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Factors Determining the Participation of Private Military and Security Companies in 21st-Century Armed Conflicts and the Resulting Challenges for State Actors

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Introduction

In the 21st century, we are witnessing the commercialization of armed conflicts conducted by state actors through the increasing outsourcing of military services carried out by Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs). The range of their tasks is continuing to expand, encompassing logistical support, intelligence gathering, military training, humanitarian assistance and even combat missions.

PMSCs are defined as: "[...] a corporate entity, which provides on a compensatory basis, military and/or security services by physical persons and/or legal entities" (A/HRC/57/45/Add.1, 2024: 10). In the academic literature, many other definitions of PMSCs can be found, describing them, for example, as:

> […] business organizations engaged in the trade of professional services closely linked to warfare. These are corporate bodies specializing in providing military skills, including combat operations, strategic planning, intelligence, risk assessment, operational support, training, and technical expertise (Singer, 2008: 8).

The first PMSCs emerged in the 1960s, successfully engaging in activities such as building bases and providing logistical support for US forces in Vietnam, as well as supporting British interests in Africa. At the same time, the conflicts that erupted in Africa and Europe in the 1990s increased the demand for foreign military interventions, and the resulting gap in military services began to be filled by PMSCs (Singer, 2017: 119–125).

However, the true expansion of PMSCs was driven by the US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, which were a consequence of the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States. The "war on terrorism" that began generated demand for highly qualified specialists in military services, which were dominated by private entities in the subsequent decades of the 21st century. According to research conducted by Market Research Report, the value of services provided by private military corporations was estimated at 314.7 billion USD in 2025, and is expected to grow to 521.9 billion USD by 2035 (MAK Data Insights, 2026).

The primary aim of this article is to answer the main research question, namely: What factors shape the growing involvement of private military companies in the conflicts of the 21st century, and what challenges does this pose for state actors?

This research question is important because it addresses one of the most dynamic and controversial phenomena in the contemporary security environment – one that significantly influences the way wars are conducted and how crises are managed. Understanding the factors behind the increasing role of private military companies makes it possible to assess the extent to which the position of the state as the primary actor in the security sphere is changing, as well as the risks and responsibilities arising from this transformation.

In the research process, the author focused primarily on collecting, selecting, describing and scientifically interpreting reports and publications devoted to PMSCs, using theoretical methods such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization and inference.

Examples of the Use of PMSCs in Contemporary Armed Conflicts

The large-scale involvement of PMSCs in the conflicts that began in the early 21st century in Afghanistan and Iraq was influenced by several factors directly or indirectly linked to US policy. This cause-and-effect relationship appears natural and evident, considering that of all participating countries, the United States contributed by far the greatest financial and military resources and had the most significant impact on the course of these wars. The first factor driving the use of PMSCs in these two conflicts was the historical relationship between the private sector and the US armed forces, dating back to World War II, continuing through the Vietnam War, and the 1991

Gulf War. This relationship was also reflected in state regulations that facilitated the use of private enterprises to support US military operations.

Another factor shaping the involvement of PMSCs was the reluctance of American society to bear once again the human cost of war (military personnel casualties), stemming from the traumatic experiences of the Vietnam War. A further incentive for PMSCs was the shortage of specialists needed to operate advanced weapons systems and provide logistical support – shortages openly communicated by the military. Moreover, the heavy engagement of special operations forces in direct combat in Afghanistan and Iraq created a deficit of personnel available to provide adequate protection for key individuals and institutions operating in the conflict zone. This capability gap was quickly filled by private military corporations, which contracted former special forces personnel (Terlikowski, 2008: 12–13).

Statistical data confirms the growing role of private contractors in the armed conflicts of the 21st century. During the first Gulf War in 1991, the ratio of civilian contractors to soldiers was 1 to 100. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, this ratio increased to 1 to 10. In the following years of the conflict, the ratio reached 1 to 1, and by 2007 contractors outnumbered soldiers (Bejesky, 2014: 62–63).

PMSCs in Afghanistan

Private military corporations, after the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan in 2001, eagerly took advantage of emerging opportunities to secure lucrative contracts with US government agencies. The American company Blackwater (BW), founded in 1997 by former Navy SEAL Erik Prince, received a contract worth 170 million USD to protect the CIA headquarters in Kabul, and subsequently, for several years, provided security for US personnel and the American embassy in Afghanistan. In addition, BW trained a total of several thousand soldiers of the Afghan army and border guard. It is important to emphasize that during its years of operation in Afghanistan, none of the personnel protected by Blackwater was injured or killed. The company built its international reputation on this undeniable achievement (Prince, 2014: 362).

One of the main beneficiaries of the conflict in Afghanistan was the private military corporation DynCorp International, one of the largest and best-known private military companies in the world. The corporation received numerous contracts, including one for providing security to Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Between 2002 and 2013 alone, the US Department of State spent over 4 billion USD on contracts in Afghanistan, of which 2.8 billion USD went to DynCorp – representing 69% of all funds allocated by the Department of State during the war. It should be noted that DynCorp repeatedly faced problems fulfilling its contractual obligations and providing transparent accounting for the funds received. British PMSCs

also operated in Afghanistan. One of them, G4S, received a contract worth approximately 100 million pounds in 2018 to provide security services for the British embassy in Kabul (SIGAR, 2014).

In August 2010, following a series of scandals involving foreign PMSCs, a decree issued by the President of Afghanistan ordered the termination of operations of eight major foreign private military companies (Reliefweb, 2010).

Investigations confirmed in many cases that PMSCs and their subcontractors paid tens of millions of dollars to local warlords in exchange for "protection" of their convoys. It was also found that many reports of attacks on convoys were fabricated or false, serving only as justification for increasing convoy protection costs. There were also suspicions of payments being made to the Taliban to prevent attacks on these convoys. Another challenge associated with the functioning of PMSCs in Afghanistan was widespread corruption among Afghan officials. Many private contractors complained that they had to pay bribes ranging from $1,000 to $10,000 each month to almost every Afghan governor, police chief, or local military commander for convoys to pass through the territories they administer (Warlord, Inc., 2010).

Activities of PMSCs in Iraq

On 20th March 2003, after the expiration of the ultimatum issued to Saddam Hussein's regime, the United States and coalition countries launched Operation Iraqi Freedom. After less than six weeks of combat operations, on 1st May 2003, US President George W. Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq and the victory of the United States and its allies. However, it turned out that the United States and its coalition partners had been bogged down in Iraq for many years. The United States and its allies, already embroiled in two wars, were "aided" by private military companies, which began to fill the gaps in the combat capabilities of coalition forces on an unprecedented scale and provide combat and logistical support for them (Łukasiewicz, 2018).

With each passing year, the number of PMSCs in Iraq increased, and the scope of their tasks expanded. This trend was driven by the deteriorating security situation in Iraq and the need for coalition soldiers to focus on strictly combat operations, delegating additional training, support, logistics and protection tasks to PMSCs.

As early as August 2003, the Department of Defense signed a contract worth approximately 21 million USD with Blackwater to protect Paul Bremer, the Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Less than a year later, the same corporation secured another lucrative contract – this time awarded by the Department of State – to protect the newly opened U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on

30th June 2004, located in the so-called "Green Zone." Three months after signing the embassy contract, Blackwater established its own independent Quick Reaction Force (QRF) in Baghdad. On 3rd October 2007, after insurgents attacked the Polish ambassador, retired Lieutenant General Edward Pietrzyk, and his security detail in Baghdad, it was Blackwater's QRF that arrived first, evacuating the severely wounded general and his team from the ambush site (Prince, 2014: 100–105, 326–329).

Another American PMSC, Vinnell Corporation, received a contract from the Department of Defense to train several dozen infantry battalions of the newly formed "Iraqi Army". Meanwhile, the private corporation DynCorp International received a major contract worth 1.3 billion USD from the Department of State to train and equip the Iraqi police. A legal case was brought in the United States concerning the fulfilment of this contract, and in 2025 DynCorp International agreed to pay 21 million USD in compensation for knowingly submitting inflated subcontractor rates under the police training contract known as "CIVPOL" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025).

From the early stages of the conflict, numerous controversies surrounded the activities of PMSCs in Iraq. Incidents involving armed PMSC personnel interacting with civilians were periodically reported, most often in urban areas, including firing in the direction of civilians or throwing water bottles at pedestrians appearing along convoy routes. However, the true shock to public opinion came in April 2004, when reports and photographs were published detailing the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers and PMSC personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison. Investigations revealed that 100% of interpreters and approximately 50% of interrogators at Abu Ghraib were private contractors from Titan and CACI. Evidence showed that they were involved in 36% of documented abuse cases. It is important to note that all US soldiers involved in the abuses at Abu Ghraib were brought before military courts for their actions, whereas none of the private contractors named in US Army reports were charged or punished (Taguba, 2004).

However, the crossing of a "red line" occurred with the tragic events of 16th September 2007 at Nisour Square in Baghdad, when employees of the American PMSC Blackwater, while escorting US Embassy personnel, unlawfully opened fire on Iraqi civilians, killing 17 and wounding 20 people.

This incident outraged the Iraqi government and the local population, especially since similar, though smaller-scale, events involving other PMSCs had occurred in the past. Iraq sought to prosecute the perpetrators in its own courts, but this proved impossible due to Coalition Provisional Authority Order No. 17 of 17th June 2004 (UNHCR, 2004), which granted contractors in Iraq immunity from Iraqi judicial jurisdiction (Safi, 2020).

These and similar incidents involving PMSC personnel and coalition soldiers unfortunately shaped a negative perception among the local population and

undermined efforts to win the "hearts and minds" of Iraqis. At the end of 2007, the government in Baghdad adopted a draft law removing immunity from all foreign PMSCs operating in the country, and Blackwater was forced to leave Iraq in 2009 (Horton, 2007).

PMSCs in Ukraine and Syria

The use of PMSCs in the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria differs significantly from their deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq. The key difference lies in the fact that Russian PMSCs played the dominant role in these conflicts and, unlike their Western counterparts, were more heavily involved in direct combat operations rather than support or logistics tasks. Although the operation of private military companies in the Russian Federation has been – and remains – illegal, Moscow has nonetheless used selected PMSCs to conduct military operations abroad as tools for advancing its policy objectives and protecting its interests, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. The Russian strategy of employing PMSCs to pursue national goals is a logical consequence of the 2013 statement by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, General Valery Gerasimov, who argued that the extensive use of private military companies, combined with armed local forces, would become a permanent feature of the modern battlefield, where strategic deception plays a significant role (Jawor, 2020). The main purpose of this approach is to avoid direct Russian involvement in conflicts on the international stage or, as in the ongoing war in Ukraine, to reinforce the actions of the Russian army through the direct participation of PMSCs in combat operations.

The most striking example of Russia's strategy of using private military corporations to achieve its strategic objectives was the Wagner Group (WG), officially founded by former GRU officer Dmitry Utkin, but in reality created under the inspiration of Russian military intelligence in May 2014. The annexation of Crimea and the events soon to unfold in eastern Ukraine undoubtedly served as the catalyst for the group's formation. In 2014–2015, the Wagner Group fought in Donbas, effectively supporting separatist operations. The group has also been accused of shooting down a Ukrainian Il-76 military transport aircraft in June 2014, resulting in the deaths of 49 soldiers (Górski, 2023).

After proving its effectiveness in Donbas, the Wagner Group began supporting the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015. In the initial phase, the group operated in eastern Syria with the objective of regaining control over oil and gas fields occupied by ISIS, acting on a contract from the Syrian Ministry of Energy. Once these areas were liberated from Islamic State control, Wagner personnel assumed full responsibility for securing the extractive infrastructure. Payment most

often took the form of 25% of the profits generated by local oil and gas companies, which were transferred to Evro Polis, a company linked to Prigozhin.

Subsequently, supported by Russian airpower, the Wagner Group took part in direct combat operations against ISIS and the Syrian Democratic Forces (Heinemann-Grüder, 2023). Most Wagner fighters left Syria in the spring of 2016, but they returned several months later to recapture Palmyra for the second time from ISIS militants (Żochowski et al., 2018).

When the plan for the "special military operation" launched by Russia on 24th February 2022 failed and the Russian army began experiencing serious difficulties on the front line, the decision was made to deploy PMSCs. The Wagner Group – widely regarded in Russia as effective and ruthless – was brought in. From August 2022, Wagner forces participated in the siege and capture of the cities of Soledar and Bakhmut in Donbas. In Ukraine, the group was assigned to the most difficult sectors of the front, suffering severe personnel losses. These losses increased further due to the declining quality of training among newly recruited "volunteers" drawn from Russian prisons (Heinemann-Grüder, 2023).

The owner of the Wagner Group, Dmitry Prigozhin, frustrated by what he described as the incompetence and poor leadership of senior Russian military commanders in Ukraine, launched an open rebellion on 23rd June 2023, marching his fighters towards Moscow. However, behind-the-scenes negotiations led to an agreement, and the march was halted. All indications suggest that Putin did not forgive the Wagner leader for this act of insubordination, as two months later the private jet carrying Prigozhin and Utkin to St. Petersburg crashed north of Moscow, killing all passengers. Thus, it can be argued that although the Wagner Group served as an instrument of Russian foreign policy, it eventually grew into a force so large and autonomous that it was capable of challenging its own patrons (Reuters, 2023).

PMSCs in Africa

In Africa, PMSCs often filled security gaps resulting from the limited capacity of states to counter threats posed by terrorist and rebel groups, as well as challenges stemming from political instability. In the 21st century, private military companies have been active in numerous African states, including the Central African Republic, Sudan, Nigeria, Mali and Libya. The activities of PMSCs on the African continent have, in some cases, contributed to improved security, while in others they have led to tensions and abuses, with civilians suffering the most.

One example of the effective use of PMSCs was the cooperation of the Nigerian government with the private military company STTEP in the fight against Boko Haram. As part of this cooperation, STTEP contractors conducted military training

and supported the planning of operations against the terrorist organization. Thanks to the use of innovative manoeuvre-based operational tactics, Nigerian government forces regained control over parts of the territory previously seized by Boko Haram (Adamo, 2020).

However, one of the many negative examples of PMSC involvement in Africa was the operation in the town of Moura (Mali) carried out in March 2022. According to an Amnesty International report, at least 500 civilians were killed and more than 50 women were subjected to sexual violence during the operation, which was conducted by Malian government forces supported by contractors from the Wagner Group. This event became a symbol of the challenges associated with the legal accountability of private military companies and the difficulties in enforcing international humanitarian law (Amnesty International, 2023).

Comparison of Russian and Western PMSCs

It is also worth noting the key differences in the role, objectives, tasks and functioning between Russian and Western PMSCs, which can be summarized as the following comparisons (Boussel, 2024):

- PMSCs in Russia are officially considered illegal, whereas Western PMSCs are legally registered companies subject to the legal regulations of the countries in which they operate.
- Russian PMSCs are generally used as specific tools to achieve the Kremlin's geopolitical objectives and are therefore tasked and controlled by Russian state and intelligence services. In contrast, Western PMSCs operate as commercial service providers focused on maximizing profit. Their activities are supervised by state or corporate institutions in accordance with applicable law.
- Russian PMCs, besides engaging in military operations (often in direct combat actions), also carry out activities aimed at securing access to the natural resources of other countries in exchange for "providing security", influencing the internal politics of selected states and supporting pro-Russian regimes. In contrast, Western PMSCs focus on providing security, logistical support, training local forces and protecting infrastructure, without engaging in direct combat or political and economic activities.
- Financial relations between Russian PMSCs and their clients (Russian intelligence and government agencies) are usually classified, whereas Western PMSCs have transparent and publicly available contract values (Sukhankin, Hurska, 2020: 2).
- Russian PMSCs have not signed the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoC) nor are parties to the Montreux Document, whereas most Western PMSCs have signed these documents and usually operate

in compliance with international regulations and are subject to legal accountability, although cases of abuse also occur.

The above comparison highlights significant differences between Russian and Western PMSCs in terms of legal status, roles played in armed conflicts, accountability mechanisms and their relationships with state entities. In summary, Russian PMSCs are closely linked to the state and primarily serve Russia's strategic objectives, while Western PMSCs are formal commercial firms providing military and broad security services, profit-oriented, and operating in a more transparent and regulated environment.

Summary

Contemporary armed conflicts increasingly involve non-state actors, including private military companies, which have become a permanent element of the global security market. Understanding the factors that determine the involvement of PMSCs in armed conflicts allows for a better assessment of their impact on the course and dynamics of modern wars, which in turn contributes to the growing number of tasks expected of national armed forces. This rise in operational demands means that states engaged in conflicts – facing limited military capabilities on the one hand and the need to address new challenges on the other – are increasingly "supporting" themselves with PMSCs.

The determinants driving the increased involvement of PMSCs in modern armed conflicts can be considered in terms of political, military, economic and social factors.

- **Political factors:** State actors, by using PMSCs, can pursue their strategic objectives without the need for direct engagement and without assuming full responsibility for their actions. In this context, PMSCs become tools for conducting proxy wars. Contracting PMSCs is often seen by political leaders as a way to address emerging threats without bearing the political costs associated with mobilizing manpower reserves (Kuźniar, 2022).
- **Military factors:** The reduction in the size of national armed forces, combined with the growth of operational demands, forces the outsourcing of military services to fill those operational gaps. Therefore, states increasingly contract private companies to provide logistical support, training, facility protection, and even participate in combat operations. Moreover, PMSCs possess the ability to respond and withdraw quickly, offer high operational flexibility, and primarily ensure high task effectiveness, which allows states to meet sudden demands while avoiding long-term military commitments (Brakoniecki et al., 2026: 49–51).
- **Economic factors:** Hiring PMSCs is also directly related to financial considerations. For many states, these entities are cheaper and more flexible than

maintaining large armies. According to the Pentagon, training a soldier in basic specialisms alone costs between 55,000 and 74,000 dollars, to which maintenance, salaries, and insurance costs are added. These expenses grow significantly for more specialized personnel (Habtom, 2023).

- **Social factors:** Another argument, from the perspective of state actors, for employing PMSCs is society's reluctance to bear casualties (soldiers killed or wounded). Therefore, in the case of negative outcomes of military operations conducted by contracted PMSCs (e.g. operational failures or casualties), the state can distance itself from responsibility for their actions. Public opinion and social pressure are also significantly lower in relation to private entities than they would be towards national armed forces, as the death of a contractor evokes much less emotional response in society than the death of a soldier (Brakoniecki et al., 2026: 55–56).

However, outsourcing PMSCs by state actors, despite its many advantages, also brings a number of complex challenges. As past experience shows, the high effectiveness of PMSCs often comes at the cost of brutality, human rights violations and actions that exceed accepted norms of international law – as illustrated by the practices of American PMSCs in Iraq or the activities of the Wagner Group in Ukraine, Syria, and Mali. These companies may operate in a kind of "grey zone", where accountability is diffused or difficult to enforce. For this reason, the international community has attempted to establish standards regulating the activities of private military corporations. In 2008, at the initiative of the Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross, the so-called Montreux Document was created, outlining international legal obligations and good practices for states related to PMSC activities during armed conflict. The Montreux Document is not a formal international treaty and therefore does not impose binding legal obligations. Its main purpose is to promote respect for international humanitarian law and human rights. In practice, this means ensuring that PMSCs comply with international humanitarian law and human rights standards. Two years later, also at the initiative of the Swiss government, the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoC) was established, although its standards remain voluntary (Łukowski, 2020).

Despite the many controversies surrounding the involvement of private military corporations in armed conflicts, their position in the near future appears secure. The growing number of regional conflicts on the one hand, and the limited capabilities of national armies on the other, create a demand for specialized military competencies, fostering the expansion of the PMSC sector, which has become an important component of the global security architecture.

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Factors Determining the Participation of Private Military and Security Companies in 21st-Century Armed Conflicts and the Resulting Challenges for State Actors

Abstract

In the 21st century, we are witnessing a marked increase in the involvement of private military and security companies in ongoing armed conflicts. This trend stems from a variety of factors, including the growing commercialization of security and changes in the nature of modern warfare. States increasingly turn to private actors to fill gaps in military capabilities, enhance operational flexibility, reduce costs, and limit the political risks associated with deploying regular armed forces. However, the activities of private entities also pose numerous challenges for the states that contract their services and exert a direct

influence on the socio-political situation in conflict zones. The aim of this article is to identify the factors shaping the growing involvement of private military and security companies in 21st-century conflicts and to outline the resulting challenges for state actors.

Keywords: private military and security companies, contemporary armed conflicts, military services, international security

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Jerzy Gut: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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