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IMPLICATIONS OF PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES ON GEOPOLITICS AND GLOBAL SECURITY

Abstract

Private military companies are part of a moderately developed private security sector, present worldwide and engaged in various jobs. Apart from participation in war conflicts, which are most often associated with them, the services offered by private military companies are different: from the provision of energy sources to the collection of intelligence data, but also the training of military personnel, military logistics, and the supply of armed forces with assets. This paper examines the history of private military companies' existence and the use of mercenaries in war conflicts. The moral and material circumstances of their engagement, their results, their impact on geopolitics and global security, and the international legal regulations of their engagement are considered. Also, the work examines the "grey zone" of activities of private military companies, accusations of mistreatment and murder of civilians, tax evasion, drug dealing, and human trafficking, for which they are most often accused. However, although their work is accompanied by numerous scandals and accusations of the aforementioned crimes, court epilogues are usually absent. The paper looks at the participation of

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private military companies in the conflicts in FR Yugoslavia, as well as their presence in AP Kosovo and Metohija and its consequences.

Keywords: private military companies, geopolitics, global security, international relations, private security sector.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Private military companies can be considered a unique phenomenon often associated with the unverified or insufficiently examined claim that they are a substitute for regular armies. At the same time, their “success” is most often emphasized, and they are given preference over state armed forces, as they use the latest weapons and military technology. In recent years, they have aroused great public interest in the mass media, as they present themselves as an army elite, invariably accompanied by power and money.

The task of this paper is to verify these claims through relevant domestic and foreign scientific and auxiliary literature, which will shed light on the role of global private military companies, verify common perceptions about them, and assess their implications for geopolitics and international security.

Although scientific papers have appeared in the last decade that start from a predetermined hypothesis that private military companies are a negative phenomenon (Ryngaert 2008, 1136; Daumann 2023), in this paper, we will start from a neutral hypothesis regarding private military companies and the impact they have. The author hopes that this paper will represent the cornerstone of her future research and expresses gratitude to the editor of *Policy of National Security*, Prof. Dr. Marija Đorić, for her support, as well as to Dr. Zoran Milošević, Principal Research Fellow, for guidance and advice in research.

INTRODUCTION

According to the definition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a private military company (PMC) is an independent corporation that provides military services to national governments, international

organizations, and sub-state actors (Encyclopedia Britannica 2024). The role of PMCs is to provide combat and security forces by training personnel and creating combat units equipped with the most potent modern weapons, vehicles, and aircraft. They represent one of the most controversial elements of the privatized military industry, as their motives are material rather than political, moral, etc. In size, private military companies range from small consulting firms to large transnational corporations. Their activities can fall within the concept of total defense (Živanović and Radojević 2024, 174–175). According to estimates by military experts, around 150 private military companies currently offer services in about 50 countries worldwide (Files ETHZ 2006).

Although different scientific sources (both foreign and domestic, which will be discussed in more detail later) cite different dates for the beginning of the use of private military company (PMC) services, it is generally accepted that their use began in the wars in England from the early 18th century. The “East India Company,” founded in 1600 for commercial purposes, became essential in expanding English and later British colonial policy a century ago (DuPlessis 2016, 1–2; 4).

The “East India Company” once had around 260,000 soldiers, making it the most significant military corporation in the world (Wilbur 1945, 82–83). Its colonial successes were substantial, as it controlled most of South and Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. The company dissolved in 1874 (Farrington 2002), but it significantly impacted the emergence of subsequent private military companies worldwide.

In the contemporary Serbian academic space, numerous examples of the use of mercenary forces throughout history are cited, which are somewhat reminiscent of the work of today’s private military companies. Researchers Nenad Milošević and Jadranko Jukić from the Military Academy in Belgrade state that written traces of the first mercenaries date back to the early Bronze Age, in the service of the Sumerian dynasty of Gudea (2095–2047 BC) (Milošević and Jukić 2017, 162). Mercenaries were also present in Ancient Greece, Ancient Egypt, the Persian Empire, the Ancient Macedonian Kingdom, Ancient Rome, Byzantium, etc.; examples continue today (Milošević and Jukić 2017, 162–163). The researcher currently the most influential in this field, Peter W. Singer, would undoubtedly agree with the aforementioned claim,

with his famous statement: "Hiring outsiders to fight your battles is as old as war itself" (Singer 2008, 19).

In an analysis published by its research team on August 31, 2023, the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union criticizes private military companies for "turning war into business" (COEU 2023, 8). They argue that the work of private military companies is increasingly seen as problematic because PMCs potentially undermine state sovereignty and question their influence as peacemakers, as well as demilitarization after the end of the armed conflict (2). However, to pay attention to the moral component of military-mercenary employment in private military companies, we will first turn to the provisions of the Geneva Conventions. According to the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, signed on June 8, 1977, and according to Article 47 on mercenaries (United Nations 1949), definitions are given of who are mercenaries and how, in the event of their capture, they are dealt with. First, they do not have the rights of combatants, nor can they have the status of prisoners of war. A mercenary is a person who is recruited explicitly in a country or abroad to fight in an armed conflict; who takes a direct part in the hostilities; whose motivation is private gain, that is to say, material compensation; who is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of its territory; who is not a member of the armed forces of any of the parties to the conflict. Thus, by definition, mercenaries do not have the rights that combatants of the armed forces of the parties to the conflict have. Every State has the right to try them as ordinary war criminals (United Nations 1949).

Regarding the aforementioned law, researchers Nikola Vračević and Vladimir Cvetković state that all points must be met for a person to be declared a mercenary, i.e., that the definition provided by the Geneva Convention is cumulative (Vračević and Cvetković 2019, 51). However, they also point out that the third paragraph of Article 47 is challenging to prove in court since material gain is, in one way or another, the goal of every person. Therefore, according to the opinion of the author of this article, we will allow ourselves to partially humanize, i.e., emotionally color the difference, which the provisions of Article 47 could not describe. Namely, suppose a mercenary participates in armed conflicts, and his participation is motivated solely by material gain. In that case, he certainly differs from a soldier whose only goal

is to defend his country and people and bear survival, which has been perceived as a noble calling for centuries, especially in the Serbian mentality (Đukić 1934, 8–12; 23–27). This means that, from a moral standpoint, the participation of mercenaries in armed conflict cannot be justified.

In 2001, the 6th United Nations International Convention prohibited using mercenaries in armed conflict who participated on behalf of any state regardless of political interests or issues (United Nations 1990), clearly considering the moral component. However, the United States has rejected the notion of private military company activities as mercenary. Russia and China did not ratify the convention, nor did several states with significant military forces. More will be said about the US and Russia and their attitude towards private military companies in the continuation of the text.

In his investigative journalistic article, Dr. Zoran Milošević, symbolically titled “Privatization of War,” emphasizes that private military companies represent a unique military and security phenomenon that is taking over functions previously performed by (state) armed forces and security services in the West (Milošević 2013, 30). He highlights that the use of private military companies experienced a surge in the mid-1970s.

In 1974, a half-billion-dollar contract was signed between the private military company “Vinnell Corporation” and the US government to train the Saudi Arabian National Guard and protect oil fields in that country. The first gathering of military mercenaries was organized in the US in 1980 by the private military company “Soldier of Fortune” (Milošević 2013, 31). After that, mercenaries experienced a significant boom in the US military and security system. However, private military companies and their employees (mercenaries) are not exclusively linked to the West. Milošević also mentions guerrilla-partisan units during the Soviet era that fought alongside the Red Army for the same goal, yet they represented separate groups (31–32). Today, private military companies exist in all major and wealthier Eastern countries, with Russian companies being the subject of particular discussion in the last few years, as public attention has been drawn to them, especially in the war in Ukraine (or rather – “Russia’s Special military operation in the territory of Ukraine”). Milošević also points out that private military

companies have operated in the Balkans, mentioning two: MPRI (*Military Professional Resources Incorporated*) and KBR (*Kellogg Brown & Root*) (33). Namely, the MPRI company trained Croatian and Bosnian Muslim troops and was also linked to NATO during the hostilities and the bombing of Serbia. The company's propaganda material stated that they had "made a decisive contribution to the victory of Croats and Muslims over Serbs in the fall of 1995." Milošević states that they also provided services to the so-called Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998–1999 in Albania and then during the Albanian uprising in Macedonia in 2000–2001. At the same time, the KBR company was engaged in military logistics. In connection with this topic, researcher Miloje Zdravković analyzed the presence of private military companies in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija*, whose main goal was profit, at the expense of the security they were supposed to ensure (Zdravković 2012). The Russian researcher Oleg Vitalievich Valeckiy writes about the criminal activities of the aforementioned private military companies on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, who came to the same conclusions as Milošević and Zdravković (Valeckiy 2008, 312).

Private military companies do not only provide services in wartime but also in terms of military intelligence services, as well as various security protection services for individuals and business organizations (Labović 2015, 143). According to the types of services they provide, private military companies are divided into Military Provider Firms, which participate in armed conflicts and the most significant dangers; Military Consulting Firms, which provide military training and oversight; and Military Support Firms for providing logistical and technical support, supplying the armed forces with resources (Singer 2003, 91). According to security expert Dejan Labović, private military companies bring with them numerous legal, political, social, and humanitarian dilemmas and as much as they are essential for preventing and resolving conflicts, they are also responsible for causing and maintaining them (Labović 2015, 153).

Therefore, given that mercenaries are driven by profit rather than some moral or intangible form of motivation, the legality and legitimacy of their actions are often questioned (Radaković 2020, 3). They are frequently criticized for violating laws or standards of

warfare and human rights, but also for incompetence, indiscipline, lack of transparency, etc. (3). American private military companies are the actors in numerous controversial events with fatal outcomes for civilians in which, in most cases, a final court verdict has been absent.

THE WORLD'S LARGEST PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES AND THE CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING THEM

According to the number of private military companies, the US undoubtedly leads in the number of controversies associated with them. We will briefly present the most prominent companies, their activities, and the criticisms directed at their work.

DynCorp – founded in 1946 in Virginia and ceased operations in 2021. It started as an aviation company, providing flight operations support, training and mentoring, international development, intelligence training and support, contingency operations, security, and operations and maintenance of land vehicles. In 2017, they had 14,000 employees. They participated in numerous missions worldwide, including in Colombia, where they were accused of multiple criminal offenses, from the abuse of civilians to links to drug trafficking (Office of Inspector General 2004). The non-governmental organization “Human Rights Watch” presented evidence of trafficking in women and children in Bosnia and violence against them, organized by members of DynCorp (Cole and Vermeltfoort 2017, 71–75). In Iraq, they were accused of embezzlement (2007) and misuse of funds (2007) (McFate 2008, 646). In Afghanistan – for immoral behavior (2009) and causing a traffic accident through negligence, in which several civilians were killed (2010). In Mozambique – for tax evasion (2014). In the US – for lobbying in the Trump administration (Toledano 2023).

Constellis Holdings, formerly known as Blackwater USA (1996–2002), Blackwater Security Consulting (2002–2007), Blackwater Worldwide (2007–2009), Xe Services LLC (2009–2010), and Academi (2010–2014), has been operating under the name *Constellis Holdings* since 2014. This private military company was founded as “Blackwater USA” in 1996 in North Carolina. Due to frequent name changes, it isn't easy to connect the company with the events it was involved in

(Gielink 2007). Since 2003, they have provided services to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). They have sent mercenaries to Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, Israel, Colombia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (Svahill 2007). One of the many controversies associated with their name is the sending of more than 160,000 mercenaries to Iraq and the killings of civilians there in 2007 (Holager 2011, 86). This refers to the Nisour Square massacre on September 16, 2007, when Blackwater mercenaries killed 17 and wounded 20 civilians. There was no legal conclusion to the charges (Singer 2007; Fisher 2014). They are known to present themselves as private security, but this is not the case, as seen above.

Erinys International was founded in 2001 in the British Virgin Islands. Named after the ancient Greek goddess Erinys – or Erinyes, the guardian of the entrance to the Underworld (symbolically – the one who punishes sinners). Erinys operates in the United Kingdom, South Africa, DR Congo, Nigeria, and Iraq (Baum and McGahan 2009, 32). In Iraq, they guard oil fields and pipelines. One of the mercenaries was suspended from duty in 2004 for torturing a 16-year-old Iraqi boy in a garage (The Guardian 2004).

Triple Canopy is an American private security and private military company. It was founded in 2003 by veterans of the US Special Forces, together with Delta Force operatives. They merged with Blackwater in 2014, which is now Constellis Group. They sent troops to Baghdad, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Fainaru 2007, 6–9). They are known for high casualties among their ranks (four were killed in Basra, Iraq, in 2005 in a bomb explosion, three were killed, and fifteen were wounded in Baghdad in 2010, etc.).

Vinnell Corporation is an international private military company based in Herndon, Virginia, founded in 1931 in California. They sent troops to Vietnam (1960s) (Stanton 1985, 215–216), Saudi Arabia (1970s), and Iraq (2000s). Their outpost, “Vinnell Arabia,” was bombed on May 12, 2003, by Saudi rescuers, killing 8 Americans and 2 Filipinos, while one was wounded and later killed on the street upon returning to Riyadh (VOA News 2009). Controversies surrounding them are mainly linked to planted bombs, suspicious activities in the countries where they were located, and the loss of personnel.

Titan Corporation was a US-based private military company initially focused on telecommunications defense and protection. Founded in 1981, by 1997, it had a capital of \$171 million. 1998, they acquired Visicom Inc. and Delfin Systems Inc. to expand their business. In 2003, they signed contracts with the US Armed Forces to secure translation channels, earning just over \$112 million (Law Insider 2000). In 2005, they signed a new contract with the US government worth \$163.9 million. As the company itself announced, the contract stated that they were obliged to “provide a full range of planning, analysis, exercise, and information technology services for consequence management operations involving chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosive threats” (Coleman et al. 2019; Gov Info 2006).

Numerous controversies have marked Titan Corporation. In 2004, employees assigned to secure Abu Ghraib prison were accused of abusing prisoners. Mercenaries were involved in 36% of all scandals related to this prison, and no one was held accountable, according to research by Peter Singer (Singer 2005). According to the testimony of one mercenary, Adel Nakhla, prisoners were beaten, stripped naked, tied up, and placed in sexual positions. Although a legal process was initiated and six mercenaries were charged, no one was held accountable for their actions (Singer 2005). On March 2, 2005, the company admitted to illegally donating \$2 million to the re-election campaign of Benin President Mathieu Kérékou in 2001 and paid \$28.5 million for it (USD TDC 2005).

Also, under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, they were fined for bribery and filing false tax returns. Titan Corporation briefly partnered with SkyWay Communications, whose DC9 plane, N900SA, was seized in April 2006 with a cargo of 5.5 tons of cocaine (Hopsicker 2006).

Therefore, the largest private military companies in the world, with the most significant number of employees and earnings, are located in the United States (AirScan, Vinnell Corporation, Triple Canopy, Custer Battles, Titan Corporation, Constellis Holdings, Northbridge Services Group, Northrop Grumman, MAG Aerospace, Jorge Scientific Corporation, Raytheon, MPRI, Inc.). The second country in terms of their number and earnings is the United Kingdom (Aegis Defence Services, Erinys International, Rubicon International Services, International Intelligence Limited, Sandline International) (McFate 2016). Russia is

the third country regarding the number of private military companies. Still, the way the state tries to control and regulate the work of private military companies (under the strict control of the Federal Security Service) differs from the way Western powers deal with them. Their active private military companies are Fasel, Patriot, Redut, Slavonic Corps, and Wagner Group.

Other countries with significant PMC presence include Peru, Turkey, France, Germany, Poland, Gibraltar, Spain, and Australia (McFate 2016).

SERVICES PROVIDED BY PRIVATE MILITARY CONTRACTORS

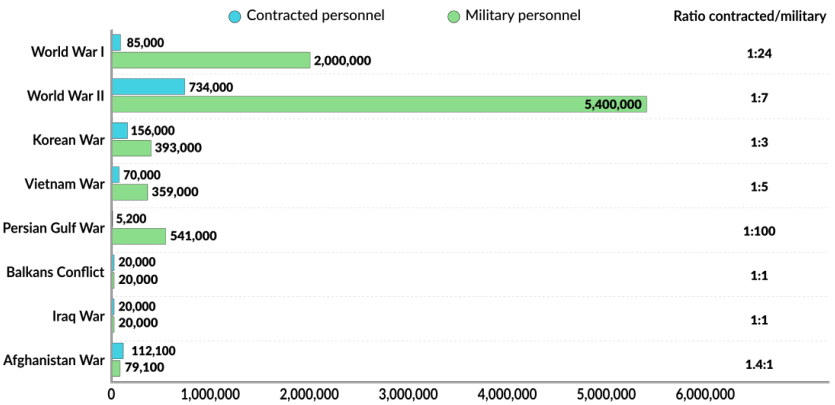
UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan addressed the gathering at the annual Ditchley Foundation conference in the United Kingdom on June 26, 1998. He highlighted the importance of private military and security companies, with a conclusion that resonates differently today than when it was uttered: “(...) When we needed skilled soldiers to separate the combatants from the refugees in Rwandan refugee camps in Goma, I even considered the possibility of hiring a private firm. But the world may not be ready to privatize peace” (Fasanoti 2024).

According to definitions provided in the propaganda materials of private military companies, the role of their personnel is multifaceted: they provide external and internal security, participate in hostilities, secure local authorities, and according to the roles they have taken on, they even become an extension of the armed forces of that leadership. Private military companies oversee key infrastructure, such as oil wells and mines, and train local forces. The protection of energy sources is a critical component and is of strategic interest to every state (Đorić i Obrenović 2022, 67; 80). Private military companies are most often tasked with protecting energy sources.

We usually talk about how state governments hold monopolies of power within them; however, we should also consider the phenomenon of the state apparatus abandoning its traditional roles and transferring them to other bodies. This phenomenon is characteristic of Somalia, Libya, Lebanon, and Yemen, where governments are weak and military forces enforce the law. According to security expert Federica Saini

Fasanotti, another phenomenon is characteristic of Hezbollah in Lebanon, where military groups even provide essential services to citizens (Fasanoti 2024).

Figure 1: The relationship between mercenaries and armed forces in 20th-century wars



Source: Fasanoti 2024.

In most cases, the US has used the services of private military companies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Participation in hostilities and securing infrastructure and governments are increasingly being transferred to their hands. When looking at the ratio of mercenaries to regular soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, we see that it reached 1:1 in Iraq in 2007 and then increased to 1:3 in Afghanistan in 2013. This is a historic turning point in American military history. Today, the US government and the CIA depend entirely on private military companies, leaving them to conduct their “wars” (Transparency International UK 2022).

In 2008, the number of private military company personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan exceeded 200,000 (Wing 2010, 15–16). This includes armed soldiers and unarmed specialists engaged in logistics, communications, intelligence, and maintenance. Of course, the number of participants is significant, and their organization has proven fruitful for those who order the work. However, this has its price, and we can conclude that excessive reliance on mercenaries weakens regular armed forces and contributes to the strategic vulnerability of the state. However, it seems that the US has not yet fully realized these negative aspects

and has engaged private military companies in a whole range of tasks, and in addition to Iraq and Afghanistan, sends them to Yemen, Syria, and throughout the African continent (Fullon 2015, 35).

Therefore, the activities of private military companies include combat operations, security, training, transportation, communications, and other activities, as well as complementary services designed to prevent intervention on the battlefield, such as negotiations, advisory, and intelligence services, according to Singer's theory, according to research by Joel Baum and Anita McGahan, former US generals who served as senior consultants in private military companies, such as MPRI, cultivated skills in training and negotiation precisely because of their personal preference to avoid armed conflict whenever possible (Baum and McGahan 2009, 13–14). They further argue that the founders of these companies tend to be ideologically committed to the missions they undertake and the services they provide. They are also known for their dedication to the ideals of military discipline and the rigor of military life. They employ military veterans with a proven propensity for service. Conventional customs, rules, command structures, training, and specialization of the military hierarchy characterize the formal administrative systems of private military companies, making them close to regular armed forces (14).

We must now answer what private military companies do and where their employees are engaged. We will use publicly available information in the academic world and investigative journalism. They are involved in:

- protecting airports (AirScan, operating in Colombia, across Africa, worked in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and then in North Macedonia; Custer Battles, LLC; L-3 MPRI in Yugoslavia in the 1990s; Northrop Grumman Corporation in the US, UK, NATO members, Japan);
- operations in Afghanistan and/or Iraq (Blackwater – Constellis Holdings; Custer Battles, LLC; MAG Aerospace; L-3 MPRI; Triple Canopy; The Vinnell Corporation; Aegis Defence Services; Aegis Defence Services; Rubicon International Services Ltd; The Mozart Group);
- operations in Africa (Aegis Defence Services, etc.);

- cooperation with state intelligence services and intelligence gathering (Blackwater – Constellis Holdings; International Intelligence Limited);
- surveillance and espionage for government needs (Jorge Scientific Corporation; MAG Aerospace; L-3 MPRI; Northbridge Services Group Ltd);
- logistics and technology (Jorge Scientific Corporation; Northbridge Services Group Ltd);
- protection of oil reserves (L-3 MPRI in Equatorial Guinea; Aegis Defence Services; Aegis Defence Services);
- the war in Ukraine (on the side of Western countries: Northbridge Services Group Ltd; The Mozart Group; Cubic; DynCorp; Sons of Liberty International; Byblos; Chiron; Geos; Prevail Partners; and on the side of Russia: Wagner Group, Task Force Rusich and Patriot);
- protection of telecommunications (Titan Corporation) and dozens of others (more covert), operating worldwide on various tasks.

CONCLUSION

The operations of all private military companies are invariably accompanied by scandals, as discussed in this paper. These range from tax evasion and document forgery to drug trafficking, abuse and murder of civilians, and human trafficking. Despite laws regulating their operations, abuses are frequent (almost inevitable in their work), and it is worrying that they essentially take over the traditional roles of the armed forces and state authorities. Although accusations against them exist, and legal proceedings have been initiated, most never receive a court verdict, and their crimes remain unpunished.

This raises a logical question in light of all the above: to what extent will private military companies develop, and will they replace entirely regular armed forces? What consequences can be expected for states (as is slowly beginning to be reflected in the example of the US) that neglect regular armed forces and rely on the engagement of private military companies?

Approximately 150 private military companies are operating worldwide, with the United States and the United Kingdom hosting the most significant concentrations. While the US and UK have granted PMCs significant operational freedom and lucrative contracts, Russia has adopted a more restrictive approach, placing them under the control of the Federal Security Service.

Private military companies have become a significant force in global security, with their influence felt in countries worldwide. While these companies often promise security and stability, their operations are frequently characterized by a profit-driven approach that can undermine these goals. Their promotional materials usually emphasize their ability to provide protection, but their actions often lead to increased instability and conflict.

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