

Silent and Irresponsible

European Approaches to Commercial Military Services

The commercialization of military services by the USA and the UK has been amply debated, criticized and acted upon in recent years. In the rest of Europe, including Norway, however, awareness of commercialization has been as limited as the efforts to control and regulate it. This silence within Europe and the irresponsibility of the approach to the commercialization of military services that it entails is the topic of the present brief. The silence primarily reflects the limited information available regarding European commercialization processes, as well as the absence of any spectacular shifts from public to private security arrangements. Partly as a consequence of this silence, European approaches to military commercialization have become irresponsible, in the sense that no one seems to ask about responsibility or seeks to take it. Instead, European commercialization is governed by diffuse processes. While responsibility for individual decisions can be readily attributed, overarching responsibility for security commercialization appears far more tenuous.

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The role played by commercial military companies within the defence sectors of the USA and the UK is by now news to no one. *Blackwater* has become a household name, epitomizing the emergence of an industry captured in Mike Leigh's film *Route Irish*. The close protection services to which both refer is just a small part of a much larger process of commercialization in which an increasing array of activities related to the armed forces are being handled on market terms, in association with private companies. However, most Europeans – including Norwegians – appear to find this process of limited concern. Military commercialization seems to crop up in public discussions only when co-nationals are entangled in some scandal related to it – as, for example, when the two Norwegians Joshua French and Tjostolv Moland were arrested and accused of being mercenaries in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Yet commercialization has also been far-reaching within Europe.

Silent Commercialization

Relevant information upon which a discussion of the commercialization of the military sector within Europe might be based is scarce. This is not because no commercialization is taking place; to the contrary, there is evidence of *considerable and growing reliance on markets*. Furthermore, *it appears self-evident for specialists* working with military matters in the context of international operations that companies are and should be playing a role. Such specialists are not discussing *whether* commercialization should be taking place, but rather *how* to best organize it – including by drawing limits around the amounts and types of commercialization that should take place. Yet, in spite of this, *information about the role of markets is not readily available in any European country*. This contrasts with the situation in the USA and the UK, where core public institutions such as foreign and defence ministries keep track of the amount of outsourcing and contracting they undertake. No similar procedures seem to be in place in Europe, where the picture of military commercialization accordingly has to be constituted on the basis of collated bits and pieces of information gathered from heterogeneous sources. More than this, when prompted for specific information, the relevant public authorities in Europe generally seem to dismiss or refer

enquiries elsewhere. In sum, it is difficult to get a clear overall picture of how commercialized the military in Europe has become: such a picture has to be constructed upon a quagmire of partial, shaky information.

The Scandinavian countries are a case in point, even if they usually pride themselves on the relative ease of access to public sources and strong links between policymakers/experts and the public. As in the rest of Europe, public institutions (including ministries and armed forces) do not publish any consolidated information on contractors, probably because they do not collect and produce it. But, more interestingly, when asked, they avoid responding, resorting instead to vacuous general statements that emphasize the need for states to be involved and declaring that they are following the situation closely and with keen interest. When researchers try to get more precise answers, they find themselves unable to reach the proper office or desk. And, if by chance they get through to the proper authority, they are told that the information is classified, sensitive or confidential, and therefore cannot be shared.

This lack of information is not only a problem for researchers. *It also seriously hampers public democratic debate*. Anyone engaging in public debate naturally looks for solid ground. If all there is to stand on is the unstable terrain of a quagmire, the public will often not engage with a particular issue. Moreover, this lack of information has created a gulf between experts and the broader public. While the former regard commercialization as being integral to contemporary military activities, the latter continue to think that commercialization is of no concern to them. Silence is the main reason for the continued existence of this gap. Making the European approach to commercialization more 'noisy' – breaking the silence – is therefore essential for bridging the gap between experts and the lay public.

Hybrid European Commercializations

Breaking the silence surrounding European commercialization is easier said than done, however. A core reason is that beyond the differences that distinguish the various European approaches to commercialization, they share a number of aspects that make this silence seem more warranted than in the US and UK contexts. In Europe, the involvement of market actors in the military area rarely

entails a clearcut transfer of activities to markets. Instead, the state tends to remain involved in the activities of the market.

Arrangements in which *commercial entities are owned fully or partly by the state* are therefore common across Europe. Examples include the French company *Défense Conseil International* (DCI), which is 49% state-owned. DCI works both for the national armed forces – for example, training pilots – and for foreign armed forces, using French equipment and strategies. Similarly, in Germany, *BWI Informationstechnik* – a 49.9% state-owned consortium involving Siemens and IBM Deutschland – has core contracts for the provision of information technology for the German armed forces and other armed forces working with German equipment. Lastly, the Italian *Difesa Servizi*, which provides defence-related services, and the privatized firms under the control of the Hungarian Ministry of Defence are further cases in point.

But, even when the companies involved in the commercialization of the European military sector are *formally speaking private*, they are often *de facto closely linked to the state*. One kind of illustration is provided by the nominally fully private companies established and nurtured by European states. The German national agency that was created to coordinate contracting and privatization projects largely because the country's ministerial bureaucracies were not trusted with such a role is a case in point. The *GEbb* (Gesellschaft für Entwicklung, Beschaffung und Betrieb) is a large-scale enterprise that, while formally private, naturally retains close ties to the state. A second kind of company that is nominally private but retains close links to the state can be seen in the many companies established by individuals with close roots and continued close ties within their home defence/security establishments. These companies are usually smaller and specialize in personal protection services, but often do so with a clear focus on co-nationals, including those working for the state in conflict areas. *Gallice Security* in France, *Vesper Group* in Sweden or *UTI* in Romania are all cases in point – private companies providing personal security for their co-nationals, for example in Afghanistan. These companies were all established by insiders from the state's armed forces and intelligence services.

The continued presence of the state in the market gives European military commercialization a somewhat unspectacular appearance. It makes it seem as though the state is still in control and discussions about military commercialization in Europe are simply ‘much ado about nothing’. As a result, whenever European military commercialization is taken up for discussion, the reason is more often than not to shed light on conventional issues of public mismanagement and corruption. While these issues are important in their own right, such a focus reinforces the impression that, as far as Europe is concerned, the commercialization of the military/defence area is something rather banal. However, this conclusion is doubly unwarranted: it neglects both *the role companies play even if states remain involved* in markets and the extent to which commercialization refashions *what states can and wish to do* in the military area. More fundamentally, the conclusion blocks public debate and engagement with these issues, compounding the silence surrounding European military commercialization. Accordingly, it contributes to producing the irresponsibility that may be said to characterize European security commercialization.

Irresponsible Commercialization

European commercialization is not the result of a carefully planned strategy elaborated in one clear location by a clearly delimited set of people. Rather, it is the outcome of many small changes undertaken for specific – often pragmatic and technocratic – reasons. None of the changes are necessarily significant or important enough to appear to have caused the commercialization trend as a whole, yet taken together the many small changes make up the trend: they *are* the European commercialization. Such a multiplicity of processes, however, makes it difficult to locate or ascribe responsibility. As a result, no one asks who is responsible for military commercialization, just as no one steps forward to assume responsibility for it. The consequence is that the European approach to commercialization appears peculiarly irresponsible.

Multiple Processes Diffusing Responsibilities

Although there is nothing new in commercial companies providing military services in Europe, four interrelated sets of processes have increased the presence of such compa-

nies considerably over the past two decades:

(i) *Technological processes*: Highly sophisticated armament systems linked to what some have termed a ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ as well as the relatively more mundane reliance on simple information technology has made collaboration with private companies essential: they supply much of the technology. Additionally, the possibility of making ‘dual use’ (civilian and military) of the technology makes public–private collaboration seem both pragmatic and cost-effective.

(ii) *Economic processes*: The organization of the contemporary economy is increasingly marked by multiple and complex collaborative relations between companies. The role of networks has been increasing, while both conventional hierarchically organized firms and conventionally competitive markets have been on the decline. The military and security sectors have been no exceptions to these trends, and this has made it seem pragmatic and reasonable to allow and encourage joint ventures and strategic partnerships, including public–private partnerships.

(iii) *Strategic processes*: Since the end of the Cold War, the strategic concerns that motivated states to keep strict control over everything defence-related have been somewhat dissipated. At the same time, strategic thinking has focused on a wide range of ‘new’ and ‘asymmetrical’ threats and risks, such as those related to terrorism, cyber-warfare, underdevelopment and the environment. This has created considerable scope for involving companies to a greater extent, as well as for pragmatically encouraging them to operate on international markets.

(iv) *Public management processes*: The post-Cold War period has also seen a ‘normalization’ of the ways in which military and security matters are managed. Logics of the (no longer) new public management have made their inroad also in the defence area. For pragmatic reasons, extensive efforts have been made to increase efficiency and cut costs through the introduction of market or quasi-market competition.

These processes can be traced in all the European countries, *even if their exact form and significance varies* from case to case. In Hungary, Poland and Romania, for example, the processes were formed through the transition

away from a Warsaw Pact-oriented defence organization based on fully state-owned enterprises that were part of the system as whole, together with a related eagerness to join NATO and international pressure to adjust public management practices. By contrast, in Sweden, France and Germany, all of which have major defence industries, EU-level policies that encourage the creation of joint ventures as well as a concern with maintaining a competitive edge in core technological areas have marked commercialization. Finally, particularly in Norway and Sweden, but also in other European countries apart from those of Central Europe, commercialization has been strongly marked by the shift in defence priorities towards development and human security and the related reconsideration of the role of civilians, including NGOs, public development organizations and local area experts.

These four (technological, economic, strategic and public management) sets of processes *make military commercialization appear diffuse*. Commercialization driven by technological considerations involves a different set of persons, institutions and processes than commercialization resulting from a reorganization of public management. While the former might involve a company specialized in a specific technology, a person responsible for logistics in the armed forces, and perhaps European and national research experts and funding agencies, the latter would more likely involve administrative staff from the armed forces, people from the defence ministry and perhaps hired consultants to support the implementation. The variation could be reproduced almost indefinitely. Its practical consequence is that a correspondingly varied number of people, institutions and processes are involved in making commercialization. Asking this amorphous collection of actors and institutions to take responsibility is a daunting task. There is no clearly identifiable authority one might ascribe responsibility to. Indeed, it is easier to hold a king whose head can be cut off responsible than to address a maze of heterogeneous and changing people and institutions. In the USA and the UK, the question of responsibility is less problematic: these countries’ policies are more explicit and hence associated with specific people, institutions and documents rather than diffuse processes.

The challenges involved in establishing responsibility in Europe, however, do not mean that no responsibility is possible or that commercialization is a fate for which no one can be held responsible. The processes that have occurred might have been developed otherwise – or even not at all. They have taken place because particular decisions were taken, regulations adopted and policies pursued, or alternatively because nothing was done. Those who decided to facilitate or not to oppose the relevant processes could (in theory) be held accountable for the commercialization they engendered, or at the very least their own part of it.

Irresponsibility Suing Security Professionals

In Europe, even such a fractured responsibility seems unlikely. Certainly, security professionals – whether within government ministries, the private sector or the armed forces – have done little to alter the current state of affairs. There would seem to be three good reasons for this. First, *European security professionals remain profoundly attached to the state monopoly on the legitimate use of force*. Although the phenomenon takes different forms, it is generally agreed both within public opinion and among security professionals that the use of force should be limited to and controlled by the state. This makes commercialization likely to be contentious. There are accordingly good reasons for shunning public discussions of the matter. More than this, professionals frame (and perhaps think of) their own engagement with private markets and companies as a matter of pragmatic technocratic decision making. If pushed, therefore, European security experts will acknowledge that they are involving markets, but they will not see this as amounting to a commercialization of the military for which they have a responsibility. Rather amazingly, they do not seem to see the inconsistency entailed in admitting that they are increasing

the role of markets while denying that they are contributing to the commercialization of the military.

Second, European security professionals have a *professional culture that disinclines them to publicly debate* and claim responsibility for commercialization. Security professionals take pride in their own competence, which they consider beyond the reach of outsiders. More than the members of other professions, security professionals think outsiders misunderstand and misjudge both them and the importance of their profession. To compound all of this, security professionals see their work as depending on confidentiality. Engaging in debates about commercialization and spelling out lines of responsibility thus does not come naturally to them.

Third, the current irresponsibility no doubt suits European security professionals because *it can be manipulated in various ways*. Some may use it for personal gain, as demonstrated by discussions around the Ministry of Defence firms in Hungary or *Difesa Servizi* in Italy. But, more than this, commercialization allows for an extension of the professional sphere: it stretches strained resources and contributes new ones. It is far from clear that this stretching and adding would be acceptable if it were subject to public scrutiny and debate.

In other words, European security professionals have good reasons for reproducing the current irresponsibility surrounding commercialization. In so doing, they also reproduce the gulf between themselves and their publics.

From Opinions to Policies

Emile Durkheim, whose magisterial work on *the elementary forms of religious life* was first published exactly 100 years ago, insisted that

opinion is a poor guide to research. This brief has been produced precisely for that reason. It has drawn upon the findings of a collective research project to highlight the silence and the irresponsibility that seem to characterize European military commercialization. Silence and irresponsibility compel researchers, the public at large, and policymakers and experts to rely on nothing more than their ‘opinions’ when they engage with this topic. Whether one favours and wishes to continue the growing commercialization or not, such a situation is regrettable.

Policy Implications for Norway

Norway should:

- **Lay the foundations for an informed discussion** of commercialization by ensuring that information is readily available, including details of ‘hybrid’ forms of commercialization where the state remains involved in the market.
- **Engage in a policy debate** about commercialization practices and their regulation, encouraging a focus on the form and limits of commercialization in the Norwegian/European context.
- **Establish lines of responsibility** both for processes of change that have *already* taken place and for the changes that may lie ahead, preferably ensuring a broader public understanding of and engagement with these.

Find Out More

- Leander, Anna (ed.) (2012) *The Commercialization of Security in Europe: Consequences for Peace and Reconciliation*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.
- Commission on Wartime Contracting (2011) *Transforming Wartime Contracting: Controlling Costs, Reducing Risks* (www.wartimecontracting.gov).
- Hayes, Ben (2010) *NeoConOpticon: The EU Security-Industrial Complex* (www.statewatch.org). ■

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THE PROJECT

The brief draws on a research project funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Commercialization of Security: Consequences for Peace and Security*. The project analyses the commercialization of security and peace-keeping operations in Norway and eight European countries, drawing on examples from those countries’ engagement in Afghanistan.

PRIO

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