



Private Military and Security Companies: An Interview with Christopher Spearin

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Defence and security expert Christopher Spearin discusses the use of private military and security companies by states and the implications of this trend for international security.

Q. A series of examples in recent conflicts – such as the US’ use of contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan and Russia’s reliance on mercenaries in Ukraine and Syria – seem to indicate a new trend of warfare becoming increasingly privatized. Have private military and security companies (PMSCs) become the contemporary weapon of choice for states engaging in conflicts?

Please permit me to dissect the question in two ways. Regarding the use of the word “contemporary”, the PMSC phenomenon (meaning private commercial actors capable of utilizing violence) dates largely from the end of the Cold War. Put differently, there is a long track record here. One can argue instead that the phenomenon has morphed considerably since that time in terms of who the employers are, what the rationales for employment are, and for what ends PMSCs are employed.

As a “weapon of choice”, I would contend no. Many states have not relied on security and military privatization of whatever form and those that do are often still wary of relying upon PMSCs particularly. That being said, PMSCs have become a prevalent creature in international affairs given that the United States, the world’s largest military power, employed them to a considerable degree in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. PMSCs are even factors in pop culture, with television shows and video games now focusing on them. The fact that Russia increasingly relies upon firms, and as such PMSCs are now a

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matter of great power politics, suggests that they will not disappear off the radar soon.

Q. In what ways are the PMSCs of today different from mercenaries of the past?

Generally speaking, the differences are twofold. One is the type of violence employed. PMSCs have generally acted in a defensive manner whereas mercenaries (or what were called “vagabond mercenaries” of the 1960s and 1970s) were comfortable operating in an offensive manner. The second difference rests with the corporate nature of PMSCs. There is a desire to have an ongoing and legitimate business presence compared to operating in the shadows on an ad hoc basis.

Q. What sectors do PMSCs normally recruit from? Are most of those who become contractors ex-military?

For the most part, contractors are ex-military (there can be former police officers and militia members too). But within that description, there is a fair bit of spread. Former special operations forces members are often liked because of their skillsets and the commercial cachet their presence brings (in this regard, looking at the question above, I would contend that special operations forces are increasingly becoming a “weapon of choice”). PMSC personnel can also be former members from developing world militaries because they can be hired for lower wages.

Q. How much constraint and regulation is there of PMSCs in international law and are these measures actually effective?

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The main international ingredient in a regulatory framework for PMSCs is the 2008 Montreux Document On pertinent international legal obligations and good practices for States related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict. On the one hand, the document indicates that it is not crafting new international law. Rather, it stresses how existing international humanitarian law is applicable to PMSCs. At present, 54 states are signatories. On the other hand, a governance architecture has grown out of the document through the following: the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers, the International Code of Conduct Association, and the International Organization for Standardization.

As for effectiveness, these efforts have created normative boundaries regarding what PMSCs can and cannot do, what employers can ask PMSCs to do, etc. However, what is not evident is what happens when transgressions occur because the architecture is relatively new and untested.

Q. Somali piracy has been a serious security problem for some time. Could the use of PMSCs be the answer to this problem?

Many do believe that PMSC usage was important in reducing the prevalence of Somali piracy earlier this decade. PMSC personnel mostly operated on commercial vessels, but in some cases they used their own vessels for protective duties.

Q. Due to the international community's lack of resources and, in some instances, willingness to effectively respond to humanitarian crises, PMSCs have been discussed as being an alternative option for UN peacekeeping missions. How suitable do you think PMSCs are for peacekeeping roles?

Because PMSCs have become more and more defensive in orientation, they are arguably less and less likely to become UN peacekeepers given that peacekeeping has become more robust with Chapter Seven authorizations, the creation of rapid reaction forces, the explicit naming of adversaries, etc. Nevertheless, the PMSC presence is still considerable within the UN architecture and peacekeeping efforts. PMSCs have trained state peacekeepers, they have advised on UN security requirements, and they have provided mobile and static security for UN civilian personnel.

Q. How do you see the use of PMSCs by states evolving in the future?

Unfortunately, my crystal ball is foggy on this one. What I can assert with confidence is that the PMSC presence *will* continue to evolve. During the 20 years now that I have studied this phenomenon, firms *collectively* have operated on the land, on the waves, and in the air in developed and developing world contexts for a clientele that includes states, corporations, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations. Indeed, my interest in the phenomenon is informed by the fact that it has been so dynamic.

Image credit: [chuck holton/Flickr](#).

Interviewee biography

Dr. Christopher Spearin is a professor in the Department of Defence Studies of the Royal Military College of Canada located at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto. His research concerns private military and security privatization, non-state actors and violence, and security governance. His work has been published in a number of edited books and in a variety of forums, including *Canadian Foreign Policy*, *Canadian Military Journal*, *Civil Wars*, *Contemporary*

Security Policy, Human Security Bulletin, International Peacekeeping, International Journal, International Politics, Journal of Conflict Studies, Journal of International Criminal Justice, Naval War College Review, Oxford Analytica, Parameters, Security Dialogue, Small Wars & Insurgencies, and World Defence Systems. He is the author of Private Military and Security Companies and States: Force Divided published by Palgrave Macmillan.

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