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PRIVATE MILITARY CONTRACTORS: A CASE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING?

The deployment of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) into battlespaces is not a new phenomenon. There are those who trace the origins of modern PMCs to the creation of WatchGuard International Ltd. Under the leadership of Sir David Stirling and John Woodhouse, [WatchGuard](#) was established in 1965 in Jersey as a private company that could be contracted to provide security and military advice, services, and training. WatchGuard aimed to fill a void in the defence market and contract itself to governments, and thereby provided services their clients were either unable to do themselves, or required training in.

The role of PMCs has increased dramatically since the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by United States-led (US) coalition forces, and since the US began its 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) offensive. However, most of these offensives have merely escalated with no end in sight—and numerous PMCs, acting as extensions, or in support of, the invading armed forces, have benefited greatly from their government's actions.

Considering their capabilities and mission statements, Singer divides PMCs into [three categories](#): 'Military' contractors focusing on tactical situations; 'Consulting' contractors centring on building capabilities; and 'Support' contractors specialising in non-lethal assistance. A few PMCs prefer to focus on providing advice (law enforcement, intelligence, and military), training and in-the-field mentoring.

Private Military Contractors are profit-driven companies, with the majority claiming to provide services closely related to 'military operations related to war' and in support of the armed forces, thus freeing up forces and taking over tasks traditionally performed by regular forces. Despite achieving successes in [Angola](#), [Sierra Leone](#), Uganda, and [Nigeria](#), others have resorted to human trafficking, child prostitution, arms trafficking, illegal [killings](#), and even abuse of power and fraud, thereby adding to the controversy surrounding PMCs.

Most modern PMCs list their services primarily as logistical support, transportation, maintenance, technical expertise, training, and related skills. However, several have become an integral part of the

foreign armed forces operating in Africa—as well as securing and exploiting foreign interests—with very large host government sponsorships. Foreign governments view this as an extension of ‘foreign aid’ aimed at cementing and strengthening political ties. Private Military Contractors are also supposed to free up elements of the armed forces to increase overall combat efficiency.

Africa has experienced a dramatic ‘PMC creep’ and the increased role of foreign PMCs on this continent has been well documented. Foreign, primarily Western governments, wishing to project influence and expand their foreign interests in Africa frequently resort to using their PMCs—usually to countries that are rich in strategic resources. This approach to securing foreign interests and expanding political influence has not gone unnoticed by the [Chinese and Russian governments](#). The dangers involved are reflected in the [February 2018 confrontation in Syria](#) where a large number of Russian PMC personnel assisting Syrian forces were killed in a battle with US-led forces.

Contracted military services, if not strictly controlled and monitored, can pose several risks to a national armed force. These risks span the ambit of successful mission completion, loss of command, control, communication, computers and information (C4I), disruption of civil-military law enforcement relations, belligerence, and force protection as dependence on the contracted services grows. This has resulted in numerous budget increases, as well as corruption, bribery, and non-performance. Unless the contractor’s manpower is distributed throughout the force, a sense of contractor-control over government forces will develop.

Critics lament PMCs and question to what extent PMCs actually conduct capacity building? How successful have they been in developing and strengthening the skills base, abilities, and capabilities of their clients to survive, adapt, and thrive on a dynamic, and rapidly-changing battlefield? How long have they been in-country and what results have they delivered? Do they adhere to the norms and customs of the African armed forces they support? Or have they merely kept the golden goose alive for it to lay more eggs they can benefit from?

The record of most PMCs in Africa is a poor one. There are few success stories. Indeed, to most, the longer the conflict or war continues, the greater their profits are, and the more able they are to entrench themselves in countries where they are supposed to be providing services and build capacity. Capacity building becomes all the more obvious when foreign governments use their PMCs to entrench their influence and expand their economic and political interests.

Where PMCs have actually achieved true capacity building and helped end African armed conflicts and saved lives, host governments have often been threatened with regime-change, sanctions, or economic disruption—if they do not terminate PMC contracts. In instances where true and valid competencies have been established in specialist units, political pressure to disband or break-up such units emerged.

There are professional PMCs that offer professional services related to advice, training, doctrine development, strategy, and mentoring. However, as long as PMCs claim to add value and assist with capacity building, but perform poorly in doing so, their roles will always be questioned. African governments that make use of PMCs for capacity building, but fail to subject them to due diligence, or assess their past track records, will not reap expected benefits from the contractors. Capacity building will unfortunately remain controversial, the consequences of the privatisation option uncertain and will remain a perceived threat to governments.

Recommended Reading

Contos, B.T., Derodeff, C., Crowell, W.P. & D. Dunkel; (2007). *Physical and Logical Security Convergence: Powered By Enterprise Security Management*. Syngress.

Mr Eben Barlow is the Chairman of STEPP International and wrote this brief in his personal capacity.