

Private Military Contractors; The dark side of military expenditures and the unanswered question of accountability

We live in a world where stated military expenses, for any given country, pose substantial transparency and credibility hurdles. Portions of US military spending are spread across the budgets of the Departments of Energy, State, Veterans Affairs, and even Environment (*Higgs*). Hidden in this ever-growing sector of the 'black market' of militarism are also the private military contractors – PMCs. Many observers believe PMCs have grown in importance at such a speed that, for instance, the US government could not imagine waging war without them; nearly a third of all weapons systems in the US are maintained by PMCs (Sourcewatch). What is startling is that PMCs – and their mercenaries – have become the second largest force in Iraq after the US military.

The black sheep of the military spending family – private military contractors – have hardly received the international attention they deserve. Especially since **circa 50% of the Pentagon's budget** gets pumped into the private sector. During the 6-year period between fiscal year Oct. 1, 1997 and Sept. 30, 2003 the most lucrative war profiteers were (in contract totals): Lockheed Martin – \$94 billion, Boeing – \$82 billion, Raytheon – \$40 billion, Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics – each with nearly \$34 billion (*DoD*). It must be noted that these five alone consumed the vast majority of the Pentagon funding allocated to the private sector.

Halliburton, Blackwater USA, DynCorp, Aegis are other powerful players in the industry. It is not only the US and British in the military privatisation industry, many other countries have followed suit, among others, S. Africa, Israel, and Norway.

Outsourcing Defence Departments should not be a shocking new revelation; the World Bank, the Bush administration, the WTO, and the neo-liberal economists have been advocating privatization for many years and decades. Why is there then concerned international criticism regarding the privatisation revolution within the military industry?

First, the challenging question of accountability, which laws do the employees of these contractors have to abide by. Who should monitor, regulate, and/or

punish the personnel or the PMCs they work for, is left unanswered (*Singer*). A fundamental question of liability must be raised: are privately-contracted employees from US-run PMCs (in Iraq) subject to Iraqi or US law? Are they civilians or soldiers? In some views, this unanswered question has led to a sort of lawlessness among PMCs, and even a sense of being above certain laws.

Secondly, US laws prohibit soldiers from becoming involved in countries, such as Colombia, but there are however no such regulations for corporations. US Congress's 'Plan Colombia' is structured around this political loophole – instead of the Armed Forces PMCs have been deployed. What is more dangerous is that these private contractors move into other countries under the veil of a corporate entity, although they are nearly 100% financed by and given contracts from governments, usually the US. Concerning PMCs, even Donald Rumsfeld has conceded: “they're not subject to the uniform code of military justice; we understand that.” The Secretary of Defense went on further to say, “there is an issue that is current as to the extent to which they can or can not carry weapons and that's an issue” (*Rumsfeld*).

Thirdly, when the US initiates a war, it is the US government that should carry all aspects of the costs of a war: economically, politically, and the human cost of casualties. The Pentagon however hires, funds, and gives orders to PMCs, and the PMCs in turn function as corporations concerned with their bottom line budget. This has led to most PMCs hiring mercenaries from Latin America, Africa, and other less-developed regions due to the cheap labor costs. In this respect it is then foreigners dying for a US cause, which raises an essential moral question. Both democracy and common sense would dictate that, if a country begins a war, it should have to bear the burden. It can be argued PMCs have also led to a lower level of resistance and opposition to recent wars, and within the US they have undoubtedly reduced the political costs of going to war, since less casualties must be carried by the initiating country.

Fourthly, the barrier of secrecy. From Halliburton in Iraq to DynCorp in Colombia there has been a mysterious cloud hovering above the casualties; the

Pentagon refuses to discuss the deaths of PMC employees, directing questions back to the private firms, and private firms directing questions back to the Pentagon (*Ivanovich*), a hopeless cycle for devastated families.

Aside from these indispensable questions, which have yet to be answered, some overall arguments in favour of PMCs are: they are more efficient, albeit at one of the world's most devastating acts – war making. They also bring privatisation and flexibility into the realm of militarism; this implies that these firms, and their employees, can be fired, and this changes the parameters of speed, resourcefulness, efficiency, etc. of operations.

All things considered, 'outsourcing the Pentagon' and other Defence Departments has become a huge business, particularly for the leading war profiteers. To summarize, "on the war front, private companies are ubiquitous, increasingly indispensable, and largely unregulated -- a lethal combination" (*Berrigan*). In such a hazardous field with so many unanswered matters, more privately-fueled turmoil is sure to come. Whether PMCs should be abolished or have to abide by clearly defined laws are questions that cannot be tackled here, only within a wider debate among the international community. The number of PMCs and 'illegal' wars are constantly growing themes in the mix of international politics. Therefore we can expect more corruption, scandals, and political loopholes in the future – unless the UN and the international community understand the urgency and reform the rules of the game of war; however detailed solutions at the time being of writing appear to be sorely lacking.

Story by Alexander Krauss

IPB Intern

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