

THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE USE OF PRIVATE MILITARY CONTRACTORS

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Introduction

The United Nations, the post-World War II international confederation, has recently made the decision to embrace private military contractors for the purpose of providing effective protection for its staff who operate in volatile areas of the world such as Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.ⁱ This administrative strategy or ploy constitutes a major deviation from the organization's long-standing standard operating procedure pertaining to the non-use of military contractors toward the fulfillment of its global peacekeeping responsibilities. As a matter of fact, the contemplated idea in the 1990's of the use of such contractors to protect refugees in the eastern part of the then Zaire, following the ethnic purges in neighboring Rwanda, was said to have been dismissed as too costly and politically inadvisable.ⁱⁱ Since resources are scarce relative to the demand for them, the organization's expressed concern over the issue of costs is thoroughly understandable. Additionally, since the United Nations is a confederacy that purports to represent the global interests of sovereign entities for peace and stability, the concern as to whether or not such military contractors will conduct themselves on the basis of a pattern of shared values with the United Nations is also understandable. Therefore, given the above statements, it can be seen that these two considerations had constituted a clear manifestation of the fact that the organization has always been aware of the underlying difficulties that are associated with any attempt to adopt military contractors into its operations.

Therefore if this venture had been abandoned outright, on a cost-benefit analysis basis as indicated above, why has the United Nations suddenly decided to reverse itself by embracing this form of public administration in global peacekeeping; and, what might the long-term global implications likely to become for the world body? This brief exercise will attempt to address the question above by providing the reasons underlying the organization's sudden decision; and, assessing the impact of such a decision on the organization as a global confederation.

Analyses

Even though the organization has advanced a number of reasons for embarking on this venture, none of them appears to have addressed the twin issues of costs and benefits adequately. Samples of the posited reasons follow: ⁱⁱⁱ

- Since the organization has lost several of its staff to terrorist attacks in the past, this ploy will ensure some measure of security for organizational staff.
- Host countries have demonstrated that they cannot be relied upon to provide the needed security for staff members.
- The strategy will enable the organization “to continue operating in an increasingly hostile environment”.

In assessing the sample of reasons stated above, one can discern two distinct features: One, the organization has not determined exactly what it will cost to secure these contractors and whether states may be inclined to keep making financial contributions toward the sustenance of such a program, within the parameters of a seemingly endless war on terrorism. Two, the idea that the military contractors will be able to provide effective security for United Nations personnel is strictly speculative, since each contractor will be conducting its operations independently through the use of its own personnel management system, the values of which may or may not be in concert with those of the United Nations as an organization. Therefore, if the very significant public administration issues of costs and benefits have not apparently featured prominently into the organization’s decision-making pertaining to private military contracting, then one might speculate that the organization’s decision has been made largely on the basis of “organizational survival” rather than on the basis of any scientific reasoning pertaining to public personnel administration. It appears as if the Secretary-General has endorsed the plan prior to determining its short and long-term costs.

Additionally, this behavior appears to reflect some significant measure of confusion within the decision-making apparatus of the organization. Such confusion may have been engendered by the negative public image of the organization in various parts of the world; especially the third world, where economic depravity has contributed greatly in generating conflicts among vying political factions. For example, there is widespread

speculation among some combatants in the countries already mentioned that the organization may be under the direct control of certain major global powers with vested interests in their respective countries. As a result, the organization is viewed as incapable of becoming a neutral arbiter in their domestic disputes, since such powers are suspected of using the organization to promote their individual foreign policies. Whether this is the case or not, such speculations have been known to fuel the persistent animosities directed against the organization when it attempts to fulfill its responsibilities in peacekeeping. Therefore, for all practical purposes, deployed members of the organization have been viewed as combatants or potential combatants, by some of the rival political factions in the theater. This, as a result, explains the primary reason for attacks perpetrated against the organization's personnel on a repeated basis.

Further, since the United Nations has been unable, for unknown reasons, to shed its image of "perceived inequity" in areas of conflicts it has been placed in a situation whereby it has no other choice but to continue to make itself consequential in the global arena by "remaining in business". Remaining in business would therefore imply that the organization cannot afford to allow itself to be expelled from its vital global peacekeeping role by incessant attacks from combatants. In this regard two conclusions can be drawn: one, since the organization appears to have accepted the view that it could not satisfy the political aspirations of all the vying factions in any given conflict that rages in a particular country; and two, since it does not intend on allowing the existence of the world body to be threatened by being absent from global areas of conflicts as a result of attacks against its personnel, the organization has decided to abandon its long-cherished value of not absorbing private military contractors into its operations. It will do so simply to ensure its organizational survival.

Additionally, the United Nation's inability to gain the trust of all vying factions in a conflict, as a neutral arbiter, would be tantamount to a contradiction in terms of what the international community expects the organization to represent as a global confederation in pursuit of peacekeeping. Peacekeeping will be impossible unless all the warring factions have faith and confidence in the intentions and abilities of an organization which purports to promote peace. Since most conflicts that emerge on the world stage consist of combatants with legitimate political grievances that might not have not been

addressed equitably and comprehensively, this explains the reason for the continuous fighting. Further, if one or more of these combatants envisage that the United Nations could not be relied upon as an equitable and neutral arbiter, then the response to the presence of the organization will come in the form of attacks, kidnappings, and shootings. This explains the reasons for the continued attacks against the organization's personnel, which have apparently led to the embracement of private military contractors as a last resort.

Assessment

The embracement of private military contractors, as a form of strategic public personnel administration, may create difficulties for the organization in the long run. The factors, stipulated below, constitute some of these anticipated challenges:

- Accountability – This is defined as the process by which public officials answer to the citizens directly or indirectly for the use of their powers.^{iv} Since the private contractors will not be considered as “employees” of the United Nations, and as a result can neither be disciplined nor terminated (except in cases in which the contract may not be renewed), how will the organization hold them accountable for their actions in a theater of rampant violence?
- Responsibility – If the private contractors engage in a conflict that may bring about “collateral damage” (the mistaken deaths of innocent civilians, for example), will the contractors accept responsibility for their actions and pay restitution to the affected populations or will the United Nations accept responsibility on their behalf? What impact will such situations have on the international image of the United Nations?
- Effectiveness – This is defined as the degree to which a program fulfills the goals defined by policymakers.^v If the private contractors succeed in the goal of protecting the United Nations personnel effectively, regardless of the “ruthless” methods that might have been employed in the process, how will the organization respond to this type of situation? For example, will the organization renew the contract of that contractor because it has been successful in achieving the set goal? If this should transpire, how will the organization defend its image

within the international community as an entity that grants contracts to ruthless and uncontrollable private military concerns?

- Costs – How will the organization ensure that the private contractors will not impose financial charges over and above actual services rendered?

Conclusion

By contemplating the granting of contracts to private security firms, the United Nations should prepare itself for a plethora of difficulties in that pending relationship. In this regard, the organization may be advised to learn from the imbroglio involving the activities of the former Blackwater/USA security firm, in Iraq.

Since the organization cannot afford to lose its mediating credibility in the global arena, the author reasons that the proper channel would be the development of a model that addresses the issue of getting states to cooperate toward the fulfillment of peace missions throughout the world. The United Nations cannot be regarded as a force for peace if vying political factions continue to visualize it as unfair in its quest to address the myriad problems confronted by countries.

ⁱ Colum Lynch, “U.N. Embraces Private Military Contractors”, Foreign Policy FP, January 19, 2010 <http://turtlebay.foreignpolicy.com/posts>

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} William C. Johnson, Public Administration: Policy, Politics, and Practice, Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., Connecticut, 1992, page 532.

^v Ibid, page 533.