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Private Military & Security Companies: A Review Essay

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ABSTRACT: Research in private military and security companies has matured over the last fifteen years. This essay reviews past research and identifies three areas needing further attention; progress in these areas is critical for guiding security and defense policies and establishing effective regulations.

Private military and security companies became a topic of research in the early 1990s, and is a matter of great interest for academics, journalists, and practitioners alike.¹ While much progress has been made in studying this diverse industry, the field has many avenues that could benefit from further research. This article reviews past research and suggests a way ahead. It first identifies the major approaches taken thus far: the field has matured greatly; researchers have moved away from studying the industry as a whole, and now focus more on non-state clients and individual contractors and services rather than state-sponsored contracting. Second, the article identifies the field's most pressing research concerns, as well as how they can be pursued. Individual research projects are too often disconnected; establishing formal research networks among interested universities would facilitate cooperation and foster joint projects. Additionally, regular exchanges between practitioners and academics would greatly improve the quality of research output, and help to educate those working with private military contractors.

Prior Approaches

The field of private military and security companies is a relatively young one, though it evolved quickly over the last fifteen years. During that period, five general themes characterized the research: (1) the nature of the industry, (2) normative and ethical concerns (e.g., what should or should not be outsourced, with how much governmental control, and whether the use of armed contractors in lieu of soldiers was ethical), (3) the impact of private military contractors on civil-military relations and states control of violence, (4) non-state contracting, and (5) laws and regulation.

The field is clearly concerned with more than just armed security contractors. Obviously, the potential of armed contractors to use deadly force has given rise to important considerations regarding regulation and oversight. However, non-combat services—such as intelligence, security training, logistical support, and risk assessments—are also part of the industry. In fact, the term “private military companies” has evolved into broader terms such as “private military and security companies”

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1 The more inclusive term “private military and security company” is shortened hereafter to “private military contractors” for readability.

and “private security companies,” an evolution which also reflects developments within the industry. For instance, the first private military contractors to come to public attention in the 1990s were Executive Outcomes (South African) and Sandline International (British), both of which offered combat services.² However, as mentioned above, the industry now offers a broader range of services.³ Similarly, academic research once used typologies that categorized types of companies based on their proximity to the battlefield.⁴ Nonetheless, while distinguishing between private military companies and private security companies may work in theory, it remains difficult in practice. Contractors or firms develop different profiles based on the types of services they offer and their clients. Most prefer to call themselves “security” companies to avoid negative connotations associated with the term “military.”

Research activity in private military contractors has taken place in three chronological periods or waves: (1) from 1998 to 2003, (2) from 2004 to 2009, and (3) from 2010 to 2014. The first wave tried to describe the larger industry of contracting basic military services, and make sense of its evolving role in warfare.⁵ Discussion typically centered on the rise of contractors as non-state armies, and the potential end of the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence.

The second wave of research began after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and focused on the US government’s use of contractors.⁶ It was more concerned with finding solutions to practical problems than theoretical or normative issues.⁷ As the number of contractors decreased in Iraq, the “Iraq bubble” burst and the industry began to explore new markets in anti-piracy operations, maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and

2 For example, see Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), *Private Military Companies. Options for Regulation*, Green Paper (London: The Stationary Office. HC 577, February 2002), 10; Christopher Kinsey, “Private Security Companies: Agents of Democracy or Simply Mercenaries?” in *Private Military and Security Companies Chances, Problems, Pitfalls and Prospects*, eds. Thomas Jäger and Gerhard Kümmel (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), 87-104, 94f.

3 This does not mean there is no market for this – but offensive action is not a service offered by PMSCs. Sarah Percy makes a convincing argument about why companies moved away from selling combat services. Sarah Percy, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), see especially Chapter Seven.

4 Compare: Peter W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Gerhard Kümmel, *Die Privatisierung der Sicherheit: Fluch oder Segen? Postheroische Gesellschaft, überlasteter Staat und private Sicherheits- und Militärunternehmen* (Strausberg Sozialwiss. Inst. der Bundeswehr, 2004); Christopher Kinsey, *Private Contractors and the Reconstruction of Iraq: Transforming Military Logistics* (London: Routledge, 2009), 7.

5 For example David Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, Adelphi Paper 316 (New York: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998). Peter W. Singer, “Corporate Warriors. The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry and Its Ramifications for International Security,” *International Security* 26, no. 3 (2001): 186-220.

6 Compare: Peter W. Singer, “Warriors for Hire in Iraq,” *Brookings*, 2004; Congressional Budget Office, *Contractors’ Support of US Operations in Iraq* (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, August 2008); Moshe Schwartz and Joyprada Swain, *Department of Defense Contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq: Background and Analysis* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 2011); Christopher Kinsey, *Private Contractors and the Reconstruction of Iraq: Transforming Military Logistics* (London: Routledge, 2009); Deborah D. Avant and Lee Sigelman, “Private Security and Democracy: Lessons from the US in Iraq,” *Security Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 230-265; David Isenberg, *Shadow Force: Private Security Contractors in Iraq* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2009).

7 Christopher Kinsey and Malcolm Hugh Patterson, eds., *Contractors & War: The Transformation of US Expeditionary Operations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2012); Claude Berube and Patrick Cullen, eds., *Maritime Private Security: Market Responses to Piracy, Terrorism and Waterborne Security Risks in the 21st Century* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012)

other areas.⁸ The third wave commenced in 2010 and was characterized by themes that were more specific in nature, such as contractors' self-perceptions, mental health, and gender issues.⁹ A growing number of researchers also began addressing military-contractor cooperation. This research encompassed attitudes of soldiers towards contractors, their views about becoming contractors, contractor motivation, and military professionalism.¹⁰

While the main clients of contractors have been the governments of the United States and United Kingdom, the United Nations and many non-governmental organizations have also bought security services from private military contractors. In 1997, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan provoked public outcry by suggesting the organization ought to hire private security companies to carry out peacekeeping tasks and to administer refugee camps. However, the idea did not garner much support.¹¹ Nonetheless, researchers found that some UN bodies have indeed contracted services from private military contractors, though not to the extent suggested by Annan.¹² Non-governmental organizations are very cautious about admitting to the use of private security contractors, but they too have availed themselves of the industry's services.¹³

American scholars have been particularly good at adopting a practical "they're here to stay so let's deal with it" attitude, and the field could stand more of this way of thinking. To be sure, ethical and normative concerns are important. However, more research is needed in what is

8 Dominick Donald, *After the Bubble: British Private Security Companies After Iraq*, Whitehall Paper 66 (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2006). Compare: Krahmhann, *States, Citizens and the Privatisation of Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010); Molly Dunigan, *Victory for Hire: Private Security Companies' Impact on Military Effectiveness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). See also Laura A. Dickinson, *Outsourcing War & Peace: Preserving Public Values in a World of Privatized Foreign Affairs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Thomas C. Bruneau, *Patriots for Profit: Contractors and the Military in U.S. National Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

9 Molly Dunigan, et al., *Out of the Shadows: The Health and Well-Being of Private Contractors working in Conflict Environments* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2013); Paul Higate, "Cowboys and Professionals: The Politics of Identity Work in the Private Military and Security Company," *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (2012): 321-341; Jutta Joachim and Andrea Schneider, "Of 'True Professionals' and 'Ethical Hero Warriors': A Gender-Discourse Analysis of Private Military and Security Companies," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 6 (2012): 495-512; Claude Berube and Patrick Cullen, eds., *Maritime Private Security: Market Responses to Piracy, Terrorism and Waterborne Security Risks in the 21st Century* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Sarah Percy and Anja Shortland, "The Business of Piracy in Somalia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 4 (2013): 541-578.

10 See for example the article by Scott L. Efflandt in this issue. See also Gary Schaub, Jr., "Civilian Combatants, Military Professionals? American Officer Judgments," *Defence Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 369-386. Berndtsson writes more specifically about soldier-contractor interaction: Joakim Berndtsson, "Exploring PMC-military relations: Swedish Officers and the Private Security Sector in Peace Operations," *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 4 (2013): 484-501. Ryan Kelty and Darcy Schnack, "Attitudes on the Ground. What Soldiers Think about Civilian Contractors," in *Contractors & War: The Transformation of US Expeditionary Operations*, eds. Christopher Kinsey and Malcolm Hugh Patterson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 36-59. Kelty and Schnack not only examine soldiers' attitudes vis-à-vis contractors but also their interest to work as contractors in the future. Ulrich Petersohn, "The Other Side of the COIN: Private Security Companies and Counterinsurgency Operations," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no.10 (2011), 782-801.

11 Quoted in Michèle Griffin, "Blue Helmet Blues: Assessing the Trend Towards 'Subcontracting' UN Peace Operations," *Security Dialogue* 30, no. 1 (1999): 43-60, 48.

12 Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Victoria DiDomenico, *The Use of Private Security Providers and Services in Humanitarian Operations*, Humanitarian Policy Group Report 27 (London: Overseas Development Institute, October 2008); Åse Gilje Østensen, "In the Business of Peace: The Political Influence of Private Military and Security Companies on UN Peacekeeping," *International Peacekeeping* 20, no.1 (2013): 33-47, 36f.

13 For some of the challenges to PMSC-NGO cooperation, e.g. difference in their institutional culture, see Birthe Anders, "Tree-huggers and Baby-killers: The Relationship between NGOs and PMSCs and its Impact on Coordinating Actors in Complex Operations," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no 2 (2013): 278-294.

already a reality for many contractors and those working with them. Unless the United Kingdom and United States change their thinking about using private military contractors, the industry is here to stay. That, in turn, means the use of contractors needs to be regulated appropriately; yet, aside from spikes of interest following controversial incidents, little has happened regarding regulations. Many aspects of the business, such as importing weapons into a war zone, are already tightly regulated.¹⁴ However, the crucial issue is enforcement of existing laws and regulations. In 2013, a new association was established that will monitor compliance with the “Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers.” Signatories have committed to a wide range of principles governing the use of force, weapons training, selection and management of personnel, and the prohibition of torture, slave labor, and child labor.¹⁵ Currently, more than seven-hundred companies have agreed to the principles, among which sixty-four are US companies.¹⁶ While the association is not yet functional, it promises to have procedures for addressing complaints, and to conduct field visits. The US Department of State has announced it might make association membership a prerequisite for the award of contracts, which in turn signals confidence in the association’s potential utility.¹⁷

The next wave of private military contractor research must study specific aspects of contracting through greater data collection rather than theoretical analysis; it must also intensify the dialogue with industry, government, military, and non-governmental organizations.

Avenues for Further Research

Which issues warrant further research depends on one’s perspective; clients will have different questions and knowledge requirements than academics. Nonetheless, future research would do well to address three areas:

1. Individuals and non-state clients and their cooperation in the field;
2. The expansion of research methodologies, especially the range of comparative case studies;¹⁸
3. The establishment of research “clusters” or networks and the facilitation of regular academic-military dialogues.

First, greater examination of the “soft” end of contractor services (the health and well-being of individual contractors, their personal costs, and general effectiveness) would complement previous state-centric research. Non-state clients—such as shipping companies,

14 Birthe Anders, “There is a New Sheriff in Town - But Can He Keep the Peace?” *Strife Blog*, 12 November 2013, <http://strifeblog.org/2013/11/12/theres-a-new-sheriff-in-town-but-can-he-keep-the-peace/>.

15 *International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers*, 9 November 2010, http://www.icoc-ppsp.org/uploads/INTERNATIONAL_CODE_OF_CONDUCT_Final_without_Company_Names.pdf.

16 *The International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers Signatory Companies*, 1 September 2013, http://www.icoc-ppsp.org/uploads/Signatory_Companies_-_September_2013_-_Composite_List_SHORT_VERSION-1.pdf.

17 “State Department to Incorporate International Code of Conduct into Worldwide Protective Services Contracts,” Press release, 16 August 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/08/213212.htm>.

18 My thanks to Joakim Berndtsson for mentioning the need for a wider range of country case studies.

non-governmental organizations, and development contractors—are interesting to compare to governmental clients; and non-state contracting has practical implications for military forces. When non-governmental organizations contract for security services, their choices can affect their partner organizations in important ways.

Second, scholars must open a broader dialogue about research methods. Most researchers employ a mix of document analysis and qualitative methods, with infrequent quantitative surveys. But we need a debate concerning how to analyze interview data, how to construct surveys, and how to build on previous research. Most research projects are stand-alone attempts to address specific questions. However, building on previous research findings would give other outputs more footing. Furthermore, future research would benefit from comparing a broader range of countries to identify their contracting choices and how effective they are in specific situations. These points are, of course, made from an academic perspective—I would certainly invite a debate about the kind of research needed from a practitioner perspective.

Third, too much research potential will be wasted if it is not better connected, transnationally and across disciplines. Formalized networks have been established, but these consist of scholars working on very different aspects of the industry. While this was a useful first step, the further evolution of research networks could form research clusters. For instance, a “government contracting cluster” could formally link researchers working on state outsourcing and facilitate development of future projects. The same approach is conceivable for the other topics mentioned above, such as contracting by non-governmental organizations, maritime contracting, laws, and regulations. It would also be beneficial to include experts from fields not directly concerned with private military contractors. Management scholars might have something interesting to say about emerging contractor markets; psychologists and sociologists might offer insights into contractor motivations and self-understanding; and regional experts could contribute to our knowledge of political, social, and legal conditions in specific countries. In addition, research programming that is more comprehensive would benefit scholars by offering easier data collection; it would also help practitioners by facilitating their access to scholars working on similar sets of problems.

Regular dialogues help scholars stay in touch with what practitioners consider important. A case in point is a recent meeting between the “Private Military and Security Research Group” of King’s College, London, and the faculty and students of the National Defense University’s Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy. Both parties benefitted from an afternoon’s candid exchange. Military officers learned about ongoing research and preliminary results before these were published. Researchers gained insights into working with contractors in different field environments. But such exchanges should be routine, not extraordinary.

To conclude, research in the field of private military contracting has matured significantly in recent years. It has evolved from early efforts to describe and understand the entire industry to address previously neglected issues, such as private maritime security and the motivations of the individuals involved. As an emerging field, it would benefit from a more coherent research agenda. Comprehensive programming and

research clusters will be crucial to efforts to consolidate the field and to ensure it informs the security and policy areas most effectively.