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For the Study of Security
Verona

Proxy War and Chinese Potential Use of PM Contractor
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ITSS Verona Magazine, Vol. 1, no. 1

Spring/Summer 2022

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To cite this article: Francesco Cirillo, *Proxy War and Chinese Potential Use of PM Contractor*, ITSS Verona Magazine, Vol. 1, no. 1, Spring/Summer 2022.

Keywords: China, Private Military Company, Belt and Road initiative, Chinese Government

ITSS Verona website: <https://www.itssverona.it/itss-magazine>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/itss-verona/>

Instagram: https://instagram.com/itss_verona?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

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Published online: June 18th, 2022

Abstract: The rise of private military companies employed by state actors in various politico-military theaters shows a change in conventional doctrines, where the monopoly of force was held exclusively by nation states. But for some the deployment of paramilitary forces or armies linked to Private Military Companies is seen as an opportunity to avoid the deployment of regular forces. Beijing could apply these resources as silent armies at strategic points that would relate to the protection of national interests in areas affected by the New Silk Roads, such as Tajikistan or Southeast Asia. The growth of Private Military Companies on the international scene is slowly privatising the military and security sector, leading to two phenomena: cost-cutting in the economic resources involved in the deployment of units and de-empowerment of political and military leadership.

In recent years, the United States and Russia gained a ‘near’ monopoly in the sector regarding private armies; however, the People’s Republic of China is slowly gaining ground albeit with some gaps.¹ The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has confronted Beijing with the problem of ensuring safety of its companies operating in the areas affected by the BRI. China initially attempted to outsource the safety of Chinese personnel to local forces, given the reluctance of the Chinese leadership itself to deploy its military forces due to the traditional foreign policy called “principle of non-interference,” where China refuses to commit its armed forces in other states, without United Nations authorization.² Unfortunately, the dilemma of ensuring security is linked to difficulties in the operational efficiency of local forces in countries where Beijing companies are present. Their lack of experience in ensuring efficient security standards and poor intelligence capacity on the part of the institutional apparatus, has forced Beijing to accelerate the development of its own private security contractor agencies. Sean McFate, author of “The New Rules of War,”³ wrote that according to the Congressional Budget Office, an infantry battalion in times of armed conflict costs the US government \$110 million a year, while a private battalion costs \$99 million . In peacetime, according to the CBO, an infantry unit weighs on the state coffers 60 million dollars while a private unit costs almost zero.

¹ Dominic Tierney, “The Future of Sino-U.S. Proxy War,” Texas National Security Review, February 15, 2022, <https://tnsr.org/2021/03/the-future-of-sino-u-s-proxy-war/>.

² Giorgio Cuscito, “La Cina Schiera I Contractors a Guardia Delle Nuove Vie Della Seta,” Limes, September 14, 2018, <https://www.limesonline.com/rubrica/la-cina-schiera-i-contractors-a-difesa-delle-nuove-vie-della-seta-imprese-sicurezza-private>.

³ Sean McFate, “Mercenaries Will Return,” in *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (London: Michael Joseph, 2019), 131.

Analysis of the Phenomenon

For several years, the growing phenomenon of PMCs has been analysed where states and governments initially contracted out private companies for simple tasks, such as the protection of officials, ambassadors or bases abroad. Later, these private forces became part of the political-military strategies and for the projection of power of the states, which needed paramilitary forces which would not be traced back to them.

For states, PMCs are the invisible arm with which to protect their national interests in various theaters of conflict or to be the eyes of intelligence operations, with the aim of gathering information on competitors and rivals. States use PMCs to carry out risky operations, thus avoiding putting themselves in the middle of possible repercussions in case of failure. Other actors use PMCs as a means of projecting their political influence, but without the risk of getting involved in possible scandals. For the People's Republic of China, one could hypothesize the deployment of paramilitary PMC units in operational theaters where it is necessary to protect Beijing's economic interests; deploy Contractor units in countries where the government requires Chinese political support (e.g. Myanmar); and finally, send military advisers and contractors to support the reorganization of armed forces in countries that are economically strategic for the Chinese government.

The PMC phenomenon, however, shows an alternative resource for nation states that would give them an alternative political-military instrument to regular forces, since governments cannot afford to sustain human losses among its armed forces without suffering heavy media repercussions.

China's First Moves in the Area of Private Military Companies: Wagner Model

With the development of the New Silk Roads, Beijing needs to ensure the security of the personnel of companies operating in BRI countries. For China, sending regular military forces, outside of UN Peacekeeping missions, to Belt and Road nations would be seen as a concern by Washington and other Western nations and a first attempt to build political-military influence.⁴ In future Chinese plans, modeled on Russia's Kremlin-friendly Wagner Society, the deployment of contractor units would be justified as a peacekeeping mission as a cover for sending PMCs to protect Beijing's interests. Today, the Russian Federation uses the low-cost capabilities of the Wagner units with training tasks for regular armed forces in African countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic. Beijing would implement this *modus operandi* in those nations, with the appearance of instability, included in the Silk Roads to support the reorganisation of the military apparatus, with the possibility of obtaining access to economic resources and raw materials.⁵ For the People's Republic of China, this is a fundamental point which, in the long term, it will be able to develop effectively.

China and the PMC Sector

In order to have a “low cost” power projection tool with the ability to move without alarming the other actors, Beijing began in 2017 to “set up” its own PMC agencies. This has brought both benefits and logistical and political problems. On the one hand, the indigenous contractor companies guarantee the loyalty of their members to Beijing.⁶ Being former members of the Chinese armed forces or the People's Armed Police (a paramilitary group that

⁴ See note above.

⁵ Carl H. Peterson IV, “Guns-for-Hire: Chinese Mercenaries on the 21st Century Silk Road,” *Washington International Law Journal* 30, no. 1 (December 28, 2020): 116-143, <https://doi.org/https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1856&context=wilj>.

⁶ See note 2.

responds to the Chinese armed forces and the Beijing government), the risks associated with the passing of information or plans linked to the projects of the new silk roads are reduced.

On the other hand, as far as the corporate sector is concerned, Chinese companies feel safer being protected by PMCs composed of Chinese. For Beijing, contractor companies can become, in the near future, a tool for projecting its influence abroad, providing experienced know-how to be passed on to regular military forces.⁷

For Beijing, however, the gap remains in the lack of experience it has in the PMC sector. Compared to Russia and the United States, Beijing's main competitors, the People's Republic has little experience and the Chinese PMCs do not guarantee highly trained men like their American and Russian counterparts, which Beijing still has very little experience.

Chinese PMCs: Frontier Services Group (FSG), Haiwei and Hua Xin Zhong An (HXZA)

Today one of the main private Chinese contractor companies is the Frontier Services Group (FSG) founded by Erik Prince, former founder of the US PMC Blackwater. The FSG, based in Hong Kong, has the Chinese state giant CITIC Group as its main investor. To date, the FSG has a training center near Beijing and operates in various areas of the globe, such as Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. In addition to the FSG, another PMC (or PSC) is the Haiwei Dui. The company operates in several countries where the Chinese industrial sector is present, which is working on the BRI project. Several branches are present in Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Tanzania and other countries that are part of the new silk routes project. Hua Xin Zhong An (HXZA) operates in the maritime sector. It is the first Chinese PMC operating in the field of maritime security. It deploys armed personnel on

⁷ See note 2.

ships sailing in the waters near East Africa and is also specialised in technological integration in the security field.

To date, China has no legislation with which to control the operations of its PMCs abroad, but the latter is considering the creation of an entity to coordinate and control the PMCs of the People's Republic, through support of the Ministry of State Security that could bring under Chinese state (and Communist Party) control an instrument of military projection capable of protecting the economic and commercial interests of the Belt and Road Initiative and the People's Republic.⁸

Future Scenarios

The clash between the United States and China risks inserting the PMCs into the international and politico-military strategies of the two Great Powers. The deployment of paramilitary forces or Chinese contractors in very high-risk areas, as in the Russian case of Crimea, could guarantee Beijing to deploy a paramilitary vanguard in strategic areas for Chinese projects, such as Southeast Asia or East Africa. The African continent, vital to the New Silk Roads, would become a testing ground for Beijing's ability to deploy contractors or paramilitary units. Another test field could become Myanmar, shaken by violent anti-government revolts that opposed the military coup carried out in February 2021.

To protect Chinese interests, Beijing could find itself obliged to deploy rapid intervention units in the country, with the in order to protect their companies. In order not to alarm the other states in the region, it could send contractor units without Chinese military identifiers and "advisers" to be deployed in diplomatic offices. This would guarantee Beijing a channel of information and eyes on the territory. The risk would be that of several Sino-US Proxy Wars, in which the indirect support, carried out with "shadow units" or PMCs, from

⁸ See note 2.

Beijing and Washington, to various non-state actors in the medium to long term would become an integral part of the Sino-US competition is looking to Central Asia and Afghanistan, which with the US withdrawal and the subsequent return of the Taliban to power from August 2021, would risk becoming again a base of jihadist acronyms, ready to infiltrate central countries -asians and Xinjiang. The hypothesis would be to deploy Chinese PMC units, accompanied and supported by EPL advisers, in Central Asian countries. Another possible use by Beijing of the PMC tool could be applied to deploy “Advisors” and instructors in the countries involved in the BIS projects. Another dossier that could relate to a Proxy War scenario would be linked to the acquisition of economic assets such as raw materials, rare earths and innovation in the technological or scientific field.⁹

What is the state of the industry in China

Beijing has recently started to develop its own contractor sector, attempting to imitate Washington and Moscow. The opportunity of the New Silk Road Initiative could give the People's Republic a testing ground to consolidate its influence in the PMC sector. The gaps in China's PMCs, as explained above, could be filled by experience in the field. Therefore, information about possible Chinese bases in other states, such as Tajikistan, would prove useful in strengthening operational experience and passing it on to the Chinese regular armed forces.

Case Study: Military Base in Tajikistan for both EPL and PMC?

Towards the end of 2021, many news agencies relayed the news that Beijing has begun negotiations to build a military base in Tajikistan¹⁰. This alarmed many analysts and Washington saw it as a move by the Chinese government to control the border areas with

⁹ See note 1.

¹⁰ “China to Build Outpost for Tajikistan Special Forces near Afghan Border,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, October 28, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-build-outpost-tajikistan-special-forces-near-afghan-border-2021-10-28/>.

Afghanistan, and to use the installation as a base for training the Chinese PMC units. For China, a base in Tajikistan is part of the Chinese plans to control neighbouring countries or the areas involved in the BRI projects. A military base in the Central Asian country, on the border with Afghanistan, would give China an eye to monitor areas of Central Asia and avoid destabilization brought about by Islamic terrorist groups¹¹. This would also provide an opportunity to intervene in the event of riots that may be detrimental to Chinese economic interests. The base would not only house regular troops but also be a logistical facility for units of Chinese private companies. Given that the principle of non-intervention is a pillar of Chinese Defence Strategy, the Chinese PMCs, which would include former members of the armed forces of the People's Armed Police, would have greater flexibility of manoeuvre in countries where it is necessary to protect Chinese companies. Furthermore, the PMCs could be exploited as military “advisers” to the Tajik armed forces with training tasks and as eyes to collect possible dissidents from Beijing or Islamic terrorist groups that would jeopardize the stability of the areas on the western border of China, in particular with Xinjiang.

A future Chinese base in Tajikistan, which according to the photos would be built near the Wakhan Corridor, an eastern area of Afghanistan bordering the PRC, would guarantee the Chinese government a strategically important military asset, with which to protect its border with Asia Central and at the same time projecting Chinese influence in the Central Asian region.¹²

PMCs and Public Opinion

Over the years, the public opinion of the great powers, primarily the United States, has observed and viewed the military operations of the military forces. This has also put the

¹¹ Giorgio Cuscito, “Perché La Cina Costruirà Una Base in Tagikistan,” Limes, November 5, 2021, <https://www.limesonline.com/rubrica/cina-base-tagikistan-afghanistan>.

¹² See note above.

deaths of personnel under the magnifying glass. Over the years, Western governments, primarily Washington, have granted more security mandates to private company units. De facto, governments have contracted private military companies to escort and protect military installations before they have been given operational missions. For some governments, PMCs are an instrument of global military projection¹³. In recent years, Russia has begun to exploit the Wagner company, accused by Western intelligence officials of being linked to Vladimir Putin's presidency, as a means of military projection. Central African Republic, Libya and recently Mali have begun to "benefit" from Russian contractor units with tasks as military instructors for regular forces in Mali and Central African Republic and as support in eastern Libya, where they support and train General Khalifa Haftar's units. Since they are not Moscow regular units and the Moscow government has extensive control over the information system, public opinion is not aware of these Wagner operations. For many governments, the deaths of soldiers in scenarios usually described as peacekeeping missions threatens internal stability, leading in some cases to institutional crises, the fall of governments and early elections. To avoid this, more and more states are entrusting military tasks (the dirty work) to contractors in order to offload responsibility and avoid criticism and political crises. For China, it may be the same *modus operandi* as for the Russians at Wagner in the near future.

Are Private Military Companies Threatening the Weberian Concept of the Force?

The development of PMCs is leading to a privatisation of security and military affairs, weakening the Weberian concept of the Monopoly of Force¹⁴. For the German sociologist, the

¹³ Francesco Cirillo, "La Privatizzazione Dei Conflitti: Il Ruolo Dei Contractor," iari.site, April 18, 1970, <https://iari.site/2020/04/18/la-privatizzazione-dei-conflitti-il-ruolo-dei-contractor/>.

¹⁴ Ambrogio Santambrogio, "Weber e Il Processo Di Razionalizzazione," in *Introduzione Alla Sociologia: Le Teorie, I Concetti, Gli Autori* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 2019), 94-95.

modern state consists of a strong correlation between the domination of some men over other men by means of legitimate force (law enforcement and armed forces).¹⁵ This is possible because of the state's ability to concentrate its legitimate monopoly of force on it in order to maintain order, defend its borders and project its influence through military force. The emergence of PMCs puts the state in a complex dilemma: deploying military units abroad costs huge economic and human resources. For many great powers, being able to save economic costs and human capital with paramilitary units, contractors hired for tasks of surveillance and protection of installations or strategic companies operating abroad becomes a benefit. For others, the PMCs become instruments of global projection of the political influence of their own nation. But states are aware that a massive privatisation of security apparatuses risks undermining the Weberian concept of the monopoly of force, risking delegitimizing the functions of nation states and in the future even the UN function of peacekeeping missions. For the time being, Weber's thinking holds good, but the PMCs, in parallel, are growing among the interests of the great powers that aim to change the rules of international security, such as the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.

Conclusion

In the coming years, systemic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China will focus on economic and technological hegemony. In the plans to keep a low profile in conflict zones, in order to avoid an expensive deployment of regular military forces it will be necessary, for some governments, to contract out to PM since a low cost to the governments, related to their deployment.

¹⁵ Michele Basso, "Max Weber. Tipi Di Monopolio," *Scienza & Politica. Per Una Storia Delle Dottrine* 32, no. 63 (December 28, 2020): 21-39, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1825-9618/12061>, 23-24.

For many governments, privatising military security also serves as a hidden hand to project their international politics, without affecting their internal public opinion. In recent years, the Russian Federation has exploited the Wagner Group, a Russian PMC linked to the Kremlin according to several Western intelligence agencies, as an indirect arm for its international policy in several countries, such as the Central African Republic. In the Central African state, Wagner had the task of supporting the training of the Central African security forces, but it also had another purpose: to protect Russian economic interests in the country.

The role of PMCs is still ambiguous but they are used by some Nation States. They report to their employer, usually either the government or the Ministry of Defense. Since the beginning of the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing had to readjust its strategy while maintaining its doctrinal orthodoxy in the political-military sphere. A further benefit of PMCs is the ability to unload on them responsibilities or faults that may exist in the areas where they operate, avoiding criticism from the media and general opinion for political decision makers and military leaders. In the current scenario, where the Washington-Beijing clash could escalate, Beijing's PMC tool could be applied as the eye and ear of the Chinese government. On the US front, the Indo-Pacific chessboard will be the strategic asset that will most engage future administrations and political-military apparatuses. In this the business of private companies will be fundamental to protect both American and Chinese national interests. Beijing could aim to use PMCs as a paramilitary tentacle to protect its companies operating in risky conflict zones. With the PMCs, the Weberian concept of the monopoly of force, entrusted to the national state, is failing to implement a slow process of privatisation of national security and military affairs.

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