



From Moscow to Beijing, contractors are the new geopolitical players

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Histoire & stratégie

There are several dozen Russian SMPs (Časnaia Voennaia Kompania or ČVK), the best known of which are RSB-Group, Moran Security Group, Mar or Redyt-Antiterror. In addition to a wide range of actions and services, from training to demining, they also carry out training missions, as was seen in Sudan during the winter of 2017, or in the Central African Republic (CAR) from the spring of 2018.

Most often, their roles and games of influence are the result of initiatives taken by former military personnel from the special forces or elite units of the Directorate General of Intelligence (Glavnoié Razvédyvatel'noié Oupravlénie - GRU), the Federal Security Service (Federalnaia sloujba bezopasnosti - FSB) or the Foreign Intelligence Service (Sloujba vnechnei razvedki - SVR). It is difficult, however, not to confuse them with the Russian and Ukrainian mercenaries who operated in the 1990s in separatist actions in Transdniestria (March-June 1992), Georgia and Ukraine.orgy (1992-1994), or in the civil wars in Sierra Leone, Angola, Zaire in 1997, Côte d'Ivoire or even Darfur on behalf of Sudan.

In the Ukrainian crisis, from February 2014, as in Syria, since September 2015, Russia has thus had recourse to SMPs whose contractors are generally designated as members of the Wagner Group, created in 2013 and financed by an oligarch, Evgenij Prigožin, close to the Kremlin.

Far from being on the fringes of this way of operating, the Chinese also know how to rely on companies officially dedicated solely to the security of Chinese interests, especially from 2009 onwards. It is indeed a question of Beijing taking the games of influence of the other major competing powers in the opposite direction. In 2013, some 4,000 Chinese SMP/SSPs will be officially registered, intrinsically ensuring the employment of 4.3 million employees. By 2017, they will have passed the 5,000 mark.⁶. All the agents dedicated to

security tasks and missions are former members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

China's SMPs and SSPs are thus well established in the global landscape, as is the Dewei Security Company along the "new silk routes". Its armed employees provide security for the oil installations of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in South Sudan, the Nairobi-Mombasa railway line in Kenya designed by the China Road and Bridge Corporation, and the protection of the installations and personnel of Poly-GCL Petroleum Group Holdings in Ethiopia .

Far from remaining in the logic of state compartmentalisation, the SMP/SSP now have the backbone of holding companies of foreign nationalities, which makes their activities all the more opaque. Thus, Erik Prince's holding company reveals all its ambiguity with regard to its partnerships established with Chinese companies, such as the security company China Security & Protection Co. Ltd.⁷ in parallel with those with the US federal authorities.⁸ .

Logically, we cannot but be concerned about the risks of conflicts of interest between sovereign state powers. This does not encourage public authorities, in Europe and in France in particular, to encourage the emergence of a versatile and powerful sector of private military companies beyond the category of ESSDs specialising in logistics functions.

SMP and the French culture of use of forces: between polemics and questioning

Promoting the concept of private military companies in France is complex, as they are still associated with historical mercenary companies.

The cultural imprint of national armies

In France, the culture of the profession of arms remains imbued with professionalism and respect for the regalian power, in the service of the Nation. Therefore, for holders of high command posts, developing private military companies in order to have combat units is not considered legitimate or relevant.

Moreover, since the Algerian war, the French State has never tasted the existence of paramilitary networks. Is it out of fear of slippage, of a coup de force against the institutions? Difficult to decide because everything is intertwined in the end: the cultural trauma of the "putsch of the generals", the legacy of the actions of "Bob" Denard and his teams - most often in command service for the French secret services - maintained by a - paradoxical - lack of knowledge on the part of the technocracy about military affairs. All this has contributed to locking in the thinking and adaptability of paramilitary tools by virtue of France's strategic game.

The situation is quite different with regard to PSS. They are now part of the defence outsourcing field in the security and logistics sectors. And it is indeed these specificities to which the generic name ESSD refers.

Towards a better consideration of ESSDs... ..under reinforced surveillance?

In 2018, the French government demonstrated its willingness to ensure that the activities offered by private security companies are better taken into account, while subjecting them to strong government control. The tightening of control over ESSDs could be incorporated into the draft law on military programming for 2019-2025.

Particularly targeted are those societies which are characterized by operational capabilities and the use of war material comparable to those in the military environment. In addition to this category of companies, there are also those which carry out subcontracting missions involving the management of stocks and logistical transport of war materiel (particularly of category A2).⁹. In France, it is estimated that 130 companies conduct operations dedicated to security, cybersecurity and strategic intelligence. But competition is tough and the longevity of these companies is relatively fragile.

While it may be considered advisable to rely on cooperative forces to help achieve the strategic objectives established by the executive branch, various cases serve as a reminder of the need for the State to maintain strict multidisciplinary control.

The Abu Ghraib Prison Case (2003-2004) in Iraq, managed by an American SMP in conjunction with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), shows, for example, the need for very strict control over the management of prisoners in order to avoid gross human rights violations. Similarly, the intervention of SMP under Pentagon contracts did not imply that the contractors could use unrestricted firearms in urban areas among civilians. It should be recalled that SMP Blackwater alone is the subject of a total of 168 legal complaints, some of which are still being processed.

It is also a question of avoiding the rise of uncontrolled pharmacies between public players and private partners. In France, the Alexandre Benalla affair in the spring of 2019 highlights a circle of insiders via a Mars security company, escaping all public control and falling into entrepreneurial activism, against a backdrop of clientelism.¹⁰. By extension, this could even stir up administrative reluctance in the future to resort to commissioned PHC.

It is therefore imperative that control over PMS/SSPs be plural and inter-ministerial, with the right of oversight and control falling to the Ministry of Justice on the one hand, and the Ministries of the Armed Forces and Foreign Affairs on the other. A national logic that is corroborated by strong measures taken at the international level. These measures are designed to defend the individual rights of contractors and to uphold international laws on ethics and the law of armed conflict.

⁶ Among the most powerful SMPs are China Security and Protection Group (with more than 30,000 employees), China Overseas Security Group (with nearly 20,000 employees), Huaxin Zhongan (with 15,000 employees) and Beijing DeWe Security Services.

⁷ China Security & Protection Co. Ltd is part of the Chinese Ministry of State Security. Lawrence Zhao is also an advisor to the Chinese government on risk management abroad, particularly in Africa.

⁸ In addition to Frontier Services Group, other Anglo-Saxon companies such as G4S and Control Risks are achieving leading positions in the Chinese market.

⁹ According to the legislation in force, these are "weapons relating to war materiel, materiel intended to carry or use in combat firearms, materiel for protection against combat gases".

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