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Increasing Trend of Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) in Contemporary Global Conflicts



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Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is another instance wherein private contractors like the Wagner group and mercenaries from Chechen & Syria, have been utilised by the Russians. Ukraine also has been using private forces, names of whom are yet to be disclosed. In contemporary times, the private security forces are being increasingly used by major powers, especially by US and Russia, for both military and security purposes, followed by UK and China for security purposes only. Thereby, war becomes a lucrative business with the involvement of private forces perpetually.

Following the Ukraine crisis, various websites such as BBC News, News 18, and newspapers such as Jerusalem Post and the Middle East Eye, have covered a post with respect to job advertisement for the recruitment of private forces. The advertisement specifies that anyone

Key Points

- With increasing role of private military forces, wars have become a lucrative business in contemporary times.
- Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) are an amalgamation of both Private Military Companies (PMCS) and Private Security Companies (PSCs) who perform military related and security related tasks respectively.
- Due to the factor of 'plausible deniability' (of states), PMSCs tend to commit more heinous crimes.
- Private military forces have been used as 'tools' of information warfare and false flag operations in the ongoing Ukraine conflict.



who have the military experience of more than five years in Europe to serve as 'extraction and protective agents' and evacuate from the countryside and cities in Ukraine, are eligible for joining.¹ This was allegedly posted on the employment website called *Silent Professionals*— a US based contractor. After an interaction, organised by the *Military Times RebootCamp* with the CEO of *Silent Professionals* vis. Adam Gonzales and his wife, Susan Gonzales, what can be concluded is that *Silent Professionals* recruit private forces to deploy in most states, from time to time, depending on states' demand.² *The Middle East* highlights that the Ukrainian Government, under the Presidentship of Volodymyr Zelensky, established 'International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine' and later accommodated 16,000 volunteers to fight against Russia— out of which 100 of them belonged to the French Foreign Legion.³

What are Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs)?

PMSCs are non-state bodies that deploys forces for military purpose or sometimes security purpose to accomplish the goals of contractors in war or conflicts. They are 'profit motivated based industry' and operates behind the military concealment. They mainly comprise military veterans who have vast experiences in warfare in terms of skilled, trained, as well as how to mobilise quickly in worst-case scenario.

PMSCs or mercenaries (used in ancient time) have been in use since the pre-Westphalian era. From 17th century until the 20th century, states had used private forces in a supplementary role that is to expand their territory and defeat the enemies. During the two World Wars and even Cold war, the presence of private forces was prominent. In the post-Cold War era, their existence increased to fill the security vacuum left by the great powers. After disintegration of former USSR, US downsized its military personnel. Simultaneously, those underdeveloped and small states, which became independent post the Cold War, stopped receiving military support from both—former USSR and US. Therefore, these states did not have any choice but to seek military support from the global market. Scholars like



Peter W Singer, a professor at the Arizona State University and Sarah Percy, an Associate Professor at the University of Queensland, have explained relatable aspects for the emergence of PMSCs and their different phases in international affairs respectively. For Singer, three significant factors for the resurfacing of PMSCs are:

- ***Change of Market Security in Post-Cold War Era.*** Countries reduced their reserved forces and preferred to use technologically advantageous private forces resulting in the increase use of private forces by states.
- ***Transformation in the Character of Warfare.*** After the end of the Cold War, no major war was fought between states, but interstate wars along different ethnic lines and low-intensity wars among ethnic groups still continues. In order to fight intra-state conflicts, states hire private forces when the major powers refuse to extend military support as they do not have any political interest.
- ***Normative Shifts Towards Privatisation and Increased Outsourcing Fashion.***⁴ Because of this shift, privatising security forces has become one of the options to meet Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG) trend in global governance and this increases the outsourcing of security.

Is The Usage of PMSCs Ethical?

PMSCs are ambiguous and complex due to lack of legal status or position under the umbrella of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Though, PMSCs are considered the new incarnation of mercenaries, it is not wholly accepted in the academic field and security studies by many scholars. Many international conventions like the UN Charter and related resolutions, the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries (1989), Article 47 (Additional Protocol 1) etc. mainly focuses on mercenaries rather than PMSCs. Since, the latter does not fall under any international legal framework, hence, its legitimacy of operating in battlefields is still challenging.



The PMSCs also lacks legitimate checks and balances. There has been several instances to prove that possibility of committing grave human rights violations like the Abu Ghraib incident of 28 April 2004, the Nisour Square Incident in Iraq wherein Blackwater killed 17 civilians on 16 September 2007, by PMSCs are always high. It was followed by grave human rights violations in Afghanistan in pre-August 2021. All these instances epitomises the notoriety of PMSCs—their controversial nature due to lack of legal bindings that offer plausible deniability and accountability issues regarding their activities and responsibilities. However, in some exceptional cases, PMSCs are portrayed positively for their contributions in ending civil wars and reinstating the leaders in failed states. For instance, with the help of PMSCs, countries like Angola and Sierra Leone ended fighting civil wars against The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) respectively.

Functions of PMSCs

Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) have gained more prominence, especially in global affairs, by carrying out both combatant and non-combatants operations such as states' logistics and support supply lines, base building & gathering intelligence and other security provisions.⁵

PMSCs are an amalgamation of Private Military Companies (PMCs) and Private Security Companies (PSCs)—'PMCs' perform military related tasks while 'PSCs' perform security related tasks; PMCs are questionable due to their combat roles in military operations unlike PSCs. In current times, different private contractors are operating in various countries for military purposes, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Presence of PMSCs in Different Countries

States where Private Military Contractors have Reached	Private Military Used
Eastern Ukraine	Wagner group deployed to assist breakaway Russian region.
Syria	Wagner group fought for Assad.
Syria and Iraq	US currently use 5500 contractors.
Afghanistan	UK security company— G4S, have around 1200 employees.
Horn of Africa	Providing security for ships against Somalia Pirates
South Sudan	Chinese private military contractors rescued 300 trapped oil workers
Central African Republic	Between 250-10,000 Wagner group employees reportedly in the country.
Venezuela	Wagner group reportedly helping President Nicolas Maduro with security.
Nigeria	Private military contractors fought Boko Haram.

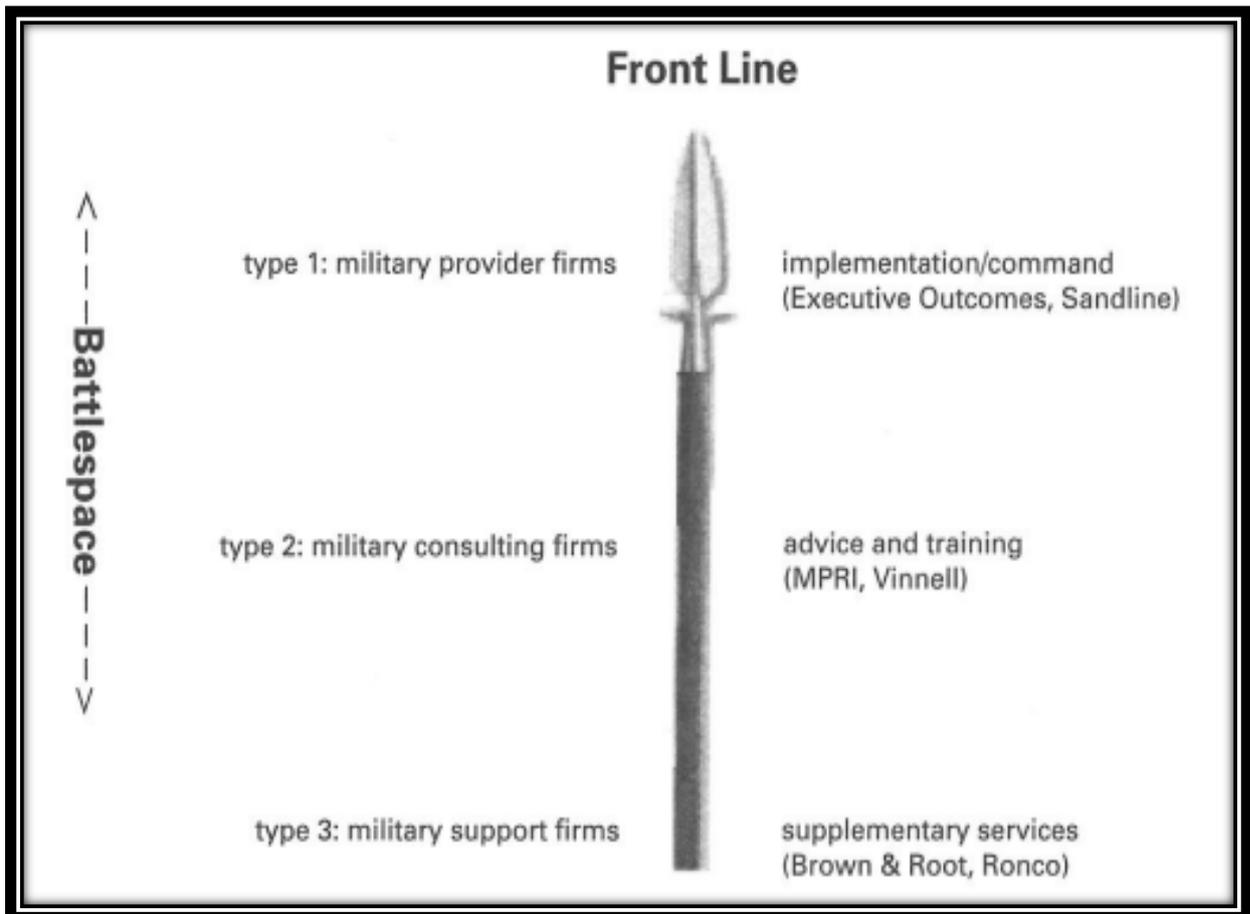
Source: <https://www.the-sun.com/news/271118/how-worlds-next-power-could-be-a-private-army-amid-fears-russia-is-about-to-unleash-mercenary-battalions-in-venezuela/> (*Adapted by Author)

Types of PMSCs

Based on the activities performed by PMSCs, Singer prefers to call it Private Military Firms (PMFs). As per him, the industry can be categorised into three types:—(a) Military Provider Firms; (b) Military Consulting Firms; and (c) Military Support Firms.⁶ **Figure 1** shows the ‘metaphoric diagrammatic illustration’ of each category and its different tasks. It is represented by ‘the tip of the spear’ based on their assigned functions like the deployed units of the armed forces on the battlefield based on their location, degree of impact, training, and prestige.⁷ The ‘tip of the spear’ are the military provider firms whose primary function is to deploy or follow command wherever required. The ‘middle part’ of the spear comprises the ‘military consulting firms’ wherein advice

training is facilitated. The 'lower part of the spear' is occupied by 'military support firms' that play supplementary roles of providing services.

Figure 1: Singer's Three Different Category of the Industry



Source: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3092094.pdf>

Generally, the industry is commonly known as PMSCs, and their myriad tasks, along with relevant examples, are illustrated in **Table 2** below.

Table 2: Myriad Roles Performed by Various PMSCs

Private Military and Security Companies				
-- (-----Level of Force -----) +				
Types of Company	Military Support Firm	Military Consulting Firm	Private Security Company	Private Military Company
Primary Role	Sustainment	Force Generation, Intelligence, Mission Command	Defense and Protection	Offense
Activities	Transportation Engineering Medical Support Procurement Personnel Services	Intelligence Support Knowledge Management Training Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facility Security • Physical Security • Personal Protection • Convoy Security • Refugee Protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combat • Combat • Support • Close Air Support • Fire Support
Notable Examples	Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR)	Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI); <u>Dyncorp</u>	Blackwater/Xe/Academi	Executive Outcomes

Source: Annotated by Author

Table 2 clarifies that, the first three types of the Company are non- problematic as their tasks are confined to security, logistics and intelligence purpose. However, the last type that is ‘the private



military company', whose tasks comprises of combat and combat-related support, appears problematic since these are the critical component while performing the whole of duty, especially as a combatant.* As the PMSCs are not legally approved by the international humanitarian law (IHL), therefore, countries are unwilling to come forward to legitimise them.

Role of Private Forces in Global Conflicts

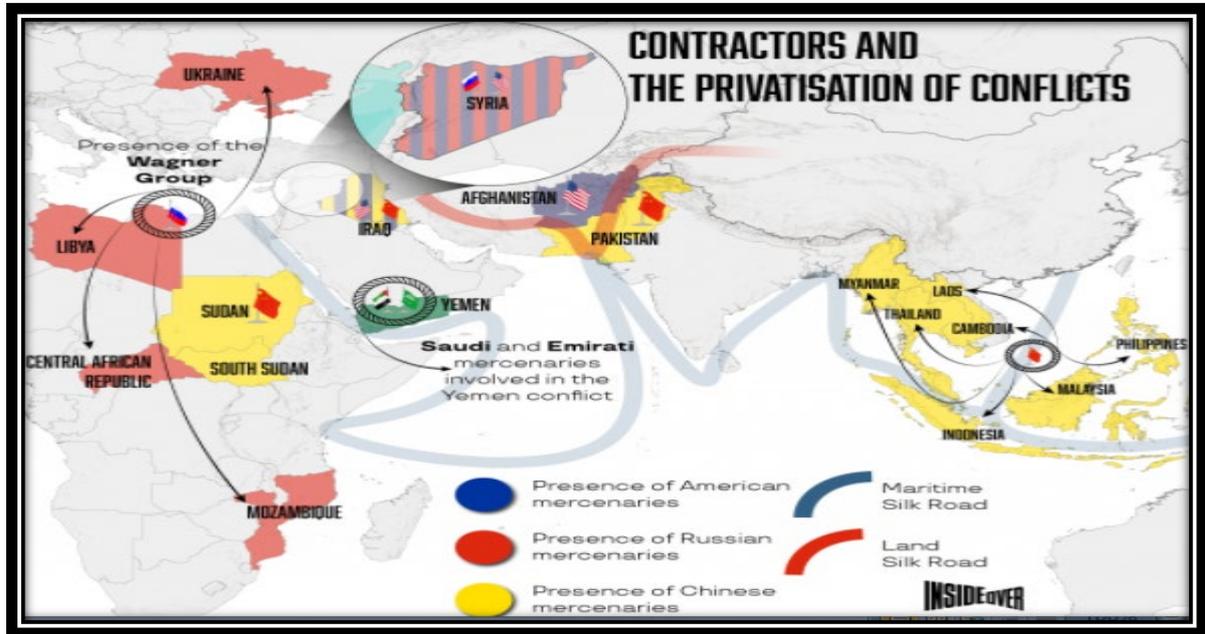
The changing character of warfare and the inclusion of private forces into the battlefield have changed the dynamics of conflict that is shift from high intensity warfare to low intensity warfare. PMSCs have the potential to become integral part of privatised conflicts (as shown in figure 4), thereby, states' demand for PMSCs has been augmenting gradually. For instance, developed states go for PMSCs for 'plausible deniability' on one hand, and to 'reduce their defence budget' on the other hand. At the same time, states also facilitate the training of PMSCs and strengthens their military capability.⁸ Few examples are:

- The Wagner group, who was hired to assist breakaway Russian region in Eastern Ukraine.
- Wagner group in Syria to fight for Assad.
- Private military contractors who fought Boko Haram in Nigeria.
- The US Blackwater/Xe/Academy in Iraq and Afghanistan to train Afghan soldiers.
- Executive Outcomes in Angola.
- Sandline International in Sierra Leone to train soldiers and conduct military operations.

Unlike the developed states, failed or underdeveloped states need PMSCs to survive, reinstate their sovereignty, and stop prevailing internal conflicts or threats posed by warlords and rebels against the state. Besides states, NGOs, international institutions like the UN employ PMSCs for humanitarian assistance during conflicts.⁹

* As private contractors does not fall under the jurisdiction of any national and international legal framework or Prisoners of War (PoWs) like a regular soldier.

Figure 2: PMSCs' Presence in Global Conflicts



Source: <https://www.insideover.com/war/the-dark-world-of-private-military-contractors.html>

Table 3: PMSCs Employed by the U.S and Russia in different States

U.S.A's PMSCs		Tasks
PMSCs	State Used PMSCs	
Blackwater/XE/Academi	Liberia	Armed Operational
Blackwater/XE/Academi	Iraq and Afghanistan	Armed Operational Support, Logistical Support, Military Training, Security Management
Military Professional Resources Inc.	Croatia, Bosnia, Equatorial Guinea and Colombia	Military Training, Intelligence Surveillance
Russia's PMSCs		Tasks
PMSCs	State Used PMSCs	
Wagner Group	Syria, Nigeria, Libya, Mozambique, Guinea, Sudan, Chad, Mali, Burundi, Comoros, Madagascar, Botswana, Congo, Burundi	All types of Tasks depending on the need of the state
Wagner Group	Venezuela	Military Training, Intelligence Surveillance and Logistical Support,
Wagner Group	Ukraine	Military & Security purposes, Logistics and Intelligence Surveillance

Source: Annotated by Author

During the Cold War, superpowers hired private forces to fight major wars and if required, used them in proxy wars. However, in the contemporary multipolar world, states may hire PMSCs for their security, which further increases the demand for PMSCs. The US and other states are now planning a system of hiring PMSCs to manage conflicts without involvement of their soldiers. The



US favours hiring PMSCs for pertinent reasons— **(a)** after the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’, the US decided not to send its troops abroad for fighting for another counter attack. Hence, PMSCs are the best available option for US in such a situation; **(b)** the country need not take any responsibilities of waging war abroad especially when it comes to paying pensions and insurance unlike regular soldiers and; **(c)** the formal procedure for declaring a war is rather along enduring process as it needs approval from both vis the US Congress and Senate. Therefore, hiring PMSCs in covert operations, without the knowledge of the public and also as a tool to shape its foreign policy.

From **Table 4** below, it can be concluded that, US used large number of private forces as also its military personnel while fighting major wars. However, in case of proxy war, number of private forces used was less except in the longest war in Afghanistan, in which contractors outnumbered military personnel. In one instance, Eric Prince, the CEO of Blackwater (XE/Academy), thought of replacing the military forces in Afghanistan with private forces.¹⁰ Thus, he tried to privatise wars in Afghanistan, but to no success. This instance shows that the US used contractors in most wars which later became a part of the strategic plans of US soldiers in every war they fought since the First World War.

Table 4: Use of Contractors by the US in its Military History

SI. No	Wars	Contracted Personnel	Military Personnel
1.	World War I	85,000	2,000,000
2.	World War II	734,000	5,400,000
3.	Korean War	156,000	393,000
4.	Vietnam War	70,000	359,000
5.	Persian Gulf War	5200	541,000
6.	Balkans Conflict	20,000	20,000
7.	Iraq War	95,500	95,900
8.	Afghanistan	112,100	79,1000

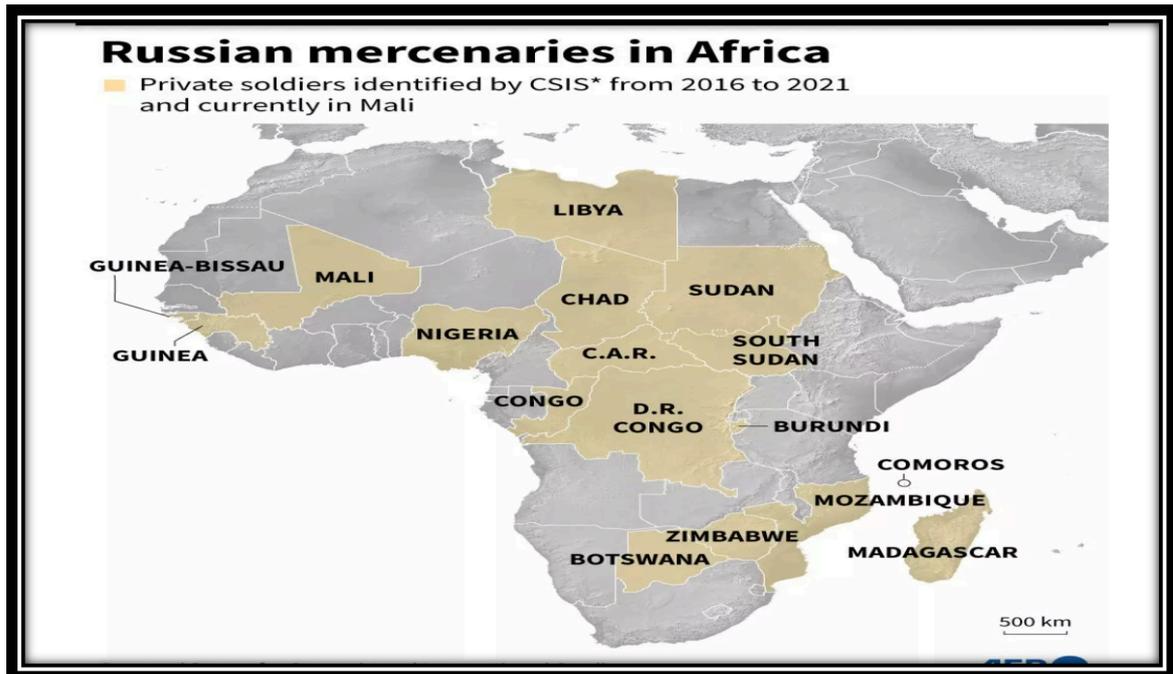
Sources: <https://www.statista.com/chart/4440/private-military-and-security-company-sector/>

In 2014, Russia had employed 'Little Green Man' or the 'Private Army of Putin' to occupy Crimea. Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin did not accept the use of private forces in the Crimean occupation initially, but he confessed later.¹¹ In addition to shaping its foreign policy goals wherein its interest lies, Russia used PMSCs in both psychological warfare to frighten the Ukrainians.¹² Given the plausible deniability in the information age, PMSCs can be used to change the narrative of war by changing facts on the ground.¹³ There were instances wherein private forces used badges of Ukrainian soldiers to show that Ukrainians were waging war against Russia. They also engaged in false flag operations.

Coming to the recent conflict, there are PMSCs' heavily involved in the ongoing Ukraine crisis. Volunteers from across the globe are involved, and private forces & regular soldiers are equally involved in fighting a conventional war with Russia. Russia is using Wagner groups, Chechen's

Mercenaries and Syrians as part of its private forces. Ukraine, on the other hand, is using private forces for the very first time, hence, no accurate data is available in the open domain.

Figure 3: Presence of Russian Mercenaries in Africa



Sources: <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/1494271658265391110/photo/1>

Recently, the Wagner group has started operating in Latin America also—almost 400 contractors from the Wagner group are deployed in Venezuela, helping the socialist government. The group flourishes in most developing or underdeveloped states and are as notorious as the US' Blackwater.



PMSCs Operated by UK and China

With regard to PMSCs operating for security purposes, UK and China are major stakeholders—the former owns 60 companies in Iraq and deployed almost 1,200 personnel in Afghanistan in pre-August 2021¹⁴; the latter is expanding localised private military contractors such as Shandong Huawei Security Group[†] and DeWe Security Service. China has deployed 3,200 private military forces abroad, which is more than its contribution to UN peacekeeping mission where only 2,600 soldiers are deployed.¹⁵ Both, UK and China, uses private security companies on a wide scale, but not for military purpose. In total, China has 7,000 PSCs present within the country; 20 Chinese PSCs are operating overseas and are located from Central Asia to Africa.¹⁶ Besides, China uses private security companies to guard its workers in South Sudan and Iraq, in the corridor with Pakistan and ports of the New Silk Road, also called the ‘Pearl Necklace’.¹⁷

Currently, China is using localised PSCs to secure its infrastructure abroad, and there is no involvement of military components in Chinese PSCs. Nevertheless, seeing the current trend of increasing use of PMSCs by major global powers, undoubtedly China might use them for its military purpose in near future, which then would be a threat to India’s security. In this context, India must understand the usability of PMSCs that is to protect its interest against the growing expansionist policy of China, especially the Aksai Chin Region & Arunachal Pradesh and its immediate neighbourhood. China might also use these PMSCs disrupt along its border with India especially the Northeast region, which is in close proximity to unstable Myanmar.

Applicability of PMSCs in India

Like any other emerging countries, also aspires to become a major role player both at regional and global platforms. Therefore, India needs to develop its infrastructure as also invest in new set ups to expand roads, build metro, hospitals, colleges, universities and shopping complexes. To guard all these assets, it would require more number of private security personnel employed by PSCs. In India, private forces are unarmed and their main tasks comprise of guarding assets, intelligence

[†] First Chinese security firm to with office abroad.



and logistics. Pioneer Security Solutions PVT Ltd, G7 Securitas, Tops Security, G4S India, Security and Intelligence Service (India) (SIS), Defence Security Service (DSS) and Premier Shield are some of the functional PSCs in India. At present, India have used private security forces extensively for security purpose only and not for combat operations. There is a possibility that, in the future, India might use private forces in fighting war against adversaries. However, for employing private forces for military purpose, India should wait for the right time that is until the world accepts PMSCs as a legal entity under IHL.

Trend of Using PMSCs by Terrorists/Insurgents

Another emerging trend of some private forces is their connection with insurgents or radical terrorists. Presently, non-state actors increasingly use PMSCs, to train fresh recruits of terrorists and insurgents. For instance, 'Malhama Tactical', also known as 'Blackwater of Jihadists', is considered the 'first for-hire terrorist group'— they provide training to Islamist militants such as East Turkistan Islamic Movement fighters and other mercenaries who are involved in the Syrian War¹⁸; their primary interest is business-oriented that is earning more profits. Countries like Kurdistan facilitates safe haven for 'soldiers of fortune' who works for the Kurdish Militia. Mercenaries deployed by UAE fought against Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. Most of the wealthy Arab nations like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Emirates used mercenaries to fight in Yemen, Syria and Libya lately.¹⁹

Advantages and Disadvantages of Private Forces

The following paragraphs highlights few both pros and cons of private forces' trend in modern day warfare.

Pros

- Private security companies offer plausible deniability in the information age.
- They provide plausible deniability to domestic audiences. In other words, they circumnavigates sensitive domestic environment like enabling to undercount the number of military personnel of the state who died in the war.²⁰



- PMSCs have been used in false flag operations by both Russia and Ukraine. For instance, in the Bucha incident, Ukraine blamed Russia for killing innocent Ukrainians. However, there is limited evidence for proving the same.
- Private security forces are easy to access from the global market and costs much cheaper.
- Hired to reduce state's burden with respect to training and paying pensions as opposed to regular states' forces.
- Shaping foreign policy goals is more manageable. PMSCs offer deniability for geopolitical purposes that is they assist states in power projection abroad to support foreign government and non-government military forces without actual deployment of state forces.
- They will fight for the cause until they succeed since they are paid handsomely.²¹
- States are not responsible for any war crimes as they hold 'plausible deniability'.

Cons

- Private security companies like 'Malhama Tactical' poses global security threat. Privatisation of Jihad could facilitate and connect terrorist organisations globally, and states, on the other hand, will maintain plausible deniability while conducting asymmetry war against infidels or contenders for dominance.²²
- High chance of extrajudicial killings including grave human rights violations.
- Commodification of war²³ (since security can be bought and sold in the market) due to profit oriented nature.
- Any internationally recognised legal institution does not bind them to the rules of war.
- There is more chance of committing crimes due to 'plausible deniability' factor.
- PMSCs can be used as tools of information warfare and false flag operations.

Conclusion

Even though the role of PMSCs is questionable, their involvement in modern day warfare is multiplying. Conflict is getting more defined and PMSCs are being used by super powers since long time now. Their role in current global conflict is more crucial like in the case of Iraq, Syria and



Ukraine. Their usage in covert operations vis. false flag operation in the ongoing Ukraine conflict, suggests that they can be employed tactfully in waging information war against adversaries. The Russia-Ukraine conflict is a fine example.

Employment of PMSCs for security purposes is not problematic for states except when private forces are used in military operations. In coming time, greater inclusion and increased employability of private forces in conflicts could have negative implication, as it would empower PMSCs and make it difficult for nations to control them. Therefore, the states must think all possible aspects before employing PMSCs for military operations.

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