

The Nature and Limits of Private Air Power: Violence and the Relationship to the State

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While studies of ground-based Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) and now their maritime equivalents have become more prominent, analyses of PMSCs vis-à-vis air power have been less evident. This is especially so in relation to the application of violence. Thus this paper, recognizing that the lack of consideration in part stems from a relatively limited PMSC presence in the air that is largely unexplained, presents four guiding considerations:

First, it emphasizes the manpower-centric nature of the PMSC industry that usually involves the substitution of manpower for capital. To allow this substitution, the ground and maritime environments are somewhat forgiving, but the aerial realm is less so.

Second, while PMSCs in the 1990s offered a full spectrum of capabilities, including the offensive application of force, the industry has now become normatively defined in a defensive way. This was evident through practice in Iraq and Afghanistan and in proscribing international endeavours such as these: the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, the Montreux Document on Pertinent International Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies during Armed Conflict, and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers. However, with air power frequently portrayed as an inherently offensive weapon because of its flexibility in the third dimension, the ideational and operational space in which PMSCs can operate is constrained in a manner not as readily apparent on the land or on the waves.

Third, the capital-centric nature of air power and the prestige imbued to its costly assets limits the ability of PMSCs to be present. A consideration of air-focused PMSCs will reveal their emphasis on training assets that are of constrained capabilities compared to the higher generation, state-owned fighters they operate alongside. The paper places weight here on the American experience given the formative role the United States plays regarding both the structure of the PMSC industry and the promotion of air power.

Fourth, the paper offers that despite these material and ideational differences when private air power is compared alongside PMSC activities on land and on the waves, air-focused PMSCs are both a result of neoliberal approaches and a potential catalyst for future neoliberal efforts. These matters have implications for the future direction and the epistemology of air power. To make this case, the paper analyses the discourses evident in the marketing and Internet materials presented by air-centric PMSCs. In so doing, this approach also makes plain that private air power substantiates the limitations of contemporary armed forces rather than compensates for them.

Biographical Information:

Dr. Christopher Spearin joined the Royal Military College of Canada's Department of Defence Studies, located at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto, Ontario, as an Assistant Professor in 2003. He was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor in 2007. During his time at the College, Dr. Spearin has held a number of administrative and curriculum development posts and has taught in all of the major on-site programmes. His research concerns change in militaries, global security governance, non-state actors and conflict, mercenaries, the privatization of security, piracy, and Canadian foreign and defence policy. His work has been published in a number of edited books and in a variety of forums, including *Canadian Foreign Policy*, *Canadian Military Journal*, *Civil Wars*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Human Security Bulletin*, *International Peacekeeping*, *International Journal*, *International Politics*, *Journal of Conflict Studies*, *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, *Naval War College Review*, *Oxford Analytica*, *Parameters*, *Security Dialogue*, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, and *World Defence Systems*. Dr. Spearin is the yearly contributor on Canadian foreign and defence policy in the longstanding *Canadian Annual Review of Politics and Public Affairs*, published by the University of Toronto Press.