and the maintenance of stability in strategically important areas.²⁴ With respect to PSCs, an alternative approach to the above would be to treat SOF not as individuals requiring incentives, but rather as a strategic resource. US policymakers must consider how this resource is best utilized and whether such a resource should be under government or private management. Put differently, policymakers should assess the advantages and disadvantages of the public and private sectors in order to measure the degree to which US policy might best benefit from SOF’s strategic utility.

At present, the PSC presence provides flexibility to US policymakers along several lines. In the realm of global strategy, the effective implementation of a preventative war strategy, as detailed in the White House’s *2002 National Security Strategy*, requires that the US leadership be able to rely on a pool of sufficient military manpower. This pool conducts both military operations and serves as a deterrent to rogue states and terrorist organizations. Should the US become engaged in an operation where its military manpower is overly committed, US credibility will suffer. PSCs, therefore, serve as an adjunct to US military presence by performing tasks that were once conducted by military members.

Regarding financial and political imperatives, substantially increasing the overall number of Americans in uniform is not currently a policy objective of the US government, and it is not just an attempt to avoid debates related to the reinstatement of the draft or some other form of national service. To quote former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: “I am very reluctant to increase end strength. . . . Resources are always finite, and the question is, would we be better off increasing manpower or increasing capability and lethality?”²⁵ Sec-

retary Rumsfeld's concerns are borne out by Congressional Budget Office statistics that determine the annual price tag of a 100,000-member increase to cost approximately \$10 billion. What is more, this amount covers only personnel costs such as housing, medical care, and family benefits—additional training and equipment are not included. These costs are considerable and reflect the longstanding military mantra that with a professional force, “you recruit a soldier, but you retain their families.”²⁶ With the PSC option, though initial costs of employment might be more substantial than the public sector alternative, the long-term costs of a larger force structure do not have to be considered.

Yet, does fulfillment of these various priorities necessitate reliance upon the SOF resource specifically? At present, PSCs conduct a range of contracted tasks including security advising, security sector training, static security, convoy security, and close protection for a variety of clients—states, corporations, international organizations, and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations. However, not all SOF skill sets are applicable for these tasks. One might argue that firms with experienced personnel garnered from different segments of the government security sector would more than meet the demand of many of these clients. In other words, given a particular criterion, conventional, rather than SOF, expertise may be more appropriate. What is more, it is important to recognize that while SOF expertise is sometimes interpreted as “generalist” because of its adaptable nature, within SOF community there are specific core missions and operators are trained to task: “The reality is that SOF units are organized, trained, and equipped to carry out one of the core missions, and although they have an ability to move away from their field of specialist capability, that ability is, in reality, limited.”²⁷ In this light, some PSC tasks such as close protection, former SOF personnel may not have received the specific training to carrying out such missions. In other cases, a certain SOF capability may not be relevant. For instance, US Air Force combat controllers are being lured away from the US military by PSCs and were targeted in the aforementioned retention drive. This is despite the fact that their unique speciality of vectoring warplanes onto targets under hostile conditions is not one currently in demand by PSC clients.²⁸

US policymakers need to overcome two barriers in order to treat SOF as a strategic resource. First, independent of the PSC challenge, is the fact that SOF have not been used to their full strategic potential. Analysis of recent operations has found a significant emphasis on SOF's more direct combat role.²⁹ This approach sees the application of highly trained operators in combat roles that might be of great use for propaganda purposes as previously indicated. This is in keeping with earlier studies that suggests the “American Way of War,” as coined by Russell Weigley, has difficulty incorporating SOF forces because of the longstanding preference for decisive engagement and the overwhelming application

of force.³⁰ Not only does this approach neglect other indirect, advisory, and covert capabilities of SOF, it does not take advantage of SOF's strength vis-à-vis conventional forces. There is a need for US policymakers to be educated consumers of SOF—allowing them to appreciate the certain finesse of SOF, rather than solely their mystique—so that their strategic utility is maximized in applicable operations: “[T]hose missions where the penalty for failure is high and only specially selected, trained, and equipped men can succeed—where the national policy demands a tailored response rather than brute force.”³¹ In short, there is the need for policymakers to understand the complete spectrum of SOF capabilities so they can determine why and what resources should remain under government control.

Second, the savvy of policymakers as educated consumers of the SOF resource has direct implications for PSC contracting. Despite studies suggesting that power and authority are moving away from the state in an era of globalization, characterized by the growth of non-state actors and transnational markets, the particular role of the state in shaping and managing the PSC industry is still important.³² Authors Norrin Ripsman and T. V. Paul contend, the powerful—states with ample resources and influence—are more likely to be impacted by, and have a greater ability to respond to, international shifts and developments differently: “It makes no sense to assume that transnational phenomena will affect the weak and the small, the strong and secure equally.”³³

Because the United States is such a large player in the PSC marketplace, in terms of being where most PSCs reside and for generating the greatest demand for their services, it is crucial in determining “the market’s ecology” related to PSCs.³⁴ However, to date, the United States has not exercised its market power. It has largely accepted what the PSCs have had to offer—in particular the services provided by former SOF personnel—rather than taking an active role in questioning whether this is the best use of the SOF resources. It has not closely assessed, on a contract-per-contract basis, whether the SOF resource even need be employed to support various contingencies. Of much greater impact is the fact that the United States has not introduced consistent qualitative regulation for US-based PSC personnel or companies that would, appropriately, set the official parameters for professionalism, capability, and human rights observance. Consciously undertaking these steps, rather than allowing the PSC industry to determine what is offered, would permit US policymakers to exercise “the mechanism through which the preferred model of [PSC] professionalism is communicated.”³⁵

Conclusion

General Schoomaker, the US Army Chief of Staff, warns that while SOF may be the ideal strategic resource for contemporary challenges, SOF

must nevertheless identify the constantly changing nature of said challenges: “USSOCOM faces an operational environment characterized by accelerating geopolitical change, rapid technological advancement, evolving threats, constrained resources, and potential new roles. These factors necessitate innovative thinking and new ways to shape change if we are to maintain the widest array of options for protecting America’s interests.”³⁶ PSCs should be added to this list of factors for US officials, military and civilian alike, to consider and manage. This is not to say that the PSC industry should not exist. It will be difficult for the “genie” to be shoved back into the bottle to a point that the state monopoly on violence is again predominant. Moreover, attempting to do so would deny access to the private sector’s options on versatility and innovation that is critical to the ongoing Global War on Terrorism.³⁷ Nevertheless, steps should be taken to assess how the PSC industry functions and sustains itself. Otherwise, other methods implemented by the United States to keep the SOF resource from slipping into private sector hands may not suffice, while adding to the ire of conventional forces. While the United States is experiencing greater reliance on SOF, and as such, is encountering the dilemmas posed by growth of private security companies, it is also in the unique position to act in such a manner as to establish the appropriate balance between the public and private sectors with regard to the future of these organizations.

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For this article, the term private security company (PSC), rather than private military company (PMC), is employed because companies conduct a hybrid of policing and military tasks. This is in light of the environments in which these companies are frequently employed (conflict/violence prone weak states in the developing world) and the actual effects the companies may have in these environments. Moreover, the main goal in all cases is to make something or someone more secure. As such, the term PSC is more appropriate in the cumulative sense.

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