The Influence of Non-State Actors in a Westphalian World

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Introduction

The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union have created an opportunity for a new set of studies in the international security arena. Whereas previous scholarly attention had mostly been devoted to nuclear deterrence and issues stemming from realist ideology, a new subset of research has since shone to equal status (Caldwell & Williams 2006). The role that non-state actors play in the international security field has come to the attention of many, especially since the attacks of September 11th. Non-state actors come in various shapes and sizes and include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private military corporations (PMCs), criminal and terror networks, multinational corporations, and the United Nations, to name just a few. Nevertheless, this diverse assortment of non-state entities each plays a unique role in the ever-changing realm of international security. Certainly the deleterious effects of criminals and terror networks often act to undermine the fabric of international security. Simultaneously, NGOs and the UN, more often than not, exert their energy in a positive manner. Meanwhile, the role of private security firms and their influence on international security is a point of appreciable contention.

The influence of non-state actors in this globalized world is unquestionably stronger than at any point since the Westphalia system of state sovereignty was established in 1648. Whether non-state actors play a positive or negative role in efforts to
resolve international security, stems, for the most part, from the resulting mixture of their intentions, capabilities, and the inevitable side effects of their actions. A further examination will help to elucidate how these groups have affected the state actors with whom they interact.

**Nongovernmental Organizations**

Nongovernmental organizations serve a variety of functions ranging from advocacy, protest, and mobilization of public support, to legal, scientific, technical and policy analysis (Matthews 1997). But perhaps their greatest accomplishments have been their influence over states. Take for example the role human rights activists played in 1994 when gunshots rang out in the restive, indigenously populated region of Chiapas, Mexico. Their coordinated and rapid effort to disseminate the plight of Chiapans averted a would-be heavy-handed response from the Mexican government. Jessica Matthews (1997) believes that these actions staved off a bloody insurgency, asserting that the communications expertise of these activists transformed this into a largely nonviolent conflict fought mostly on the Internet.

NGOs are able to act in ways in which states often cannot or chose not to do. Referring to the NGO’s close cousin, the Transnational Advocacy Network, “They also promote norm implementation, by pressuring target actors to adopt new policies, and by monitoring compliance with international standards” (Keck & Sikkink, 3). In a world in which certain states still view one another as the greatest threat to their existence, it may not be politically feasible for a state to act unilaterally to address issues of human rights or arms reduction, for instance. In this sense, the NGO is a marvel.
A salient example of such is the issue of landmines and the role of NGOs. Following decades of destabilizing and horrendous civil war, Angola finally found relative peace after the death of UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi. Unfortunately, by that point the country was so laden with landmines that any attempts at reconstruction were severely hampered. Enter Halo Trust, a British de-mining NGO, which in one square kilometer of land in central Angola removed land mines manufactured in thirty-one countries (Nordstrom 1990). While Halo Trust worked on the ground to provide Angolans with basic “human security,” a conglomerate of NGOs came together - known as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines - on the other side of the world seeking to influence states’ usage of these antiquated and indiscriminate killers.

In what became known as The Ottawa Process, NGOs acted as “providers of expertise on the nature and magnitude of the landmine epidemic to a broader extent, organizing public awareness displays and activities, and briefing sessions for reports open to both NGOs and government delegates” (Short 1999, 487). More importantly, it is NGOs that are often credited with initiating the call for a ban; the outcome of which was the signatures of 122 nations. It should be noted that while the ICBL drastically influenced the action of states through creating a new norm against landmines on a humanitarian basis, their work would have been far more arduous were it not for the assistance of a patron government in the form of Canada. Nonetheless, NGOs are increasingly finding themselves able to push around even the largest governments (Matthews 1997).
Private Military Companies

While NGOs might strive to increase government accountability or secure human rights – in the process categorically increasing international security via the proliferation of norms of good governance - private security firms or private military companies are a more hotly debated topic. If NGOs are representative of a vast swelling of human emotion and interests, PMCs tend to be more evocative of the interests of the highest bidder.

Long ago, states arrogated to themselves a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Since the end of the Cold War, intrastate conflict has been far more prevalent than interstate, suggesting that assumption is no longer taken for granted by illegal combatants, guerillas, rebels, insurgents, or any other categorization of non-governmental fighters. PMCs have historically served a multitude of roles from logistics, to training, to arming, to feeding, to security, to fighting. Their “positive” or “negative” role on international security can usually be directly correlated with the objectives of their patrons, yet is still highly subjective. Depending on your viewpoint, a PMC might provide security for your ambassador. Or a PMC might murder innocent civilians purchasing vegetables in a plaza where that same ambassador happened to be traveling through. In order to avoid epistemological debate, I’ll attempt to stick to the positivist tract of metaphysics.

Leander (2005) has shown that supply in the market for force tends to self-perpetuate. PMCs, in fact, create threats that were previously non-existent. Through the arcane parlance of security experts they fashion the security understandings so as to increase their own importance and “conquer market shares.” More importantly, PMCs
service those with the ability to pay, regardless of their legitimacy, and are not penalized for their past transgressions. Take for instance DynCorp, a PMC based out of Reston, VA, which in 2000 was embarrassed by a sex scandal in Bosnia, where seven of its employees allegedly owned prostitutes, including one as young as 12. Today, DynCorp is a recipient of lucrative US contracts and is helping to train the Haitian, Afghan, and post-Saddam police forces (Schwartz 2003).

These transgressions can even act as a calling card or trademark for more brutal patrons seeking to eradicate their foes (Leander 2005). A severely negative externality of PMCs is that they:

…Weaken existing security institutions by draining resources and worsening the security coverage. This gives further reasons to contest the legitimacy of existing security orders. In other words, the development of a market for force increases the availability and perceived need for military services, the number of actors who have access to them and the reasons to contest existing security order. This hardly augurs well for public security (Leander 2005, 1).

PMCs muddle the so-called “rules of war.” In an epoch where states are seeking to distinguish combatants and non-combatants through legal means, they paradoxically conflate the process and ultimately undermine their legitimacy through the hiring of PMCs. While “policy is still being drafted” (Schwartz 2003, 3), egregious violations of international law occur. The industry’s position in the legal sphere remains ambiguous. Singer (2004, 549) opines, “For international law in the 21st century… war is (also) far too important to be left to the C.E.O.s.”

Ostensibly, PMCs fill a security gap. This notion, however, belies a compendium of work that shows quite the opposite: PMCs attenuate the foundations upon which public security is formed and subvert the international laws and institutions from which states take solace and modern international security finds its neo-liberal roots.
Transnational Criminal Networks

The case of transnational criminal networks and their relation to international security is hardly one of much debate. The only debate seems to boil down to just how harmful the actions of criminal networks are and how are they able to affect the states in which they operate. Studies show that criminal networks flourish in failed states and can serve to further destabilize failing states with fragile institutions, corrupt officials, and weak civil societies (Levitsky 2003). Stewart Patrick highlights the cyclical nature: “As crime becomes more entrenched, a compromised political elite is less likely to deploy the capacities at its disposal to fight it” (2006, 40).

In terms of international security, this is detrimental. As Charles Taylor and his criminal cronies exemplified via their trading of people, guns, and conflict diamonds, weakness in one state can have a spillover effect on its neighbors and give rise to a “bad neighborhood” (Patrick 2006, 40). This is certainly not a revelation. Feisal Khan’s study of corruption and the decline of the state in Pakistan (2007) might be though. Khan concludes that Islamic militancy is a result of the impending state failure in Pakistan, and is not a cause of it: “The state’s inability, caused by decades of systemic corruption, to provide any appreciable level of public goods or services, broadly defined, is responsible for the delegitimization of the state its inability to maintain law and order in the cities or suppress Islamist insurgents in the rest of the country” (2007, 1). A failing state with nuclear weapons capabilities and religious extremists is a recipe for disaster by any standards.

Lastly, there is a connection between organized crime and the disruption of economic development and the transition to democracy, which has forced some countries
in a more authoritarian direction (Shelley 2005). Given the democratic peace theory, which states democracies don’t go to war with each other, the corollary might be that international security would be better served by a world with more democracies.

**International Organizations & Conclusion**

We have looked at NGOs, PMCs, and organized crime as non-state actors. Lastly, let’s consider international organization, and in particular the UN, in the international security arena. Some (neo-cons) argue that the UN is obsolete and acts as a hindrance to international security. They opine that if the US were allowed to take its proper place in the world and arbitrate moral and ethical issues then the world would be a far safer place. The majority of the planet sees otherwise. While the UN is certainly not the ideal institution for international security - simply because it is the sum of its parts, states – the world would undoubtedly be far more insecure without it. There is no other forum in the world in which every state that wishes can participate. The implication of this should not be underestimated. Communication is essential for averting crises. And there is no other organization in the world with as broad and sweeping a mandate as the UN.

When thinking about security, it is essential to remember that it is indivisible (Caldwell 2006); states must work together. The UN is in the unique position in that it can play an extremely positive role by addressing the issue of global poverty, which can lead to many forms of insecurity. While the sovereign state system ultimately limits the effects that this non-state actor can have on states, it still able to influence them through other means. For instance, Chapter VII of the UN charter allows the Security Council to take action if it deems there is a threat to international peace and security. The UN also
holds considerable amount of soft power and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Its consent or dissent can act as the green or red light for acts of aggression, be it multi or unilateral.

When all is said and done, the UN is more of a means for states to influence other states. Whereas NGOs work to influence states from within – or when channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked, a boomerang pattern may emerge by which domestic NGOs bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside (Keck) - the UN seeks to limit them from without. Each serves its positive purpose in the realm of international security. Their foci on human and cooperative security are essential in counteracting the pernicious effects of other non-state actors (criminals, terrorists, drug traffickers). Likewise, nongovernmental and international organizations may one day sound the clarion call for a binding legal framework under which PMCs should be allowed to operate, if at all. One thing is certain, though: they will prove indispensable in resolving the global threats and challenges the world faces today.
Resources Used:


Short, Nicola, “The Role of NGOs in the Ottawa Process to Ban Landmines,” International Negotiation (1999), 481-500

