

Substituting U.S. Troops for Private Military Contractors in Afghanistan

Written by Bruce Stanley and Dan Cox

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BRUCE STANLEY AND DAN COX, JUL 29 2017

In June of 2017, President Donald Trump gave the Department of Defense authorization to increase the size of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan. However, as of 21 July 2017, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has not announced if there will be an increase in the size of the military forces deployed to Afghanistan. Pending a decision by the Trump administration on the long term political strategy for Afghanistan, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford asserted that “the Afghan military required trainers and more help developing its Air Force.” Currently, there are 8,700 U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan, plus an additional 13,322 troops committed to NATO’s International Security Assistance Force supporting and training a little over 360,000 Afghan Security Forces. In addition, there are 23,525 private contractors in Afghanistan providing a wide variety of services, worth over 2.6 billion dollars per year, to the Department of Defense. The question then becomes if training the Afghan military and developing the Afghan Air Force is the critical task, then why does that require U.S. troops? Erik D. Prince, the former founder and CEO of Blackwater and Stephen A. Feinberg the owner of DynCorps suggest that the private military industry could be a substitute for U.S. military forces in Afghanistan. In my book *Outsourcing Security, Private Military Contractors and U.S. Foreign Policy*, I point out that

when political leaders choose to reduce their nation’s military force structure, they may face conflicts beyond their anticipated scope and duration. As such, decision makers are left with no choice but to legalize and legitimize the use of private military contractors, resulting in the increased use of private military contractors as a deliberate tool of foreign policy.

The current conflict in Afghanistan fits the situation that I describe in my book.

The Department of Defense is already substituting U.S. troops for private contractors in Afghanistan. In fact, there are 2.7 contractors for every U.S. service member in Afghanistan. Private military contractors are providing a wide range of services from base support and construction, to security and training. Currently there are 800 contractors supporting the Afghan training mission which makes up about 3 percent of the private contractor mission categories. Given General Dunford’s assessment that training and developing the Afghan Security Forces and Afghan Air Force is the priority, then the means to achieve this objective already falls within the mission categories already provided by private contractors. However, the main constraint placed on the private security industry is that they can only provide the training services. Current U.S. laws prohibit private security contractors advising and assisting the Afghan military in combat operations. The use of force by private security contractors is limited to self-defense, the defense of others and the protection of U.S. Government property, generally from a static position. Thus, if U.S troops directly supporting Afghan military operations are substituted for private contractors, then there must be a change to U.S. laws controlling the use of private security contractors in a combat role. Following the assertions in my book, the substitution of U.S. troops for private contractors is seen not only as legitimate means to accomplish mission tasks their use is legal under current U.S. law given some bureaucratic controls, which certainly could be changed.

We will see what decision that Secretary of Defense Mattis makes in determining the means to accomplish the mission tasks associated with achieving the future political and strategic objectives in Afghanistan. There are several options available for policy makers when determining the means. They can substitute active duty U.S. troops for

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National Guard and Reserve forces; NATO forces; or private contractors. It seems that the private security industry is poised to fill the mission requirements.

About the author:

Bruce Stanley is an associate professor at the School of Advanced Military Studies with a PhD from Kansas State University in Security Studies. He is also the author of the book *Outsourcing Security, Private Military Contractors and US Foreign Policy*. He is a retired Infantry Officer with over 24 years of service in the Army.

Dan G. Cox is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He has three published books: *Terrorism, Instability and Democracy in Asia and Africa*, *Population-Centric Counterinsurgency: A False Idol*, and *Stability Economics: The Economic Foundations of Security in Post-Conflict Environments*. He also regularly published in peer-reviewed journals and magazines. He has served as part of the NATO Partnership for Peace program helping to improve the professional military education system for the Republic of Armenia. He currently serves as the Reviews Editor for *Special Operations Journal* and on the Board of Executives for the Special Operations Research Association.