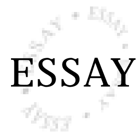

ESSAY

CIVILIANISING MILITARY FUNCTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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The privatization of activities previously performed by government has been a major characteristic of economic policies over the past two decades. This article examines the potential for privatization of military activities in the African context. Four categories in which this has or might occur are mercenaries employed by a government to provide for defence or to supplement its own military; private security company personnel employed to protect economic assets or to advise and train the local military; the contracting out of the provision of goods and services ranging from heavy weapons through to accounting services; and the transfer of non-core activities currently undertaken by the military to other government departments or civilian bodies. Of these, the last is of potential importance in Africa, given the wide range of activities which its militaries have come to perform. Three examples where private sector organisations or other government departments could play a much larger and probably more cost-effective role are peacekeeping, internal security and surveillance, resource protection and rescue activities.

Introduction

The intervention of government in economic activity may be justified by the presence of market failure so that the free market does not deliver a socially optimal outcome. Four major reasons for market failure are monopoly (the restriction of competition so that prices of a good or service are higher and its output lower than otherwise); externalities (where spillovers from an activity impinge positively or negatively on the well-being of people outside the activity's boundaries); an unacceptable income distribution resulting from the free operation of the market; and public goods.

The last of these is particularly relevant to the military. A public good or service, as opposed to others that are publicly provided, has two defining characteristics. The non-excludability characteristic means that if one person benefits from the public good, everyone does; no-one can be excluded. A second characteristic is that it is very difficult to collect payment directly from the beneficiaries at the time the public good provides its services; public goods are therefore not likely to be privately profitable and need to be financed from general taxation. The classic examples of public goods are lighthouses and other provisions for public safety, and defence. All of a nation's citizens are protected by its military but it is

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not feasible to charge them for these services as they occur; nor is it likely that individuals will voluntarily contribute towards the military in proportion to the benefit they receive from it. Governments therefore maintain a military on behalf of their populations and finance it from general taxation.

The economic explanation is not the sole reason why defence is almost always a government activity. The military is closely associated, for example, with national pride and prestige. There is also a very widespread belief that security must be directly provided by the state although, as we will see, this is a fairly recent way of thinking and is increasingly subject to modification.

The privatisation of security

Privatising government activities has been a major activity in many countries, both developed and developing, since the late 1970s. In essence, it involves the transfer of publicly-owned and operated enterprises in such areas as transport and the supply of electricity and water into private hands. The economic rationale for privatisation is the presumption that the private profit motive will result in greater efficiency than under public ownership, although comparisons of performance in industries where both publicly and privately owned enterprises operate frequently do not support this presumption. The outcome of the very large number of privatisations completed thus far is the subject of ongoing debate. In some cases, there appear to have been important efficiency gains while in others these have been modest. In most cases, the privatised enterprise provides a different level of service to its publicly-owned predecessor, making it very difficult to judge whether the outcome is indeed more socially desirable. In some cases, the quality of service has declined and/or charges to consumers have risen. In most cases, significant job losses have occurred in the quest for profit.[2]

The privatisation of security can have a number of meanings:

- traditional mercenaries employed by a government to provide or supplement its own military;
- private security company personnel employed to protect economic assets owned by a government or transnational company, or to advise and train the local military;
- the contracting out to private companies of the provision of goods and services ranging from heavy weapons through to accounting services; or
- the transfer of non-core activities currently undertaken by the military to other government departments or civilian bodies.

Mercenaries and private security companies

With the increasing employment of private security companies to protect economic assets such as mines operated by transnational companies and to fight alongside local armed forces, mercenaries have been recently subject to considerable academic study.[3] While mercenaries are not the main interest of this article, several points can be made.

Although current thinking condemns 'soldiers of fortune' fighting for economic reward[4], such thinking is both recent and out of step with trends in much of Africa. Throughout the twentieth century, many countries employed foreigners—both as individuals and in units—to supplement their own militaries. Lock[5], for example, examines the employment of such personnel in the context of the downsizing of national military forces following the end of major armed conflicts. Such a trend is consistent with the weakening of the state throughout Africa and the resulting privatisation of its functions. Security has become a commodity, purchased in formal or informal markets. Lock regards this, in all but name, as 'demobilization in slow motion'. On the supply side, he points to the strong trend towards the 'outsourcing of foreign military policy' by the US government to private companies offering military advisory and training.

Three types of services may be offered by these private military companies: combat services, advice and training and specialized services (e.g. airborne surveillance, signal interception) with a military application. The first of these were or are provided by such companies as Sandline, the South African-based Executive Outcomes (disbanded in 1999) and Gurkha Security Guards[6] The second and

third types are carried out by US companies like Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI) and Dynacorp, staffed by former military personnel[7]. Extending the economic logic behind such trends, it is likely to be cost effective for African countries to hire, say, ocean-going naval vessels from another country rather than own and operate a complete navy of their own. This echoes the suggestion that African states agree, in the spirit of non-offensive defence, to a division of labour as regards military forces. Each country would contribute to a joint task force which would possess the whole range of military capacity, but no one country would have a complete offensive force of its own.[8]

Privatisation, outsourcing and the military

Two types of privatisation will be discussed: the contracting out to civilians of various activities which support the military organisation, and the use of private military companies for tasks previously carried out by the military.

As to the first, the case for privatisation of activities within the military is based on the usual principle–the need, based on budget constraints, to focus on core business and to outsource activities which are tangential to the core. In the US, this has included military housing, information technology, conversion of excess military bases and inventory management.[9] This has been extended to supporting military forces engaged in combat. Private contractors to NATO forces in Bosnia, according to *The Economist*, provided a range of logistical and support services at about two-thirds the cost had they been supplied by the military.[10] More recently, civilian contractors have become more directly involved in combat. In charting the increasing participation of civilians in war, Zamparelli[11] notes that civilian contractors now maintain and operate high-tech weapons systems. The distinction between civilian and military personnel in such situations is blurred.

This outsourcing of military activities is not without its critics. Brower comments that US Department of Defense outsourcing and privatisation savings are generally 'inconsequential at best, anecdotal at worse'.[12] Such savings as have occurred have been the result of replacement of permanent employees by cheaper contract staff.

Private military companies like MPRI often perform advisory and training functions for foreign governments when these would have previously been undertaken by the US military. Some observers[13] have large questions about the lack of accountability as affairs of state are outsourced to corporations beyond public control. This trend has allowed the US government a 'lessened scrutiny of its foreign activities, and a level of disassociation from activities it deems unpleasant necessities'.[14]

Civilianising military functions

The military in SSA typically undertakes a range of functions, some of which are clearly at best tangential to its core functions. On the face of it, it seems sensible to utilise military personnel to perform other social functions during those times when they are not deployed on security duties. Apart from their primary function–to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation–the military has taken on such other tasks such as:

- internal security operations against opponents of the government;
- internal security operations, often together with the police services, against crime and as domestic peacekeepers;
- guarding land and sea borders against illegal immigrants and smuggling;
- protection of marine and other resources against poaching by locals and foreigners; civil defence during natural disasters;
- rescue work;
- international peacekeeping; and
- development tasks such as building infrastructure.

Clearly, these secondary functions provide social benefits but two points need to be made. First, involvement in these non-core functions may be used to secure a larger budgetary vote than is justified by the primary function. Second, the military may not perform these functions particularly effectively. Accordingly, we will examine some examples where a transfer of such tasks into civilian hands may result in them being carried out more cost effectively.

Civilianising the military: three potential functions

Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping has been traditionally seen as a military function. Depending on the context, it may involve the enforcement of peace by military action. More usually, peacekeepers are deployed after a peace agreement has been reached to assist in the disarming and demobilising of ex-combatants and to help in the restoration of civilian rule.

There is a debate concerning the capacity of combat troops to act as peacekeepers. According to Wood et al,[15] military combat training assumes a battlefield situation which is rarely the case in peacekeeping operations. They emphasise the difficulty of combat troops switching to peacekeeping mode, and note that peacekeeping activities result in a degrading of war fighting skills. To such analysts, battlefield responses are ingrained in combat soldiers. An alternative view is there is no need to undo a soldier's fighting skills; rather, there is a need to add new skills such as negotiation and cross cultural communication to enable soldiers to deal with conflicts non-violently. This second view seems to be wishful for military units as a whole. If they are limited to some individuals, the question needs to be asked whether these individuals need to belong to the military. There are also major differences between military and civilian organizations concerning degrees of hierarchy, participation in decision-making and short-term versus long-term time horizons.[16]

The need for military personnel as peacekeepers is clear enough if fighting is likely to be part of their duties, or if their presence is necessary to deter armed conflict. That is, where the presence of armed peacekeepers is meant to be coercive. The downside of armed peacekeepers is that their presence represents a continuation of dealing with disputes by force or threat of force and this delays a return to civil society. The need for military personnel as peacekeepers is less obvious if their functions are in such areas as providing logistical support and organized manpower. Civilian groups could do these tasks more cheaply and more effectively, and will lead more quickly to a return to civil society. Insofar as the tasks involves are those of peacebuilding, the military is almost certain to be far less competent than trained civilians. These tasks include conflict resolution and conflict management, economic and social reconstruction, retraining of ex-combatants and personal and societal healing.

Gandhi envisaged a peace army (*shanti sena*) of groups trained in non-violence in every community. Such an organization was established in India in 1958 but it has not been particularly effective.[17] However, it has inspired many other peace teams which contribute to peacebuilding in violent contexts. These include United Nations Volunteers, Peace Brigades International and faith-based organizations such as Witness for Peace and Christian Peacemaker Teams.[18] Such groups respond to an invitation of parties within a country. Their first responsibility is support and training for the many local people already engaged in peacebuilding at the grassroots level. They have proved able to do what the military are not trained to do–'to work with local groups to develop grassroots peacebuilding and reconstruction activities, to develop trust and patterns of cooperation.[19] They are typically seen as carrying no threat, unlike military peacekeepers who are viewed as part of the conflict. They have proven particularly effective in negotiating with local warlords for space for humanitarian NGOs to work safely. A recent successful example of a joint military-civilian peacekeeping operation is that in Bougainville.[20] This involved unarmed military and civilian personnel from different countries and included women peacekeepers who were able to encourage the powerful role which Bougainvillean women played in peacemaking. This contrasts with the limited success of most second generation UN peacekeeping missions.

What the foregoing suggests is a need for a fairly strict division of labour. The military has a role in peacekeeping when armed conflict is occurring or is likely. But its coercive presence will only delay peacebuilding and, as soon as feasible, it should withdraw and leave the work of peacebuilding to peace teams and humanitarian NGOs.

Internal security

The argument can be made that internal security should be carried out by police, who operate according to quite a different ethos to the military. This proposal would clearly be relevant to many SSA countries where conventional crime, as opposed to civil war, is the major internal security concern. There seems to be little reason why the military should be employed on crime prevention activities when police are more specifically trained to do so. If there are insufficient numbers of police for such duties, their numbers need to be expanded.

Again, there is the question of the effectiveness of military in such activities, given the orientation of their training and the frequency with which the military engages in human rights abuses during internal security operations.[21] In a candid comment following criticisms of the military for assault and theft during one such operation in South Africa, the Minister of Defence stated that 'we train our soldiers to kill and not to arrest. I don't want them among communities because they can be dangerous when provoked'.[22]

Surveillance, natural resource protection and rescue

A third area to which military resources are allocated are surveillance, natural resource protection and rescue activities. These could certainly be carried out more cheaply by other government departments or NGOs; in addition, it is likely that they would be carried out more effectively using personnel and equipment specific to the task.

The performance of such tasks by civilians is the norm in many countries. Examples include the following:

- The detection of such activities as illegal immigration and drug smuggling, as well as environmental and fisheries protection along Australia's coastline and offshore maritime zone are the responsibility of Coastwatch, a branch of the Department of Customs. Coastwatch operates 17 aircraft and eight 38 metre ocean-going patrol vessels.
- The volunteer Swedish Sea Rescue Society operates 85 boats from 45 stations and carries out of 70 per cent of rescues on Swedish seawaters and lakes.
- The South African National Sea Rescue Institute, a volunteer organization with 24 stations and 50 rescue craft, which carries out 97 percent of rescues along South Africa's coastline at an annual cost of around R5 million.

Patrol of coastal and EEZ waters can be carried out by civilian rather than defence force vessels and aircraft. It does not make economic sense for sophisticated fighting ships and aircraft to be engaged in patrol and fisheries protection work. In 2002, South Africa's Department of Environment and Tourism placed orders for three 45-metre inshore patrol vessels and one 80-metre deep sea patrol vessel, principally for fisheries and environmental protection duties. The estimated total cost of R500m is a fraction of the initial cost of R6.9 billion for price of the four Meko class frigates ordered for the South African navy in 1999, and the cost of the latter has subsequently doubled. The operating costs of the civilian vessels will also be much less.

It is also possible to use satellites for surveillance purposes e.g. to detect and produce images of illegal fishing activity and of environmental hazards such as oil spills, as well as for military purposes.[23] Commercially-operated imaging satellites can readily produce images with a spatial resolution of one metre and could be employed in place of patrols by aircraft or ships. To use expensive naval vessels and aircraft for routine patrol work is both unnecessary and wasteful.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to locate military activity within the dominant paradigm of privatisation of public activities. It has shown that, in many countries, much military activity–at both combat and support levels–has already been privatised. The principal motive for this has been economic, but there have also been political benefits for governments.

More specifically, the article has argued that the military is typically involved in a range of tasks which lie outside its core functions. If the general presumption in favour of privatisation is accepted, the military is likely to be less effective and more costly in performing these tasks

than relevant civilian bodies, other government departments or NGOs.

The transfer of responsibilities for the military to the civilian sector would have to be accompanied by a transfer of financial resources in the same direction. It may also involve a transfer of personnel. In 2002, some 7 700 defence force personnel were transferred to the South African Police Service as part of a reduction in SANDF numbers.[24] One concern has been the need for the retraining of soldiers in community-based policing, as distinct from the attitudes relevant to combat situations which dominate military training.

Finally, consider the following prediction, made in 1991 by *The Economist*. It suggests that by 2015, there will only be two main public goods left: redistribution and military protection:

> [By 2015] NATO – Warsaw [countries] will keep a register of arms sent to any poorer countries, and will start to forbid any such roles. It will gradually assume a world policeman's role. It will equip itself at lowest price with stuff that actually works … It will recruit its soldiers from the cheapest high-quality markets: Gurkhas, Britain's SAS, sons of old soldiers from various villages around the world with fighting in their blood.[25]

Note: This is a modified version of a chapter in GT Harris (ed), Demilitarising sub-Saharan Africa, unpublished book manuscript, 2003.

Notes

1. This is a modified version of chapter 3 in GT Harris (ed), *Demilitarising sub-Saharan Africa*, unpublished book manuscript, University of Natal, 2003.
2. For a comprehensive review of the outcomes of privatisation, see WL Megginson and JM Netter, From state to market: a survey of empirical studies on privatisation, *Journal of Economic Literature* XXXIX (2), 20-01, pp 321–389.
3. For example, see J Cilliers and P Mason (eds), *Peace, profit or plunder? The privatization of security in war-torn African societies*, Institute for Security Studies, Halfway House, 1999; G Mills and J Stremlau (eds), *The privatization of security in Africa*, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, 1999; and A-F Musah and J Fayemi (eds*), Mercenaries: an African security dilemma*, Pluto Press, London, 2000.
4. See, for example, the United Nations General Assembly, *International convention against the recruitment, use, financing and training of mercenaries*, United Nations, New York, 1989 and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the question of the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of people to self-determination*, United Nations, New York, 1998.
5. P Lock, Africa, Military downsizing and the growth in the private security industry, in Cilliers and Mason, op cit, pp 11–36.
6. See A Vines, Gurkhas and the private security business in Africa, in Cilliers and Mason, op cit, pp 123-140, A Vines, Mercenaries and the privatization of security in Africa in the 1990s, in Mills and Stremlau, op cit, pp 47-80; and K O'Brien, Private military companies and African security, 1990-98, in Musah and Fayemi, op cit, pp 43–75.
7. See K Silverstein, Privatizing war, *Nation* 265(4), 1997, pp 11–16 and T Adams, The new mercenaries and the privatisation of conflict, *Parameters* 29(2), 1999, 1-3-116.
8. B Moller, Defensive restructuring of the military in sub-Saharan Africa, in Harris, op cit, chapter 2.
9. T McInerney and E Pages, Bolstering military strength by downsizing the Pentagon, *Issues in Science and Technology* 14(2), 1998, pp 78–84.
10. War and piecework, *The Economist* July 10, 1999, p62.
11. S Zamparelli, Competitive sourcing and privatization. What have we signed up for? *Air Force Journal of Logistics* 23(3), 1999, pp 8–17.
12. J Brower, DOD outsourcing and privatization, *Military Review* 78(5), 1998, pp 64–66.
13. For example, Silverstein, op cit and D Burton-Rose and W Madsen, Corporate soldiers*, Multinational Monitor* 20(3), 1999, pp 17–19.
14. Burton-Rose and Madsen, op cit, p19.
15. P Wood, D Isenberg, R Fraser and C White, *An ill-fated mismatch: peacekeeping and the military,* Military Insights, unpublished paper, quoted in D Iribarnegaray, *Peacekeeping for the 21st century: a new partnership?* Master of Professional Studies Dissertation, University of New England, Australia, 2002.
16. C Gourlay, Partners apart: managing civil-military cooperation in humanitarian interventions, *Disarmament Forum* 3, 2000, pp 12–22.
17. T Weber, *Gandhi's peace army: the shanti sena and unarmed peacekeeping*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1996.
18. E Boulding and J Oberg, United Nations peacekeeping and NGO peace-building: towards partnership, in C Alger (ed), *The future of the United Nations system: potential for the 21st century*, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 1998, pp 127–154.
19. ibid, p 141.
20. M Wehner and D Denoon (eds), *Without a gun: Australian's experiences monitoring peace in Bougainville, 1997–2001*, Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2001.

21. Among the many SSA examples which could be cited, see two Human Rights Watch reports on Nigeria: *The destruction of Idi and rape in Choba, December 22, 1999*, HRW Background Report, (accessed 4 February, 2002) and *Military revenge in Benue: a population under attack,* (accessed 4 February, 2002).
22. X Vapi, Lekota tackles anger over soldiers, *The Independent on Saturday* (Durban), June 30, 2001, p 2.
23. See, for example, Private eyes in the sky, *The Economist* May 6, 2000, pp 103-104, 109 and C Covault, Secrete NRO recons eye Iraqi threats, *Aviation Week and Space Technology* 157(12), 2002, pp 12-14.
24. A Koopman, More crime fights on the way, *The Mercury* (Durban), March 5, 2002, p 2.
25. A future history of privatization, 1992–2022, *The Economist* December 21, 1991, p 18.