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## Special Operations Forces<sup>1</sup> & Private Security Companies

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Christopher Spearin

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the potential role of private security companies as part of a global special forces network. It reveals three factors that may influence the utility of such companies: (1) the industry's largely defensive focus; (2) the implications of serving a humanitarian and development clientele; and (3) the challenges of retired special forces personnel moving to the private sector.

Western states frequently use the word “network” to describe contemporary military dynamics. Not only are special forces beneficiaries of this reference, they are often proponents for it. These forces are ideally suited for networks given their “specialness” and flexibility at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. They have a relatively small footprint, whether in the context of budgets, “boots on the ground,” or with respect to much larger and more expensive conventional forces.

While these factors are often beneficial, national special forces organizations recognize their quantitative and qualitative shortcomings, especially as they increasingly become a “force of choice.” Thus, there is a perceived need to develop a network of like-minded actors. The US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has led the way in response to these pressures and, relatedly, to the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance. For instance, the objective of 2012 International Special Operations Forces Conference was to solidify USSOCOM's prominence and allow others to “gain a better understanding on how to become active members of that network.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in 2013, the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), alongside experts and practitioners from other countries, held a conference on “The Role of the Global SOF Network in a Resource Constrained Environment.”<sup>3</sup>

While these ventures are, in part, about international interoperability, they are also about reaching out and understanding other, non-national, players such as private security companies. Indeed, these firms participated in the JSOU endeavor. Conceiving them as part of a

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1 To facilitate readability, the term “special forces” is used here instead of “special operations forces” or “SOF” and does not refer to a specific country's command or organization, unless indicated. The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Canadian Department of National Defence or the government of Canada.

2 Nigel Chamberlain, “Networks of Special Forces Worldwide,” *NATO Watch*, June 18, 2012, <http://www.natowatch.org/node/728>.

3 The irony is that some of these developing ties between national special forces may be bureaucratic and rule-based rather than based on relationships, thus potentially negating network flexibility. The author wishes to thank Dr. Jessica Glicken Turnley for raising this point. Please see Jessica Glicken Turnley, “Implications for Network-Centric Warfare,” *JSOU Report 06-3* (Joint Special Operations University, March 2006).

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global special forces network speaks both to the seeming ubiquity of the private security industry and the challenges special forces, especially the US variety, currently encounter. Such a conception, however, also raises some questions. What are the assumed and actual links between these forces and private security companies? Are the ways in which these firms construct security a hindrance or an asset to special forces?

This article answers these questions. First, the article identifies linkages and similarities between these two actors. It underscores why one might think private security companies are appropriate for this network. The goal is not to rehearse the various supply, demand, and ideational rationales contributing to the rise in prominence of both—others have done this sufficiently.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the article illustrates the unique organizational character and people-centric nature of each actor. It also reveals that although companies are increasingly seen as security experts in their own right, there are significant relationships with special forces.

The article's second part is inspired by a recent assessment concerning how nodal security dynamics have to be "imagined before they can be enacted." This article's goal is not to advocate. Instead, it is to consider how firms might enhance special forces given their "strategic interests, tools, resources, and ways of thinking."<sup>5</sup> In so doing, the article moves beyond *replacing* military forces with private security organizations as was often the case in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it examines the prospects for independent cooperation and interaction and what private presence, made real through contracts with other types of actors, means for special forces.

As such, this second part focuses on three matters. One, it reveals how, because of the industry's largely defensive focus, firms exercise a particular form of territorial control on behalf of corporate clients—a type of control that differs from the approach of special forces. While the private security company stance helps businesses function, the security and welfare of local populations is not its immediate concern. This shortfall may, or may not, affect the desired outcome from the perspective of special forces. Two, it contends that, although private security companies may draw their skillsets and notions of professionalism from the state, they also rely on other actors. In particular, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide private companies both financial opportunities and enhanced status as legitimate security actors. However, appealing to such an audience may reduce the likelihood of private companies interacting with special forces due to sensitivities. Finally, it is plain that the movement of military personnel to the private sphere

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4 Alastair Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror: Warfare by Other Means* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Anthony King, "The Special Air Service and the Concentration of Military Power," *Armed Forces & Society* 35, no. 4 (July 2009): 646–666; Deborah Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

5 Patrick Cullen, "Privatized Maritime Security Governance in War-torn Sierra Leone," in *Maritime Private Security: Market Responses to Piracy, Terrorism and Waterborne Security Risks in the 21st Century*, eds. Claude Berube and Patrick Cullen (New York: Routledge, 2012), 107.

6 Similarly, the article does not consider the operational and strategic implications stemming from this state employment. Indeed, assessments of private security company activity range from the positive to the negative. See, for example, Erik Prince, *Civilian Warriors: The Inside Story of Blackwater and the Unsung Heroes of the War on Terror* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013); Swiss Peace, *Private Security Companies and Local Populations: An Exploratory Study of Afghanistan and Angola*, November 2007.

places manpower policies under stress. Just as states responded earlier this century with retention measures that pressured defense budgets, similar measures may again be warranted as the fear of special forces burnout grows and the private sphere alternative remains.

## Organizing for Violence

### *Special Forces*

Historically, conventional commanders have often pushed special forces to the periphery. This trend speaks to Jeffrey Legro's description of military cultures: "[B]eliefs and norms about the optimal means to fight wars are important because they have a pervasive impact on the preferences and actions of both armies and states."<sup>7</sup> Conventional forces' concerns are evident in several ways: (1) special forces take skilled manpower away from conventional forces; (2) they conduct "sideshow operations," though their increasing prominence and importance in the contemporary environment may be leading to attitudinal change; (3) "specialness" implies that conventional forces are somehow not special, and; (4) as both a cause and effect of organizational separation, they feature social dynamics with a lower degree of formality compared to conventional forces.<sup>8</sup> It is telling that, in a pejorative fashion, special forces have been referred to as "private armies" because of their relative independence and unique attributes.<sup>9</sup>

As such, these organizations stand apart from conventional elements in following attributes: (1) quality is better than quantity;<sup>10</sup> (2) they cannot be mass produced; (3) competent special forces cannot be created after emergencies occur; and (4) humans are more important than hardware. Focusing, for now, on the latter attribute does not mean these forces are anti-technology. Instead, to borrow an old phrase, technology equips special forces; they do not man the technology. Special forces in Iraq and Afghanistan capitalized on technologies characteristic of the Revolution of Military Affairs, and its reliance on unmanned aerial vehicles, intelligence infrastructures, and stealth capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Technology helps them stand out as "special" and assists them in completing their often sensitive tasks.

In contrast, conventional forces are usually organized, defined, and distinguished by, or around, certain military platforms such as tanks, aircraft, and ships. This difference is more than functional adaptation

7 Jeffrey W. Legro, "Military Culture and Inadvertent Escalation in World War II," *International Security* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 109.

8 Anthony King, "The Special Air Service and the Concentration of Military Power," *Armed Forces & Society* 35, no. 4 (July 2009): 647; Matthew Johnson, "The Growing Relevance of Special Operations Forces in U.S. Military Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 25, no. 4 (October–November 2006): 274; Bernd Horn, "When Cultures Collide: The Conventional Military/SOF Chasm," *Canadian Military Journal* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 3–16.

9 Finlan, *Special Forces*, 4.

10 The author would like to acknowledge a reviewer's point that with post-Cold War downsizing, increasing emphasis has been placed on "quality over quantity" in the US Army. This comment likely relates to more than doing "better with what is left" in conventional forces; it speaks to increased professionalization and socio-political rationales about when and how force is to be applied. In this vein and in the larger Western context, conventional forces may increasingly be developing SOF characteristics, at least at the tactical level. Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11 John R. Lindsay, "Reinventing the Revolution: Technological Visions, Counterinsurgent Criticism, and the Rise of Special Operations," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013): 422–453.

and recognition that humans need machines to operate in austere environments like the sea and air.<sup>12</sup> It is representative of an “armament culture,” a normative predilection among Western states favoring capital-intensive militaries over labor-intensive ones.<sup>13</sup> The formative cultural effect is no small one because, as Alastair Finlan describes, “military institutions have artificially created the reality that permeates the day-to-day life of its personnel, from the social space in which they work to the psychological realm that binds them together.”<sup>14</sup> At state level, the pursuit and possession of expensive military platforms goes beyond merely responding to the capabilities and challenges offered by adversaries. These instruments of violence symbolize modernity; they are indicative of membership in the prestigious club of statehood.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that special forces are becoming increasingly important is significant because of some high hurdles. During the Cold War, some scholars suggested weaning Western militaries off their “baroque” military technology would demand nothing less than “institutional change at every level: within the armed forces, within the wider geopolitical system, within the defence industry, and within the economy as a whole.”<sup>16</sup> Today, though “big” armies, navies, and air forces are far from gone; the trends and developments mentioned earlier underscore change. While these solutions did perceive change through the rise of less hierarchical, less capital-intensive structures and relationships, they emphasized the labor-intensive alternative largely in terms of mass. Special forces, in contrast, follow the principle that “quality is better than quantity.” As we shall see, this qualitative emphasis resonates among private security companies.

### *Private Security Companies*

Whereas special forces are, for some, at the edges of the state’s infrastructure to apply sanctioned violence, private security companies stand outside the structure altogether. While they possess many military skillsets, they are not permanent or official fixtures in a state’s apparatus. These companies, as a result, can tap into the neoliberal rhetoric of commercial firms being adaptable, innovative, and cost effective compared to state actors. They also tap into the rationales that other actors should increasingly be responsible for their own security.<sup>17</sup> Hence, firms access a client-base beyond the state, one that includes international organizations, NGOs, and corporations. It literally pays, therefore, to be on the outside.

Unlike other commercial fields, however, being on the outside is controversial and politically contested. To be sure, civilians have an

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12 The author would like to acknowledge a reviewer’s point that the US Army also advocates “equipping the man.” Indeed, unlike naval and air forces, there exists a tension within armies among the infantry, artillery, and cavalry/tank forces.

13 Robin Luckham, “Of Arms and Culture,” *Current Research on Peace and Violence* 7, no. 1 (1984): 1–64.

14 Finlan, *Special Forces*, 85.

15 Ibid., 97; Edward A. Kolodziej, “National Security and Modernization: Drive Wheels of Militarization,” *Arms Control* 6, no. 1 (May 1985): 17–40; Alexander Wendt and Michael Barnett, “Dependent State Formation and Third World Militarization,” *Review of International Studies* 19, no. 4 (October 1993): 321–347.

16 Mary Kaldor, *The Baroque Arsenal* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982), 220.

17 Christopher Spearin, “Against the Current? Somali Pirates, Private Security, and American Responsibility,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 31, no. 3 (December 2010): 553–568.

important role in military operations. Acknowledging longstanding practice, Article 4A of the Third Geneva Convention (1949) recognizes the legality of civilians accompanying armed forces. Yet while mercenaries were once commonplace, functional developments related to training and equipment and normative shifts regarding who should apply violence, and to what ends, led to their decline over the nineteenth century. Indeed, we can now speak of an “anti-mercenary norm.”<sup>18</sup> A private security company’s use of violence, therefore, does not fall neatly between binary distinctions: (1) the aforementioned convention and the Law of Armed Conflict; (2) strategic studies and international relations studies which privilege states and their militaries; and (3) Weberian bureaucratic notions about the role of the state vis-à-vis legitimate violence. The challenge for private companies, as we shall see, is how to be recognized as important security actors, and be conceived as legitimate in security activities, while skirting the pejorative mercenary label.<sup>19</sup>

Like special forces, private security companies are not platform-centric. One can approach this principle from two angles, the first being cost. With sophisticated, high-technology military platforms doubling in price perhaps every seven to eight years, most firms are not financially able to absorb purchase, basing, operating, and maintenance costs. If profit streams are uncertain and costs not recoupable, firms will adopt a service rather than hardware model to reduce overhead.<sup>20</sup> Some experts describe commercial dynamics this way: “Additional personnel and equipment are only procured on a case-by-case basis—usually after a contract with a client has been signed—allowing these firms to run their operations with limited capital outlays.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, relying on smaller weaponry and utilizing personnel not optimized for (and limited to) operating certain platforms arguably allows for greater commercial opportunities.<sup>22</sup> For the second angle, states have long dominated the management and dispersion of major weapon systems for both geo-strategic reasons and to ensure state control over the possession and movement of weapons deemed significant (recall the armament culture above).<sup>23</sup> In short, military entrepreneurship is strongly bounded by economic disincentives and state control; platform availability for private security companies is constrained.

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18 Sarah Percy, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Diana Panke and Ulrich Petersohn, “Why International Norms Disappear Sometimes,” *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 4 (2011): 719–742.

19 Kaldor, *The Baroque Arsenal*, 220; Adam Roberts, *Nations in Arms: The Theory and Practice of Territorial Defence* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976).

20 Kaldor, *The Baroque Arsenal*, 193; Armin Krishnan, *War as Business: Technological Change and Military Service Contracting* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 151, 171.

21 Peter Chalk, “Maritime Terrorism: Scope, Dimensions and Potential Threat Contingencies,” in *Maritime Private Security: Market responses to piracy, terrorism and waterborne security risks in the 21st century*, eds. Claude Berube and Patrick Cullen (New York: Routledge, 2012), 166.

22 Eric Fredland and Adrian Kendry, “The Privatisation of Military Force: Economic Virtues, Vices and Government Responsibility,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (Autumn/Winter 1999): 152, 163.

23 Owen Greene and Nicholas Marsh, “Governance and Small Arms and Light Weapons,” in *Small Arms, Crime and Conflict: Global governance and the threat of armed violence*, eds. Owen Greene and Nicholas Marsh (New York: Routledge, 2012), 168; Nicholas Marsh, “The Tools of Insurgency: A Review of the Role of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Warfare” in *Small Arms, Crime and Conflict: Global governance and the threat of armed violence*, eds. Owen Greene and Nicholas Marsh (New York: Routledge, 2012), 26.

### *Relationships*

It is important not to overdraw the distinction between states and private security companies, at least in terms of expertise, because “private security actors often obtain legitimacy precisely from their connections to the state.”<sup>24</sup> Put differently, security professionals are individuals, “who gain their legitimacy of and power over defining policy problems from trained skills and knowledge and from continuously using these in their work.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, notions of the industry’s professionalism often draw explicitly on previous service for and training by the state. In fact, a trade-marked logo for the firm Triple Canopy is “Quiet Professionals, Still Serving®.”<sup>26</sup>

Here a number of the “organic” connections between state-organized special forces and private security companies are evident. First, upon retirement, many special forces officers have formed their own companies. For example, Sir David Stirling, one of the British Special Air Service’s (SAS) founders in the Second World War, established Watchguard International in 1967, arguably the precursor firm to today’s industry. As well, Alastair Morrison, decorated for his part in the 1977 Mogadishu Lufthansa hostage rescue, upon leaving the British SAS, formed Defence Systems Limited. This firm was one of the formative parts of ArmorGroup. Gordon Conroy, a former Australian SAS commander, created Unity and former members of the Swedish Special Forces created Scandinavian Special Projects (now Vesper Group) and Scandinavian Risk Solutions. Similarly, Triple Canopy and Trident Group derive their “parentage,” in order, from Delta Force and US Navy SEALs.

Second, if not forming companies, officers, particularly those of high rank, often accept executive leadership positions. For instance, General Peter Schoomaker (retired) and Admiral Eric T. Olsen (retired), both one-time USSOCOM commanders, serve on the boards of directors for DynCorp International and Mission Essential respectively. Similarly, Lieutenant-General Sir Cedric Delves and Major-General John Holmes, two retired former British DSOs (Director Special Operations), are correspondingly directors for Olive Group and Erinys. As another example, Brigadier Aldwin Wight, formerly head of the British SAS, worked as the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Kroll Security International. Finally, firms often locate their offices and recruitment centers near special forces bases. Vinnell has offices close to USSOCOM in Tampa and Military Professional Resources, Inc., and K2 Solutions, Inc., are close to Fort Bragg, the home of US Army Special Operations Command. AKE and GardaWorld, among others, have offices around Hereford, home to the British SAS.

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24 Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams, “Securing the City: Private Security Companies and Non-State Authority in Global Governance,” in *Mercenaries, Pirates, Bandits, and Empires: Private Violence in Historical Context*, eds. Alejandro Colas and Bryan Mabee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 216.

25 Jef Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU* (London: Routledge, 2006), 8–9.

26 Paul Higate, “Cowboys and Professionals?: The Politics of Identity Work in the Private and Military Security Company,” *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (January 2012): 334. See also this website: <http://www.triplecanopy.com/careers/>.

This special forces cachet in the private security industry has both functional and associative rationales. Functionally, special forces personnel frequently come with desirable skillsets: advanced educations, language abilities, and considerable field experience.<sup>27</sup> What is more, the small team organization characteristic of special forces translates well in the private security context. It promotes self-reliance in challenging environments, especially those in which back-up forces, whether they are from the public or private sphere, may not be forthcoming. It values flexibility and innovation in tasks such as close protection. Similarly, an appreciation of austere environments helps firms in advising clients about travel routings and securing their facilities.<sup>28</sup>

As for association, the link between special forces and private security companies serves to substantiate firms and heighten their allure. While not all companies possess a special forces pedigree, examinations of contractors reveal that many transfer their professional understandings and standards to the private sector.<sup>29</sup> Claiming this pedigree, therefore, helps to instill in the minds of potential clients that the industry does *possess* security expertise and that it is a *heralded* expertise. Indeed, experts such as Finlan note that special forces hold a dominant place in Western culture and in appreciations of military expertise. They worry that descriptions of these forces as the “perfect soldiers” advance a mythology rather than an accurate picture of reality.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, this image is a marketing boon for firms. It allows Rubicon International, for instance, to reflect on its SAS-trained personnel: “[T]hey are the *crème de la crème*.” In this vein, the observation underscoring Maersk’s reputation as the “Tiffany of shipping companies,” is that it only hires companies employing former US Navy SEALs.<sup>31</sup>

## Private Security Companies and Special Forces

### *Control*

Though Western states increasingly wish to pursue strategic objectives in many parts of the world through less costly political and economic means (indeed, US Special Operations Forces alone are in as many as 75 countries), different forms of territorial control, and their associated benefits and tradeoffs, are clear. As one scholar noted, the control of territorial space relates to three components: “[O]ne may deny control to others, one may take it for oneself, and one may subsequently exercise it.” In a context in which special forces are less and less

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27 Arguably, special forces personnel, particularly those with considerable experience, may be more attuned to the development and value of networks compared to conventional personnel. The author recognizes Dr. William Mitchell of Royal Danish Defence College for this observation.

28 “U.S. Military Spending Heavily to Keep Experienced Commandos,” *International Herald Tribune*, October 11, 2007.; “Paramilitary: The Civilian Security Experts,” *Strategy Page*, September 29, 2006, <http://www.strategypage.com/htm/htpara/articles/20060929.aspx>; United States, Government Accountability Office, “Rebuilding Iraq: Actions Needed to Improve Use of Private Security Providers,” *GAO-05-737* (July 2005), 36, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05737.pdf>; David Isenberg, “Corporate Mercenaries - Part 1: Profit Comes with a Price,” *Asia Times*, May 19, 2004..

29 Kateri Carmola, *Private Security Contractors and New Wars: Risk, Law, and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 30.

30 Finlan, *Special Forces*, 5–7.

31 Pratap Chatterjee, “Ex-SAS Men Cash in on Iraq Bonanza,” *Corpwatch*, 9 June 2004, <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=11355>; Sandra I. Erwin, “War on Somali Pirates: Big Business and Growing,” *National Defense Magazine*, August 14, 2012.



operating in support of, or alongside, an intervening conventional force, emphasis is on the first component in the direct sense, made plain in the inability of adversaries to secure key personnel and infrastructure.<sup>32</sup> The second component is problematic, especially over time, because of limited numbers and it follows the third is even more difficult. It is only indirectly, through Foreign Internal Defense measures (FID), that local security sectors are mentored, often by special forces, to control space across the three components. In sum, for Paul Rogers, endeavors such as those stressing special forces are, at best, “liddism... keeping the lid on rather than reducing the heat.”<sup>33</sup>

When considering how territorial control is exercised in a global special forces network, private security companies do offer a different approach. Firms emphasize the “one may subsequently exercise it” aspect because of the industry’s defensive focus. While private security companies arguably first came to prominence in the 1990s because of South Africa’s Executive Outcomes, a firm that controlled space in all three manners, the industry has developed a strong defensive identity. Past analysis has revealed the various ingredients instilling the defensive mindset: (1) the desire of private security companies to avoid the pejorative “mercenary” label and its “offensive” activities; (2) the wish of clients to deny that they use mercenaries; (3) the underscoring by state clients and their militaries, particularly, that there are certain things the private sector does not do; and (4) the iterative development of codes of conduct, best practices, and operating principles by industry, states, and nongovernmental organizations.<sup>34</sup> Admittedly, these firms do employ violence. Yet, there is a doctrinal difference for private security companies between the defensive and the offensive: “Operations in which forces await for the approach of the enemy before attacking” over “Operations in which forces seek out the enemy in order to attack him.”<sup>35</sup> Put differently, companies exercise control in support of their clients; they benefit from others first taking control.

Such an approach would not necessarily preclude firms working for corporate clients to share intelligence with special forces in country. But it would mean that they would not be operating too far away from their compounds and clients, and doing so in a defensive mode. While control of territory might be more permanent compared to direct special forces action, the security constructed by private security companies might be just as limited in scope.

Moreover, when looking at corporate clients, especially those working in extraction industries, they not only operate in sometimes unstable environments, they are strategically interested in a resource in the first instance rather than in a people. These two may combine

32 Lukas Milevski, “*Fortissimus Inter Pars: The Utility of Landpower in Grand Strategy*,” *Parameters* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 7

33 Paul Rogers, “Security by ‘Remote Control’. Can it work?” *RUSI Journal* 158, no. 3 (June/July 2013): 14.

34 Gary Schaub, Jr., and Volker Franke, “Contractors as Military Professionals?” *Parameters* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2009–2010): 98, 101; Elke Krahnmann, “The United States, PMSCs and the State Monopoly on Violence: Leading the Way Towards Norm Change,” *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 1 (February 2013): 53–71; Andrew Bearpark, “The Case for Humanitarian Organizations to Use Private Security Contractors,” in *Modern Warfare: Armed Groups, Private Militaries, Humanitarian Organizations and the Law*, ed. Benjamin Perrin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 159.

35 United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, “British Maritime Doctrine,” *BR1806, Third Edition*, 2004, 252, 278.

geographically, or people may migrate to seek protection and opportunity, thus providing a potential locus for governance expansion or hearts and minds activities. However, this may not always be the case. Additionally, extraction efforts may be good for a state's tax base, but they do not necessarily mean that significant numbers of people will receive the required resources or physical protection.<sup>36</sup> Without other beneficial factors, when security is made both a commodity and set spatially, there will be winners and losers as Peter W. Singer describes: "[N]ot only are the worst threats deflected from the privately protected areas, but also those portions of society that cannot afford protection have to rely on declining, unstable, or nonexistent public means."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Anna Leander identifies a resulting "Swiss cheese" approach towards security. Though companies may not have created these gaps, it is likely they will remain unfilled as security provisions serve particular purposes with particular targets.<sup>38</sup> These private security companies' responsibilities and techniques arguably equate to a different variant of liddism on their own. In imagining a special forces network that includes private security companies, this may, or may not, be part of the desired outcome from the perspective of special forces.

### Contact

It is debatable, however, whether firms might interact with special forces in all instances, thus impacting the efficacy of a global network. While scholars have warned that the very flexibility of networks means that relationships between nodes are transitory and ad hoc, there is also the possibility that nodal connections will be denied in the first place.

To explain, among the range of clients, relations with humanitarian and development NGOs are among the most sensitive. While surveys have found that a significant number of NGOs utilize contractors for security reviews if not for protection, many organizations will not publicly acknowledge their interactions with these companies.<sup>39</sup> Analysts and NGOs alike have identified a number of concerns. The former's adoption of a "hardened" security mindset, especially one involving weaponry, cuts against longstanding protective techniques (e.g., consent, following the humanitarian ethic, living in solidarity among the people in need, etc.). There is fear that private security companies may usurp NGO roles or adopt the humanitarian moniker disingenuously. There is also worry that these companies may impact negatively upon NGO

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36 William Reno, "Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars," in *Greed & Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, eds. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 43–68; Kalevi Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82–122.

37 Singer, *Corporate Warriors*, 227.

38 Anna Leander, "The Market for Force and Public Security: The Destabilizing Consequences of Private Military Companies," *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 5 (September 2005): 617; Cullen, "Privatized maritime security governance," 101.

39 Among the NGO field offices surveyed in 2007 by the Overseas Development Institute, 35 percent reported using international PMSCs. P.W. Singer estimates that 25 percent of "high end" PMSCs have humanitarian clients. Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Victoria DiDomenico, "The use of private security providers and services in humanitarian operations," Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, HPG Report 27, September 2008, 9; P. W. Singer, "Humanitarian principles, private military agents: some implications of the privatised military industry for the humanitarian community", in *Resetting the Rules of Engagement: Trends and Issues in Military-Humanitarian Relations*, eds. Victoria Wheeler and Adele Harmer, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, HPG Report 22, March 2006, 70.

independence and neutrality given their relations with other clients, both in and outside of a country of operations.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, private security interactions with NGOs have several rationales as captured by José L. Gómez del Prado, the former chairperson of the United Nations Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries: “Counting humanitarian agencies as clients has multiple advantages for such companies as enhancing their reputation, providing distance from the mercenary label, and gaining a foothold in a potentially lucrative market.”<sup>41</sup> Building on this, in crass economic terms, with the rising insecurity of NGO personnel in recent years (though the catalysts for this augmentation are a source of debate), private security companies may be an alternative security solution.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, just as special forces are now a focal point with the major interventions of the 21st century winding down and Western governments applying themselves less but still desiring to manage risk, one might also see increased reliance on NGOs. At the extreme, one might witness the return of another form of liddism: the 1990s “humanitarian alibi” featured reliance on NGOs so states could avoid taking essential political measures.<sup>43</sup> Just as this alibi sparked some of the initial interest in NGO and private security company interactions, contemporary developments may see its heightening.

As a result, companies with, or desiring of, a humanitarian clientele may set limits on the degree to which they would interact with special forces given the tensions inherent in private security company dynamism discussed earlier. Firms, as noted elsewhere, relate to “the worlds of the military, the business world and the humanitarian NGO”.<sup>44</sup> While private security companies may easily move among these “worlds” and may evoke different imagery depending on the audience, they will ultimately be judged by their actions.<sup>45</sup> Given, as Ken Livingstone and Jerry Hart offer, that “[d]eveloping a positive and attractive image is central to the private security sector’s bid for professional status,” respecting the

40 Christopher Spearin, “Private, Armed, and Humanitarian? States, NGOs, International Private Security Companies and Shifting Humanitarianism,” *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 4 (August 2008): 363–382; Birth Anders, “The Relationship between NGOs and PMSCs and its Impact on Coordinating Actors in Complex Operations,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 2 (May 2013): 278–294; Benjamin Perrin, “Private Security Companies and Humanitarian Organizations: Implications for International Humanitarian Law,” in *Modern Warfare: Armed Groups, Private Militaries, Humanitarian Organizations and the Law*, ed. Benjamin Perrin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2012), 123–156.

41 José L. Gómez del Prado, “A United Nations Instrument to Regulate and Monitor Private Military and Security Contractors,” *Notre Dame Journal of International, Comparative, and Human Rights Law* 1, no. 1 (2011): 40.

42 Perrin, “Private Security Companies,” 129; Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Victoria DiDomenico, “Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: 2009 Update,” Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, HPG Policy Brief 34, April 2009; Olga Khazan, “Where it’s Most Dangerous to be an Aid Worker,” *Washington Post*, December 26, 2012.

43 Language taken from Larry Minear, “Humanitarian Action and Peacekeeping Operations,” *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (1997), <http://www.jha.ac/articles/a018.htm>. The humanitarian alibi is the antithesis of recent integrated whole of government solutions (in which both NGOs and PMSCs also played contracted roles).

44 Carmola, *Private Security Contractors*, 27; Joakim Berndtsson, “Security Professionals for Hire: Exploring the Many Faces of Private Security Expertise,” *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (January 2012): 305.

45 Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, “Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes—Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements,” in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, eds. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 6; Jutta Joachim and Andrea Schneider, “New Humanitarians? Frame Appropriation through Private Military and Security Companies,” *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (January 2012): 367; Berndtsson, “Security Professionals for Hire,” 305.

concerns of humanitarians is valuable.<sup>46</sup> Private security company interaction with special forces through a nonclient relationship would lead to a collision between these worlds, one which might bring about further closing of the humanitarian space rather than at least contributing to its stabilization.<sup>47</sup> The potential for NGO independence to be compromised and for special forces to influence humanitarian action through companies would be problematic factors at best in terms of advancing a global special forces network. Put differently, firms may have derived some of their skillsets from the state, but one cannot assume that they, in all cases, are still serving state endeavors to the letter.

### *Manpower*

While one might argue that the recent expansion of special forces the world-over means that this node is healthy, this stance is debatable. USSOCOM leaders, for instance, revealed in 2011 that since 11 September 2001, though the command's manpower had doubled, the actual number of personnel overseas had quadrupled. Additionally, with conventional forces withdrawing from Afghanistan, the expectation is that special forces' responsibilities will increase. The growing quality of life issues and fear of burnout, not only among the US SOF community but also in those of other allied countries, are significant concerns.<sup>48</sup> They underscore the network emphasis noted at this article's beginning.

However, emphasizing private security companies as part of the special forces network may exacerbate the very pressures USSOCOM and others wish to alleviate. Certainly, on the one hand, security professionals may be able to move among the nodes, bringing their expertise with them but also conforming to the operational boundaries of individual nodes. A 2010 RAND study even suggested employment with a private security company might be viewed as part of an overall career path for military personnel.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, when considering the aforementioned special forces attributes, zero-sum dynamics are evident with personnel movement from special forces to the private sector. If quality is important, if mass production is out of the question, and if standing forces are required to house experience and maturity, the potential for private employment, alone or alongside other factors, creates a vacuum difficult to fill. At the very least, it upsets the honed small team dynamics drilled over time (and at considerable expense to state coffers).

In the not so distant past, burnout concerns coupled with private security opportunities catalyzed special forces retention efforts. These efforts attempted to deny companies of manpower for the sake of self-preservation; governments were tasking special forces to do more

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46 Ken Livingstone and Jerry Hart, "The Wrong Arm of the Law? Public Images of Private Security," *Policing and Society* 13, no. 2 (2003): 161.

47 Humanitarian space: an environment where humanitarians can work without hindrance and follow the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and humanity. Christopher Spearin, "Private Security Companies and Humanitarians: A Corporate Solution to Securing Humanitarian Spaces?" *International Peacekeeping* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 22.

48 Spencer Ackerman, "Special Ops Forces Could Use A Breather: Commander," February 9, 2011. Alison McMeekin, "SAS Death in Afghanistan Raises Workload Question," *Herald Sun*, July 3, 2012. "Hidden Casualties," *Strategy Page*, July 12, 2011, <http://www.strategypage.com/html/htsf/20110712.aspx>.

49 Sarah Cotton et al., "Hired Guns: Views About Armed Contractors in Operation Iraqi Freedom," *MG-987-SRF*, RAND Corporation, 2010, xiv.

and more in major interventions involving conventional forces. As an example, in the United Kingdom, SAS personnel received a 50 percent pay increase in 2006. Also in 2006, Canada increased allowances for JTF2 personnel. Later, in 2009, Canada replaced the JTF2 allowances with a Special Operations Allowance covering a wider range of Canadian personnel. As for the United States, officials employed both the carrot and the stick over the first decade of the 21st century. There were stop-loss years preventing the retirement of certain military personnel and the then Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, even mused about noncompete clauses in government contracts that would dissuade firms from luring active duty military personnel. There also were initiatives focusing on retirement benefits, salaries, bonuses, and educational incentives.

Today, USSOCOM recognition that private security companies are potentially part of a larger network implies that the genie cannot be stuffed back into the bottle. Companies have a perceived utility (though one should note the limitations and boundaries identified above). However, the special forces highlighting of private security companies reinforces the status of these firms as legitimate security actors and it arguably draws further attention to the industry as an employment opportunity. With burnout fears returning, this time because special forces are increasingly working in lieu of, rather than alongside, conventional forces, attention may again turn to additional remuneration and other retention measures.<sup>50</sup> Although care needs to be exercised, especially given the sky-rocketing costs of conventional military platforms, the heavily special forces-reliant alternative made real through a networked approach may not necessarily be at low expense—a troubling point for political and military officials in an era of austerity.

### Concluding Remarks

In 2012, Andrew Krepinevich of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments offered this observation, one arguably applicable across the Western context: “Just as defense budgets are declining, the price of projecting and sustaining military power is increasing and the range of interests requiring protection is expanding.”<sup>51</sup> The augmented reliance on special forces, and in turn the advancement of a global network in light of the resulting pressures, stem from such analysis.

This article suggests there are many connections—almost genetic links—between special forces and private security companies in the larger network. It is increasingly recognized there are social networks among different national special forces that allow for cooperation and integration. Some go so far as to suggest there is a wider special forces

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50 In the US case, for instance, the author already notes the bonus matrix, effective February 23, 2012, which emphasizes SOF specialties. Similarly, there was the 2011 internal “sensing” study on quality of life issues. See <http://www.militaryhub.com/article.cfm?id=409>; Gregg Zoroya, “Special Ops Commander Vows Better Life for 66,000 troops,” *USA Today*, February 16, 2012.

51 Andrew F. Krepinevich, “Strategy in a Time of Austerity: Why the Pentagon Should Focus on Assuring Access,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (November/December 2012): 58

culture.<sup>52</sup> If private security personnel indeed transfer their professional standards and norms to the private sector, one might argue private security companies are perfectly suitable for a global special forces network.

However, this network resides in the wider context of security governance.<sup>53</sup> States and their special forces are important, but they are not necessarily dominant in all cases. By deemphasizing state activism, one can reveal the varying dynamics by which security is made real, in what ways, and for whom.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in order to realize what firms might have to offer, one must consider the following: (1) how contractors construct security and for what reasons; (2) how they rely on others for both commercial opportunities and legitimacy enhancing arrangements; and (3) how the personnel linkages between special forces and private security companies may impinge on the former in an era of austerity *and* increased special forces usage. As indicated above, the private security defensive focus, the importance of relations with NGOs, and zero-sum manpower dynamics together highlight a lack of *universal* congruity vis-à-vis special forces. Certainly, a lack of shared vision and tactics may facilitate complementarity, but it may also reinforce division. This possibility builds upon the opinion offered by one retired US General that “[t]he profit motive never aligns 100 percent with the public interest.”<sup>55</sup>

While there clearly are limitations and challenges in considering private security companies as partners in a broader special forces network, one should not completely discount the possibility. Instead, such networks should not be viewed as crystallized, but rather as phenomena in which the nodes “simultaneously cooperate and compete within the field of security delivery.”<sup>56</sup> Incorporating private security companies as part of this network should be done with eyes wide open.

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52 King, “The Special Air Service,” 659; Anthony King, “The internationalization of the armed forces,” in *Managing Military Organizations: Theory and Practice*, eds. Joseph Soeters, Paul C. van Fenema, and Robert Beeres (New York: Routledge, 2010), 49; Alastair Finlan, “The (Arrested) Development of UK Special Forces and the Global War on Terror,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 4 (October 2009): 978.

53 Elke Krahnemann, “Security governance and the private military industry in Europe and North America,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 5, no. 2 (August 2005): 247–268.

54 Patrick Cullen, “Private Security in International Politics: Deconstructing the State’s Monopoly of Security Governance,” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics, 2009.

55 Carmola, *Private Security Contractors*, 30.

56 Patrick Cullen, “Private Security Companies in the Malacca Straits: Mapping New Patterns in Security Governance,” in *Mercenaries, Pirates, Bandits, and Empires: Private Violence in Historical Context*, eds. Alejandro Colas and Bryan Mabee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 210.

