

Portraits in Practice: The Private Security Business and the Reconfiguration of International Politics

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Word count: 10490

Paper presented at the SGIR at the University of Torino 12-15 September 2007 (section 9)

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Abstract:

Departing from the self-portrayal of the private security business as a normal, non-political sector at the service of states and other legitimate clients, this article argues that the rise of the private security business reinforces general trends towards techno-managerial, de-politicized, and militarized security practices. Even when firms behave by their own books, security privatization reconfigures international politics. This tends to be obscured both in mainstream international relations analysis and in the critical literature on security privatization. International Relations scholars focus on the extent to which privatization undermines or alters states and the state regulatory systems at the expense of changes that leave these intact. The critical literature

concentrates on denying the self-portrayal of private security firms – showing the degree to which they are inefficient, politicized and corrupt – neglecting the unspectacular, normal, situations where the portraits private security firms present of themselves reflect their practices. As this article shows, the lack of attention to situations where the private security business does not undermine states or public regulation and acts as it preaches leads to a misunderstanding of some essential implications of security privatization.

Portraits in Practice: Private Security Business and the Reconfiguration of International Politics

Since the end of the Cold War private security has become a lucrative, fast growing business. At the outset, this passed largely unnoticed. This is no longer the case. The beheading of Blackwater employees in Fallujah, the participation of CACI and Titan in the Abu Ghraib interrogations and the close relations between vice president Dick Cheney and “the industry” are just some of the reasons it has made it into the media and hence into public debate. An impressive amount of journalistic work in the form of documentaries, articles and books is sustaining this position in the ongoing policy debate particularly, but not exclusively, in the US context. In some respects, the private security industry is literally fashionable. Paris stores carry Blackwater branded clothes (West, 2006) and Leonardo di Capri plays a “soldier of fortune” in the film *Blood Diamonds*. As one would expect in this context, International Relations (IR) scholars have engaged in taking stock and debating the significance and implications of the rapidly growing commercialization and outsourcing of security. Scholars have critically assessed the efficiency of the industry, the shifting dividing-lines between the private and the public and their implications for governance and accountability.

This article builds on this literature but shifts the focus and the question asked. It asks if and how privatization and outsourcing changes security practices and it focuses on what happens when private security firms behave as they say they do. The substantive claim in the article is that the exponential growth of the security business contributes to the technocratization and de-politicization of security practices, including the practices of states. To make this argument, the article looks at three central aspects of the portrait the private security business paints of itself and

explores the security practices linked to these portraits. The article argues that the portrait of the business as “normal” is linked to techno-managerial security practices, that its image as “non-political” leads to de-politicized security practices, and that the subordination of the private security business to states engenders a militarization of security practices. Before making this argument, the reason and relevance of looking at portraits and practices to assess the private security business will be explained with reference to the existing literature.

Retrieving Portraits /Analyzing Practices in the International Relations Context

This article can neither summarize nor do justice to the voluminous and rich literature on the privatization of security in the International Relations / Security (IR) context. What it can do, is to clarify how its argument relates to that literature. The base line is that by focusing on portraits and practices, the analysis draws attention to two aspects of the private security business that have been marginalized in the evolving discussion. By taking the self-portrayal of the private security business as its point of departure, it breaks with the tendency prevailing in the critical literature on private security to focus almost exclusively on de-mystifying industry. By emphasizing security practices, the article moves away from the IR inclination to assess security privatization mainly from the perspective of how it affects the state and state based regulation of the private security sector and the use of force more generally.

From Critical Assessments of the “Industry” to Retrieving Portraits

Awareness of the rise of the private security business is a prerequisite for critical discussion. Considerable critical effort has therefore gone into the task of describing the business. Critical

scholars have mounted evidence to show that private military services are rapidly expanding and need (more) critical attention. They have collected information about individual firms, looking at their role in different contexts, generating aggregate (and always shaky) sector figures, providing case studies and looking at overall industry transformations (e.g. Kaldor, Albrecht and Schméder 1998; Musah and Fayemi 2000; Shearer 1998; Silverstein 2000; Singer 2001/2, 2003; Wulf 2005; Jäger and Kümmel 2007). These efforts have met considerable resistance. Peter Singer, the author of one of the first academic books on the topic was told by his PhD supervisor (Samuel Huntington) that the sector was insignificant and that he better find himself “something serious” to work on (Singer 2006). The privatized wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan (Isenberg 2004; Pelton 2006) have rendered this form of critical assessment redundant. Few now need to be persuaded that a private security industry exists and plays a significant role even if many (especially in continental Europe¹) remain unaware that its significance extends beyond the US, the UK and weak developing states.

As the existence and significance of a private security business is broadly accepted, the critical discussion is increasingly geared towards the downsides of its growth. One reason is that the supporters of security privatization depict it as virtually flawless – something the discussion below illustrates. Privatization is purportedly the magic key to the desired combination of reduced expenditures, efficient soldiering/war-making in the service of the national interest or even more ambitiously of international peace. Characteristically, the industry lobby organization focused on promoting international security services calls itself the “International Peace Operations Association” (IPOA) and refers to the private security industry as the “peace and stability industry”. One of the national US lobby organizations focusing on outsourcing of defense tasks generally calls itself “Business Executives for National Security” (BENS). Critical analysis has consequently focused on de-bunking simplistic general statements about the industry. Claims about cost

¹ Most specialists (political and academic) working with security matters in continental Europe assume that privatization concerns the developing world, the former Eastern bloc and the Anglo-Saxon countries (UK/US). In academia Elke Krahnemann (e.g.2005c; 2005b; 2006) and Anna Leander (2006) are notable exceptions.

effectiveness have proven as untenable as generalization about the professionalism of the industry and its work in the service of state. The often staggering costs of an industry managed by administrations that “have forgotten the 1.01 of economics” (Singer 2005) have been criticized in academic and policy-making circles alike (Markusen 2003; Rasor and Bauman 2007; GAO 2005). Private business professionalism and capacity to support military operations have been uneven at best (Singer 2001/2; Rasor and Bauman 2007). In the process, they have created considerable difficulties for states but also for the public armed forces and for civilian populations (Francis 1999; Leander 2005b; Musah 2002; ICIJ 2002).

These critical assessments have improved our understanding of the private security industry. However, the focus on fraud, corruption, human rights violations, employee abuse, impunity and incompetence (Scahill 2007) has left little space for the analysis of the situations where there is nothing spectacular and/or illegal about the activities of the firms in the industry. Concentrating on reversing the security industry self-promotion has led critical analysts to disregard what happens when firms behave well. Yet, this is no marginal issue. Sometimes firms behave as their advocates and managers say that they do. As regulation improves, more firms may do so. Moreover, independently of whether or not firms live up to their self-promotion, the image they present of themselves shapes how others perceive them as well as how they think of themselves. This makes it significant to take the self-portrayal of the private security industry seriously and to critically assess the private security business’ self-portraits. Dealing seriously with the business self-image is too important to be left to lobbyists and business advocates. Hence the focus on business self-portraits in this article and the reason this focus constitutes something of a value added in relation to the established literature.

From Shifts in States, and State Governance to Shifts in Practices

This article also contributes to the discussion in a second way: it moves attention from the question of whether the development of the private security business alters states and/or the international (state) system to the question of how the rise of the private security business alters security practices. Just as portraits, practices have occupied a place at the margins of both the academic and popular discussion. Yet (just as portraits) they deserve careful consideration.

Academic IR analysts as well as policy oriented analysts have tended to think about security privatization primarily from the perspective of its effects on states. There are good reasons for this. Academic IR is inherently state centric. Its political imagination and vocabulary is tied to the inside/outside boundary. Its primary theoretical and empirical interest is therefore the analysis of states and the international state system. Standard text book definitions of IR emphasize that it is the study of relations among states in conditions of anarchy (e.g. Jackson and Sørensen 2003). Partly as a consequence, discussions about whether or not something is significant in IR are mostly framed in terms of whether or not it alters the role and nature of states (in general) and/or of specific subcategory of states (e.g. developing, Western, or superpowers). The way “globalization” and/or sovereignty have been discussed in academic IR are good illustrations of this general tendency. Expectedly, the analysis of security privatization follows this general trend. A central question has been whether or not the emergence of private security alters state control and (more significantly) the state monopoly over the legitimate use of force on which these relations rest (Avant 2005; Leander 2006; Singer 2003; Thomson 1994). This effort has included a differentiation of the effects according to state types and to kind of security privatization considered (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007; Krahnemann 2005a; Leander 2005a and b).

The academic privileging of questions surrounding how privatization affects states, has been reinforced by the fact that the issue is pivotal also for the practical and normative concerns of most observers (academic or not) of the industry. States and their policies are essential for understanding

the development and nature of the industry. But even more so, writing about the industry has often been driven by the question of “what to do about it” or how to improve governance (Chesterman and Lehnardt 2007: 2; Bryden 2006). Ultimately, that question revolves around states. The governance systems in question are public (state based). Initiatives to reform them (or create new ones) also would most likely be taken by states, within the state system. Hence, analysts have looked at how privatization affects-, can be dealt with-, and/or calls for reform of specific parts of the (public) governance system. For example it has been argued that the international norm against private use of force internationally has impeded the development of strong regulation of the sector or perhaps made it redundant (Percy 2007; Kinsey 2005; Zarate 1998). Ways in which contractors can be held responsible to international humanitarian law have been suggested (Doswald-Beck 2007; de Wolf 2007). National governance systems have been analyzed, and sometimes compared, to clarify the different challenges entailed by the increasing reliance on contractors (Whyte 2003). Focus has been placed on the economic governance (or the lack thereof) of the sector (Akeh 2007; Dombrowski 2005; Dupont 2003). It been suggested that clearer regulation of the role of contractors in shaping politics is needed (Leander 2007; Nossal 2001). And the governance of the relations between contractors and armed forces has been analyzed and necessary reforms suggested (Guillory 2001; Zamparelli 1999).

Important as work on how the privatization shifts states and state based governance system is, a side effect of this focus has been that relatively little attention has been paid to what security privatization may mean for other things than states and their governance systems. Most analysts would (if asked) probably not think that security privatization *only* matters if it affects states. Yet, they have spent little time probing the issue. The contention in this article is that this is a mistake. It implies a neglect of the extent to which security privatization may alter the overall context within which state security is evolving; the broader conceptions of politics and security which inform and

shape state policies and governance systems. Asking questions about whether privatization make states and their governance systems “lose control” may be less relevant than asking how privatization alters what states wish to do and how they want to use their governance systems. This is particularly true in the present context where the bulk of the privatization is not only allowed but designed and encouraged by states. Moreover, asking questions about the overarching context is both logically prior to asking questions about how privatization affects the relative strength of institutions, states and firms. It is a way of not losing sight of what is happening to the forest (security practices whether public or private) for all the focus on the trees (states and firms). The shift from states and the state system to practices in this article is an attempt to grapple with this issue. Just as the shift to portraits, the move to practices draws attention to an aspect of the security privatization which receives scant attention.

The general point of undertaking the dual shift in focus (from unmasking to portraits and from states to practices) is hence neither to disprove any specific finding in the existing literature nor to argue that it is generally useless. Rather, it adds to the existing literature by drawing attention aspects of security privatization that have occupied a place at the margins of the ongoing discussion. However, the shift in focus amounts to more than simply adding further dimensions allowing us to see “new” things. This article claims that the prevailing neglect of portraits and practices obscures important analytical questions, perhaps some of the most important ones, if the analysis below is correct. This analysis will proceed by discussing three central aspects of the business portrait and the kinds of (normal and legal) security practices tied to them. The first of these is the portrait of the business as “normal” and the techno-managerial security practices tied to that image.

Portrait/Practice 1: The Normal Business of Techno-Managerial Security Practices

The private security business is like any other private businesses; at least if we are to believe managers of the sector or assorted lobby groups such as BENS, IPOA, the British Security Industry Association (BSIA) or the British Association of Private Security Companies (BAPSC).² Security firms they insist compete with each other for contracts by trying to offer the best product/service at the most attractive price. To do this, they need to attract competent staff. Moreover, as in any other business, firms specialize in specific market segments and bolster their operations by vertical (into corporate hierarchies) and horizontal (between markets) integration strategies. Third, as in any other market, firms engage in marketing, branding and advertising as well as in lobbying aimed at reshaping the regulatory environment. Finally, as in other economic sectors, the state and state sponsored regulation play a central role. This does not imply that there is no market. Moreover, as in other markets some firms and individuals break regulatory norms and laws. This does not mean that there are no laws/norms. The private security business on its own account is, to be clear, a private business sector. The sector has its own idiosyncrasies, but logically and morally it does not fundamentally differ from any other private business sector. This portrayal of the sector will not be contested here. Instead, the question raised is which security practices are tied to this portrayal.

Marketing professional security services

The “normality” of the private security business makes it focus on the technical and the managerial aspects of security. Private security firms sell professional solutions to security problems. This leads them to stress their professionalism and technical capacities. How this is done varies greatly. Some firms work from a very specific competence (for example operating a specific Information Technology system) for others it may be far more general (for example providing guard services for

² The organizations have websites all explicitly stating this view. For a specific example see the statement by the IPOA president (Brooks, 2005).

investors in conflict contexts). Many firms stress their wide range of competencies. Characteristically, Dyncorp (one of the bigger US firms) explains on its website that “maintaining security is a global problem, but individual security needs are unique. Our flexible, integrated approach provides extensive technology and personal security solutions to protect people, facilities, and information.”

When firms compete for contracts, their emphasis on technical expertise and professional competence is paired with an emphasis on cost effectiveness. Potential clients care about results but to also about costs. It is hence unsurprising that we find the cost effectiveness of the industry figuring prominently in the business’ self-promotion. In the US for example, BENS has produced a “Tail-to-Tooth” report suggesting that defense budget could be halved if only the possibilities of outsourcing and privatizing in the sector were fully grasped.³ But also the firms themselves emphasize the cost-effectiveness of the services they offer. Cost effectiveness and technical professionalism usually figure side by side as well illustrated by the following statement by Chris Taylor (of Blackwater, another large US firm):

Send 10.000 UN troops to Darfur? A colossal waste of money. You do not create security and peace by throwing more mediocre, uncommitted people into the fray. 1000-2000 professional contractors could perform those same stability operations, safely turning over the operation to the UN and other NGOs to perform post-conflict operations. That is what they do best (Taylor 2005).

Extending the realm of techno-managerial security practices

The portrait of the private security business as normal and the related competition focused on technical expertise and cost effectiveness make security practices more techno-managerial.

³ The full report is available on the net at www.BENS.org as are a variety of interpretations and policy statements related to it.

Competition in the industry is about convincing clients that a firm is more efficient and cheaper than its competitors. But perhaps even more importantly, it is about convincing these potential clients that technically competent cost-effective security services is what they need in the first place. Unless that is the case, it is irrelevant whether or not a firm is efficient and technically competent. If a potential client sees a problem as a one best dealt with by negotiation, it makes little sense to promote technical and cost effective security services. The solutions considered will involve diplomacy; not security provision. Private security firms are effective in spreading their techno-managerial view of on security issues for two reasons.

The first is that firms push their techno-managerial understanding of security practices onto their potential clients through the “normal” business practices of advertising and lobbying. As other “normal” business, security firms of course inform about their services/products. As any other normal business it also lobbies both to promote specific contracts and for regulatory changes. The significance of advertising and lobbying here is neither that it is somehow morally objectionable to advertise and lobby for military related services/products nor that lobbying is costly and/or potentially illegal. Rather, advertising and lobbying are significant here because they make technical and managerial concerns weigh more heavily in political practices. They do so because they frame problems as security problems, solvable with the help of affordable technical competent measures. This framing becomes part of the debate and thinking about how to deal with the issues the private security sector advertises/lobbies for. As advertising/lobbying by private security firms extends, so does the need to take a position of techno-managerial framings of problems. As a consequence, correspondingly more time and effort goes into discussions where problems are framed as security problems with potential techno-managerial solutions. This is true independently of whether or not the advertising/lobbying produces the results aimed for by the private security

firms. In other words, the normal business practice of advertising and lobbying by security firms increases the weight of technico-managerial security framings.

Second, private security business are pulled into shaping security practices. Private security firms are hired for training and consultancy. This may involve narrow and technical tasks as well as broad and general ones. Private security firms may provide a security package for a firm, a template for analyzing security risks, technical training for a specific weapons system or intelligence regarding a political situations. In all these capacities firms shape the way situations are understood and dealt with. The firms directly transmit their focus on the managerial and technical aspect of security. This may be most obvious when firms provide intelligence and broad policy analysis. Here they are literally hired to transmit their own security focused techno-managerial understanding. This said, narrow technical training / consultancies are no less significant. They involve the establishment of schemes of analysis and understanding as well as of routine forms of action. These effectively shape security practices. The emphasis on the techno-managerial aspects of security is reflected in these narrow, technical routine practices as well as in the broader security analysis firms provide.

Mobilizing pro-market bias

The advertising, lobbying and contracts of the private security firms have of course not made their security focused, technical and managerial interpretation of situations monolithic. Competing views on problems and their solution exist and will most certainly continue to do so. However, the current political context amplifies the impact of the private security business. Since the early 1980s, an overall pro-private-business-and-market-solutions-mood has been the backdrop of politics everywhere (Shipman, 1998; Gill, 1995). New Public Management and “neo-liberal” governance technologies have spread to most areas, including security (Leander and van Munster, 2006).

Consequently, when the private security business portrays itself as a “normal” business, it mobilizes the generally positive bias towards business solutions, privatization and outsourcing. This bias deepens and widens the impact of the techno-managerial security practices it advocates.

This pro-market bias makes security something that not only can, but should, be bought and sold in a market by a “business” that is fundamentally no different from other business. Moreover, with the pro-market bias comes a positive image of firms. They are after all the key market actors. For the private security business this translates as generally favorable assumptions about its competence, professionalism and efficiency. Many observers, policy-makers and administrators have a positive bias towards the private security sector. In the US context, it is trusted to be “strategically effective”, flexible, and a depositor of privileged “local” and situational knowledge (Whelan 2003). This positive bias also shapes comparisons of private security providers with public ones. Evidence of inefficiency and incompetence in the private security business is dismissed as exceptional while the basic controls and auditing procedures are simply ignored (Markusen, 2003). This obviously reinforces the image of the private business as more effective than the public. The positive bias towards the sector is also reflected in the range of actors who rely on private security firms in zones where security is a substantial issue. Corporations, conservationist NGOs in national parks and states training their armed forces resort to private security (Avant, 2005: chap. 5 and Howe, 2001 respectively). But even more telling is the range of activities private security firms are entrusted with. The business is for example involved in reforming the justice system in Iraq (Isenberg, 2004), in negotiating peace accords in Sudan (Chatterjee, 2004) and explaining democracy in Croatia (Silverstein, 2000).

To sum up, the portrait of the private security business as normal is tied to techno-managerial security practices. Through advertising and lobbying the private security business pushes firms, NGOs, publics at large and security professionals to think about security in terms of

costs and technicalities. More than this the private sector is paid to transmit a techno-managerial security understanding when they are asked to train, consult and analyze. The resonance of this framing is amplified by the pro-market bias mobilized by the private security business. It is also accentuated by the de-politicization of security practices discussed below. De-politicization reinforces the technical and managerial nature of security practices by restricting the space for public debate and contestation of problems.

Portrait/Practice 2: The Non-political Business of De-politicizing Security

A second important aspect of the private security business' self-portrait is that the business does not strive to shape politics. Though the business cannot avoid contact with politics, on its own account, it does not try to influence political agendas or force through specific policies. The private security business insists that it is following the agendas of clients; it is responding to a demand. It fills the "gap" between supply and demand for security services. The business thinks of itself as working in continuation of politics. In Clausewitzian fashion they see themselves as working to continue politics by other means. The security practices linked to this portrait de-politicize security. The reason is that when firms stay aloof of politics, the fundamental discussions surrounding security are displaced and become located outside the public sphere in markets: the questions of what constitutes a security problem and whose security problems deserve to deal with becomes a question of funding rather than of politics. As security decisions are placed in markets, the possibility of relying on politics and diplomacy to limit security dilemmas is correspondingly diminished. In this sense, security practices are de-politicized.

A Business outside Politics

The private security business claims to be outside politics, not to be unaffected by it. On the contrary the business continuously emphasizes the importance of two way information flows: from the state to the sector and from the private security sector to the state. The rationale for the emphasis on the two-way information flow is the centrality of states to security operations. This makes it vital for the private security business be informed about politics and to inform policy-makers about its own activities and potential contribution. Hence, when the IPOA informs an audience interested in the “Peace and Stability Industry” why firms should join the association the emphasis is on informing:

“IPOA also works extensively with the media to ensure the private sector is accurately and fairly represented in regard to peace and stability operations, and with key legislators and regulators on issues impacting the industry. As information is of great importance in the peace and stability industry, IPOA works hard to keep its members informed of industry developments, including breaking news, legislative and regulatory proceedings, and potential contracts” (www.ipoaonline.org/php visited 7 July 2007).

Similarly, firms claim to be outside politics. They do not deny that their actions may influence political outcomes. The point is that deciding which outcomes should be influenced is a matter they will not interfere with. Blackwater for example has an advertisement featuring “Bosnia, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Iraq” as header under which the firm proceeds to tell its potential clients “...those of us who enjoy freedom and democracy are now bound to help share it with the world. Through selfless commitment and compassion for all people, Blackwater works to make a difference...” (Advertisement in *IPOA*, 2005: 4). The “selflessness and compassion” is exercised for a legitimate cause and this legitimate cause is defined by politics, not by Blackwater itself. As Blackwater, many firms are keen to work for good causes (including spreading democracy

in Iraq, keeping peace in Afghanistan or capturing Charles Taylor (Rosenfeld, 2005; Opiel and Hart, 2004; Catán and Peeland use it in public to advertise themselves, 2003)). As Balckwater, most private security firms prefer not to engage in the political and public debate about which causes are good.

As the (public) military or the police, private security firms in other words see themselves as acting in a Clausewitzian tradition. They continue politics by other means. However, there are crucial differences between private and public security providers, with implications for what their respective resistance to engage in politics means for security practices. The key difference is that most countries have political procedures – admittedly imperfect and ineffective to varying degrees – designed to control both how the (public) military and security forces engage in politics and to check way the executive uses force (Fisher, 2005; DCAF, 2002). The exact nature of these political procedures varies but they often comprise procedures subjecting security professionals to wider scrutiny. Illustrations of this include procedures requiring uses of force to be reported to parliament or perhaps even approved by it, restrictions on the amounts and kinds of military assistance that can be exported without legislative approval, legislative committees to which the armed forces report and through which they can be heard and so on. This type of political check on the use of force exists to ensure a (potential) continuous political, non-security establishment involvement with the use of force. These processes trigger public debate when force is used; a debate in which the military/security establishment is but one voice of many.

For the private military business the logic is different. Most safeguards that exist for public military involvement are either inapplicable or ineffective (Leander, 2007). Partly this is so because policy-makers and security have wished to keep control ineffective: reliance on private business is a conventional way of circumventing political control (Bigo 2004). Partly the reasons are historical. The 19th and 20th centuries (up until the 1989) were marked by a centralization of control over the

use of force in states. The political checks that do exist reflect this. They focus on areas where private firms kept an involvement (arms exports, logistics) but leave out many other areas and particularly anything resembling military operations which are assumed to be a public monopoly. This is inadequate in the face of the current expansion of private security. The Rubicon separating public troops engaging in combat from private contractors that do not has been crossed (Guillory, 2001).

The weakness of political control over the private security business weakens the public debate triggered (at least potentially) by the political controls weighing on public military involvement. The private security business' unwillingness to engage in politics therefore means something very different implications from that of the public military. It means that control over which issues are security issues and who is to deal with them comes to involve mainly security professionals from the armed forces/police, ministries of defense and possibly the executive branch. Decisions are displaced from a public political process to a narrow technocratic one. Control involving a broad spectrum of stake holders, ranging from the legislative branch (also opposition politicians), the media, interest group organizations and a broader public moves to a far narrower circle. The voice of those who would like to define a problem as something else than a security problem, and to look for non military/policing technical solutions to it, is marginalized if heard at all. The portrait of the private security business as staying aloof of politics leads to practices that marginalize public debate beyond security establishments, move the problem definition out of politics and in other words de-politicize security.

Who's Security?

The de-politicization of security has immediate implications for decisions about whose security is going to be ensured. As political debate about the use of force is displaced, money becomes pivotal

for the decisions about which clients and causes deserve to have firms working for them. The private security business itself would not formulate the basis on which they select their clients in these terms. On the contrary, in line with their general insistence on being apolitical, most firms make a point out of working exclusively for “legitimate clients”. The IPOA code of conduct for example states that: “Signatories pledge to work only for legitimate, recognized governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and lawful private companies”.

However, considering how general statements about working for legitimate clients translate into practice makes clear that funding does become central. The most obvious reason is that legitimate clients for which the firms work also have to be clients capable of paying for the services. This is why observers of politics in Africa worry about the return of “proxy wars” where (legitimate) rich firms/individuals/rulers can fight out their disagreements with the help of private proxy armies (Musah 2002). Inversely would-be-legitimate clients with no capacity to pay will not get services from private companies. While solvent researchers, NGOs, International Organizations, corporations, and governments can buy security services, insolvent political movements, refugees and children cannot. A consequence of making money rather than politics decisive for whose security will be covered, is that the security coverage becomes like a Swiss-cheese with wholes made of financial weakness.

A further, and slightly less obvious, reason financial considerations become more central in deciding who is a legitimate client is the de-politicization just discussed. Part and parcel of that process is that the discussion is about who is a legitimate client moves out of the public realm. Yet who is a “legitimate” client is inherently contestable. Settling who is a legitimate ruler is a – if not *the* – key issue at stake in most contemporary armed conflicts (Holsti 1996). Removing this issue from public debate and settling it among security professionals and business actors increases the weight of financial considerations. How far, is an open question, but there are sufficient illustrations

where of situations where financial considerations have become central. For example, MPRI convinced the US to reconsider its policy towards Equatorial Guinea (allied with Cuba and North Korea). The firm argued that it should be allowed to take on a contract with the country since otherwise a French firm would. By its own description MPRI is now assisting the country with the development of a National Security Enhancement Plan with “an integrated team of defense, security, and Coast Guard experts to provide a detailed set of recommendations to the government of Equatorial Guinea concerning its defense, littoral, and related environmental management requirements, as well as detailed implementation processes” (www.mpri.com). The extent to which the replacement of politics by money has affected security practices is most starkly expressed in the virtual absence of limits to which clients can buy security services. Even clients almost everyone would concede are illegitimate will find some firm willing to sell them military services. A drug cartel in Cali e.g. paid USD 10 million to obtain the material and expertise necessary to bomb their rival Pablo Escobar in the early 1990s (Kouri 2005).

What Threats?

De-politicization increases uncertainty not only about whose security will be covered but also about what threats exist and need response. It accentuates the traditional dilemma of having to prepare for war (building up armed forces e.g.) even though doing so increases the insecurity of the opponent and hence the likelihood of war; i.e. the security dilemma.

The security dilemma is anchored in perceptions of what might happen rather than what really does. The imagined capacity of opponents to buy security services on the private market is sufficient to justify further militarization and expenditure of defense which in turn deepens the traditional security dilemma. Hence it is of secondary importance whether or not the private

security firms do sell their services to opposing parties or not. The important question is whether or not it is believed that they will.

An episode from Ghana in 2004 exemplifies this dynamic (Addo 2004): On 13 August 2004 *The Analyst* (a Liberian newspaper) carries a story about Ghanaian opposition leaders massively recruiting mercenaries in the Ivory Coast, Togo, Senegal and Guinea to attack Ghana. President Adullah Wade (of Senegal) and a former national security boss of Ghana, Kojo Tsikata, were said to be implicated. The story is then reported in the Ghanaian papers *Statesman* (August 19) and *Insight* (August 27-29). The *Accra Daily Mail* adds to the noise by claiming that mercenaries plan planning to strike from Ivory Coast (August 23). The Ghanaian Ministry of Interior confirms that “some people with links to the opposition” are moving along the border regions Ivory Coast and Guinea. The president issues a call for security agencies to be vigilant (26 August). It turns out to be a hoax. *The Analyst* presents public excuses. However, the episode bolstered the Ghanaian security establishment and its demand for better resources. It showed what could have happened and might still happen. For this article, it illustrates the point that even if private security firms do not actually sell services to an opponent, the suspicion that they might is sufficient to deepen traditional security dilemmas.

The portrait of the private security business as a business that stays out of politics is to be clear tied to de-politicized security practices. Money becomes essential in deciding which problems are a security problem, how they should be dealt with and to whose advantage. The consequence is Swiss cheese security coverage and accentuated security dilemmas. This process of de-politicization further marginalizes the alternatives to techno-managerial security understandings that are already effectively out-competed by the technical efficiency of the private security business. The impact of the de-politicization and the technocratization of security are amplified by the close links between

states and the security business; the private security business serves states transforming them from within.

Portrait/Practice 3: The Business of Serving States' Militarized Security Practices

A final essential aspect of the private security business self-portrayal is that the sector does not undermine states, or their authority, on the contrary it supports states. The business constantly emphasizes its close links to states, its growth under the auspices of states and its continuing work for states and other clients recognized as legitimate by these. It is indeed profoundly misleading to think of public and private security actors in zero-sum terms. Gains in state influence do not mirror losses in firm power or vice versa. On the contrary, states and the private security business support and re-shape each other. When the security business serves states it reshuffles power positions inside states in a way tending to militarize security practices. Although this militarizing effect is likely to vary depending on context, it is probably more widespread than usually recognized.

The Blurred Private Public Lines

The private security industry is intertwined with states. The business itself has been created by states' willingness to reduce their direct control over security affairs and to allow increased outsourcing and privatization. States continue to shape the market and often resist regulation attempts (Hulse, 2004). States continue to be among the key clients of security firms, even if one should not underrate the significance of private business, international organizations, NGOs and assorted individuals. States, finally, are directly involved in the business. Many firms originated and continue to operate as (para-) public firms, sometimes partially owned by the state. It is common also for entirely private firms to appoint high-ranking politicians and administrators as epitomized

by the links between the US firm Halliburton and the country's vice president Dick Cheney on which there is a flood of books and intense media coverage (Didion 2006). Finally, firms have close links to the armed forces. According to Ed Soyster, his firm Military Professional Resources (MPRI) has "more generals than the Pentagon" on its staff lists (quoted in Mandel, 2002: 112). EO was linked to the South African Buffalo Battalion, MPRI is linked to the US armed forces, Sandline and its successors/ spin-offs are linked to the UK special services. But even firms that recruit from a variety of countries (e.g. Eriny's and Aegis) will have an overwhelming majority of their employees with origins in (various) national defense establishments.

Private security firms and their interest group organizations underscore that working within this landscape of blurred lines; they are subordinating their interests to those of states. Characteristically, the BAPSC⁴ makes it its first two priorities to "build and promote open and transparent relations with UK Government departments and relevant International Organizations" and "to promote compliance with UK values and interests and with the laws of the countries in which its Members operate". To dissipate any doubts about the relations between the firms in the sector and the UK government, article six of the BAPSC charter further states that membership entails a commitment to "decline to provide security services that might be contrary to UK values and interests." More generally the organization affirms its attachment to the international state based order. It emphasizes that members "will respect applicable laws and values" in countries where they operate and refrain from providing security services if this entails a risk of "adversely affecting the military and political balance in the country of delivery", "a likelihood of the provision involving criminal activity" and/or "a possibility that human rights will be infringed". Similar, statements are issued by the other professional associations and firms.

⁴ The following references are all from www.bapsc.org.uk/key_documents-charter.asp (visited 7 July 2007).

It is not meaningful to assume a zero-sum relationship between states and the private security business. Some parts of “states” (including their armed forces) encourage, work for and benefit from the development of the private security business and inversely the private security business is closely linked to (some parts of) the state. The question is what implications this has for security practices.

Reshuffling Positions of State Power

The blurred boundaries between public and private shift power positions inside states and, through this, alter who weighs on and gives shape to state security practices. Those who are empowered by the growth of the private security are those who either have direct vested interests in it or who share its general view on security.

Many public officials benefit directly or indirectly from private security business. They gain economically as well as in status. Just as “dual use technology” moves between the civilian and military spheres, so do individuals. The blurred lines between the public and the private creates a situation where staff and directors, board members and technicians of private security companies may also hold positions in state institutions including the armed forces, the government or an administration. The close links also create scope for more or less elaborate systems of economic kick-backs not only in the US as illustrated in the European “Augusta”, “Flick”, or Elf-Aquitaine scandals.⁵ The term “business politician” was coined to describe the kind of politician that developed because of the growing closeness of business and politics in Italy (della Porta and Pizzorno, 1996). The “security business politician” is an increasingly common and prominent figure tied to the expansion of the private military sector.

⁵ These scandals have unveiled complex systems of party finance involving large military contractors. For a good discussion of Elf-Aquitaine see the book by the investigative judge Joly (2003).

The growth of the private security business also empowers those who share the private security business' understanding of security and politics, or part of it, without necessarily being directly linked to the sector. For example those who share the private security business' managerial emphasis on cost effectiveness and on the virtue of governing security through markets relying on neo-liberal governance forms find good allies in the advocates of security privatization and outsourcing. Similarly, those who share the private security industry's inclination to expand the number of issues to be dealt with by security professionals with technical expertise (rather than with political/diplomatic means) also have much to gain by promoting the private security business and allying with it. For example, security professionals, not tied to the private sector, may well find their own concerns reflected and their own positions bolstered inside states by privatization and outsourcing. But also politicians with an inclination towards "military adventurism" (Desch, 1999) may find their inclination to frame problems as security problems best solved by relying on military means confirmed, bolstered inside states and more easy to implement due to the privatization and outsourcing. The point is that these people, who share nothing with the private security sector except a form of thinking, become more influential inside states. They gain allies, the impact of their world-view on politics is expanded, it becomes easier for them to implement their policies and to extend them to the field of security.

The bolstering of those who either have a vested interest in the private security business or who share its technical and managerial approach affects security practices. It gives the persons and individuals most prone to have a techno-managerial understanding of security an increased say. Since this understanding is centered on technical solutions and cost efficiency, it limits the scope for contestation. As a consequence, an increasing range of problems is seen as security issues to be responded to by technical (military/policing) and cost effective means. This amounts to a

militarization (in a classical sense⁶) of security practices. Taken to its extreme the trend may result in a “Garrison State” where “crisis accentuation of state power tends to subordinate all social values and institutions to considerations of military potential, and where as a result military and police specialists are placed in advantageous positions, within the decision process” (Laswell, 1997: 102). However, the argument here is not that any particular state has turned into a “garrison state” or that states in general have. Rather, the development of the private security business logically drives state security practices in this direction even if the significance of this drive is far from uniform.

Militarization with Variation

The weight of the security business politician as well as of the reshuffling of security institutions varies considerably across contexts. They vary because of the overall trend is inscribed and shaped in specific institutional and historical settings. These are to a large extent national. That is, the form and substance of both of privatization and outsourcing as well as of the ensuing technocratization, de-politicization and militarization vary because “national security cultures” do (Katzenstein, 1996). However, although the security field remains one of the most nationally entrenched, it is easy to underestimate the significance of the overall general “global” trends discussed in this article.

In post-second world war German security thinking the defense forces are a “school of the nation” and fear that they could escape control is deeply rooted. Privatization and outsourcing in the security sector has consequently remained limited if compared to the situation in the UK. Generally, in the German context, it is difficult (though not impossible) to turn neo-liberal governance into something positive in the defense and security. Similarly, in the German context, there is strong resistance to de-politicization. Part and parcel of the post-second world war heritage is an omnipresent emphasis on the primacy of policy and diplomatic alternatives. Even the individual soldier’s

⁶ Militarization is “the permeation of an entire society by the self-serving ideology of the officer and soldier” (Laswell, 1997: 107).

duty in the *Bundeswehr* is to resist unjust orders (Longhurst, 2004). This gives the security business politicians a rather anonymous shape and also influences the form of institutional power reshufflings. For different reasons variations would also be found in statist France, social democratic Scandinavia, post-Soviet Russia or post-Özal Turkey. These variations go to underline that no uniform version of Laswell's Garrison State is likely to appear any time soon.

The emphasis on variability should not be exaggerated. It is far easier to underestimate the effects of the rise of the private security business on the security practices of states officially resisting privatization than to overestimate it. The restructuring of the security industry world-wide and the intense competition for market shares that this has engendered, affects also those states who appear least prone to privatize and outsource (Kaldor, 1998). An increasing number of standards and security priorities are established beyond the state either through markets or regulatory agencies where private firms have an increasing. For example, in the EU the security services offered by UK companies put pressure on German and French firms to compete and on governments to create the frames regulating but also allowing this competition. The BAPSC has tried to promote regulatory standards that would reshape also the policies in France, Germany and elsewhere if adopted. Moreover, private companies have a part in most multilateral operations (Cockayne 2006). "You could fight without us but it would be difficult" is Paul Lombardi's judgment (2003).⁷ This implies that also states resisting privatization and outsourcing have working relations with the business to the extent that they participate in these operations.

Last but not least, the national boundaries around the field of security are porous or perhaps moebius ribbon like (Bigo 2005). Police and security establishments collaborate. Members of the armed forces work for companies internationally. Defense ministers meet and collaborate. And, as acknowledged by those who study national security cultures, international media, international

⁷ Lombardi is a former CEO of Dyncorp.

institutions, foreign governments and translational civil society groups shape “national security cultures”. Arguments and practices in other contexts are constantly brought in and translated in the national context. The image of the national context in international media and among foreign policy-makers is part and parcel of the discussion. And of course, “international experts” are invited to comment on and make suggestions regarding the national policies. Isolating “national” security practices in any one state from the effects of the rise of the private security industry is an elusive quest.

The private security business portrays itself as working for states to strengthen them. The interesting question is of course how states are strengthened, who and what kind of state policies are empowered by privatization and what kind of security practices result. The answer suggested here is that security practices are militarized. The blurring of public and private lines empowers groups within states that either benefit directly from its existence or the groups that share its overall world-view and priorities. These groups have promoted the industry’s expansion inside states. But more centrally here, their empowerment “militarizes” politics and reinforces the technocratization and de-politicization of security. The fact that the private security industry does not work against states but with-, for-, and through them is in other words not a sign of insignificance. It is constitutive of the private security business’ success and of its indeed significant impact on security understandings.

Conclusion:

This article has emphasized the significance of security business self-portraits. It has looked at what the portraits do by analyzing what happens when the portraits are practice. It has looked at three portraits and traced the security practices tied to them. It has argued that these practices are

reconfiguring security and more broadly international politics. The article has made the point that the normal business practices of private security firms lead to more technocratic and managerial security practices. It has shown that the non-political mode of operations of the sector de-politicizes security practices by reducing the role and scope for political contestation. Finally, the article has underlined that because the private security business works with, for and through states (rather than against them), it militarizes security practices by reshuffling power positions inside states. The point of the article in clear is that political practices are becoming increasingly techno-managerial, de-politicized and militarized.

The general motivation for writing this article is that these changes tend to disappear from view in the discussion of the emergence of private security companies. They disappear from IR mainstream discussions that focus almost exclusively on (the important) issues related to the shifts in the state monopoly on the legitimate use of force, including questions of accountability, control, and security governance arrangements. But they also disappear from the gamut of critical approaches and writings on private security companies aiming primarily at reversing the industry self-portrait by showing its (often indeed proven) non-competitive, corrupt and anti-state nature. The zeal to unveil the hidden and unlawful obscures the legal and unspectacular, but significant, reconfiguration of political practices pointed to in this article. This article has aimed at showing the difficulties inherent in the belief/argument that if we could just identify and punish the bad firms and improve governance networks, privatization with good and regulated firms would have no consequences worth discussing. It has shown the opposite to be true. The argument is no doubt blunt and overly generalizing, however, precisely because the private security business is increasingly established as both acceptable and permanent, it is worth presenting. Not least because it may engender more work and informed analysis of the implications of the private security business when it is behaving according to its books in support of states.

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