

**The Business of World Peace:  
Military Service Providers (MSPs) revolutionize international peace operations**

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Ending wars may be the most important obligation assumed by the United Nations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the 1990s the United Nations engaged in more peace operations (peacekeeping, peace enforcement and humanitarian rescue) than in any other period in its history. Unfortunately, ending wars is not a duty that has been accomplished with any significant degree of capability, enthusiasm, or triumph. The rare success stories are at best qualified, at worst short-lived. The optimism and idealism of the early post-Communist days were shattered by bitter experiences including the collapse of the Somalia mission, and the pathetic inaction by the international community during the Rwandan genocide. However, there is one relatively recent trend in peace operations that has shown a great deal of promise: the growing use of the private sector – military service providers (MSPs) - appearing to substitute for Western reluctance.

An unspoken assumption has been that international peace operations only have a chance to be successful when a large Western country takes charge and provides troops and support – the United States in the Balkans, or Australia in East Timor for example. This perspective is supported by the failure of UN peacekeeping missions such as Angola in the mid-1990s and the rout of the UN mission in Sierra Leone in May of 2000. Lacking the significant capabilities of well trained and equipped Western militaries – and not just combat capabilities, but logistics, intelligence, communications etc. as well – other nations are simply inadequate to the remarkably difficult task of ending wars.

What may challenge that unspoken assumption is the growing role of private companies in peace operations. These companies are willing to risk projects in war zones in order to provide critical services for international peace operations, and normally at a fraction of the cost of state militaries. They capably supplant many of the sorts of services that are normally provided by Western militaries. Western apprehension towards involvement in Third World conflicts, or preoccupation with the War on Terror, is progressively less of a barrier to effective peace operations. The necessary political will to do peace operations has almost always been available in developing countries. Increasingly that political will can be effectively sustained and enhanced with specialized services offered by MSPs making the Western leadership increasingly less vital.

One of the remarkable, little known realities of peacekeeping is how much MSPs already do in support these operations and how critical their services are considered to the success of these missions. Many Americans would be surprised to learn how active some of their compatriots are assisting peacekeeping operations to end obscure conflicts in faraway places. A mere handful of Americans – working with a truly international collection of former service people – do much to provide the critical services that UN or regional peacekeeping require for any chance of success in ending conflicts. Companies like PAE and ICI provide astonishingly reliable logistics services in places where infrastructure is virtually non-existent. Other companies provide demining services, communications and humanitarian services such as water purification and medical training. UN managers are finding it easier to make one phone call to a private company to get something done, rather than numerous phone calls and requests through their own bureaucracy and to the various national contingents to source necessary skills and capabilities.

In the meantime, MPRI and others work with U.S. military assistance programs helping to raise the military capabilities of armies from developing countries, enabling them to be substantially more effective at the incredibly difficult and dangerous peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations. American programs like the Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI, now being replaced by the Africa Contingency Operations Training Assistance, ACOTA) have done much to prepare African militaries to take an increasingly significant burden of peace operations on the continent. But all the military training in the world cannot replace the practical need for effective logistics, helicopter services, communications and other specialties that MSPs bring to peace operations.

What are the implications for this sort of privatizing? Currently international peacekeeping is dependent on the whims of First World countries for success. In fact, for most operations, the direct support of the United States is needed since no other country can quickly assemble the transport and organizational resources for the massive peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. But the private sector has the flexibility and expandability to do these sorts of missions. It has shown the capability to take a much more significant role in peacekeeping in the future. From transport to security, refugee management to medical services, private companies can fill the vacuum left by absent Western capabilities.

This capability to source critical services on short notice is essentially empowering the countries of the developing world with the ability to intervene and support their own peacekeeping operations. It means the regional peacekeeping can become substantially more effective, while Western militaries can concentrate on their own pressing national issues. While Western engagement is something that should still be encouraged, it is now no longer essential.

Critics in the West often disparage the growth of MSPs; but such criticism seldom comes from the countries most affected by ongoing conflicts. Fears that MSPs assisting peace operations will “inevitably” become involved in illegal resource extraction or human rights violations have simply not been realized. Instead, in every case MSPs have earned their welcome and shown themselves to be more effective, more transparent and more accountable. Often, locals trust them more than the international peacekeeping forces they support!

For some academics and Western politicians this growing interest and utilization of MSPs is fraught with numerous theoretical dangers. They treat the companies with disproportional skepticism and suspicion, and the fact that MSPs are able to make profits while ending wars is seen as somehow inherently immoral. These skeptics would rather build a more capable and willing international system relying only on state forces and not private entities. Unfortunately, this utopian concept is unlikely to appear in the next decade - if ever. In the meantime postponing effective peace operations results in the deaths of literally hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians caught in the whirlwind of very endable wars.

MSPs have shown a remarkable capability to empower non-Western militaries, making peace operations more effective and more likely. Maybe some day the West will become truly interested and involved in ending conflicts in developing countries. In the meantime MSPs are there to go where they are needed, and do what needs to be done. And millions of victims trapped in terrible wars are grateful that anyone in the outside world is taking an interest. We in the West should be grateful to MSPs too.