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## China's New Found Interest in Private Security Companies: An Assessment



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### Introduction

Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) have become ubiquitous as far as modern combat is concerned, and are also attributing to the changing dynamics of international politics.—Countries such as the US, Russia and now China have started using PMSCs as a tool to influence other nations, and also employ them at the strategic level to become a global power.<sup>1</sup> Stereotypically, these private forces 'appear as sinners who committed heinous crimes' such as human rights violations in Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>2</sup>, however, the number of states using PMSCs have increased recently. Initially, the whole concept of hiring PMSCs was considered to be a western projection where in only the western countries were actively engaged in this business model of hiring private forces from the market. In the present time, this global business model is not just confined only to the

### Key Points

- China's interest in using PSCs is to influence other nations, and in the geo-strategic competition to become a dominant power.
- The Chinese PSCs are like a fulcrum in achieving China's commercial interest especially the BRI projects and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, mainly focusing on protection of Chinese nationals and their assets abroad.
- China owns several Maritime Private Security Companies to serve its interest in maritime frontier, inter alia Indo-Pacific, especially to counter US.
- Deployment of a large number of PLA veterans in India's immediate and extended neighbourhood, through which BRI passes, could be a new tool for China to pressurise India, if not today but in near future.

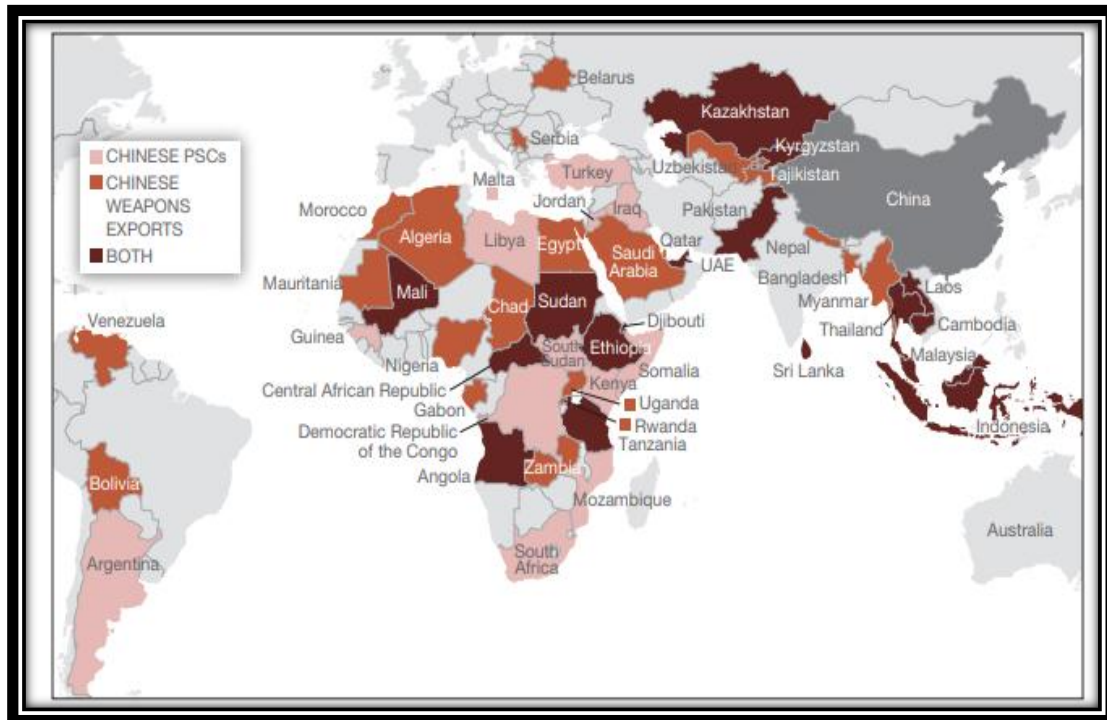


west, rather it has spread and increasingly operates in the non-west countries as well.

Despite being labeled as an illicit market, the conglomerate has transformed from a profit-oriented business to a war strategy.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Russia's use of the Wagner group in 2014 and again during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis, is evidence of the changing war winning strategy. According to Emil Avdaliani, Director of Middle East Studies at the Geocase Think Tank, 'Chinese private security companies abroad are a good tool for Beijing to better position itself in the "ongoing great power competition" with the US.'<sup>4</sup>

China, in its quest to change the existing world order, is employing PMSCs to accomplish its political and commercial interests abroad. Ranging from Silk Road Economic Belt to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, China has been using Private Security Companies (PSCs) extensively to protect Chinese nationals and its assets. In addition, it uses PSCs as a platform to accomplish Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" as also to fulfil long-term plan to become economically and militarily a dominant power.<sup>5</sup> According to a survey conducted by Rand Corporation, it has found that, 48 countries across the globe have received Chinese weapons or PSC services and 14 countries received both<sup>6</sup> as shown in **figure 1**.

**Figure 1: Export of Chinese Weapons or PSCs or Both to Other Countries**



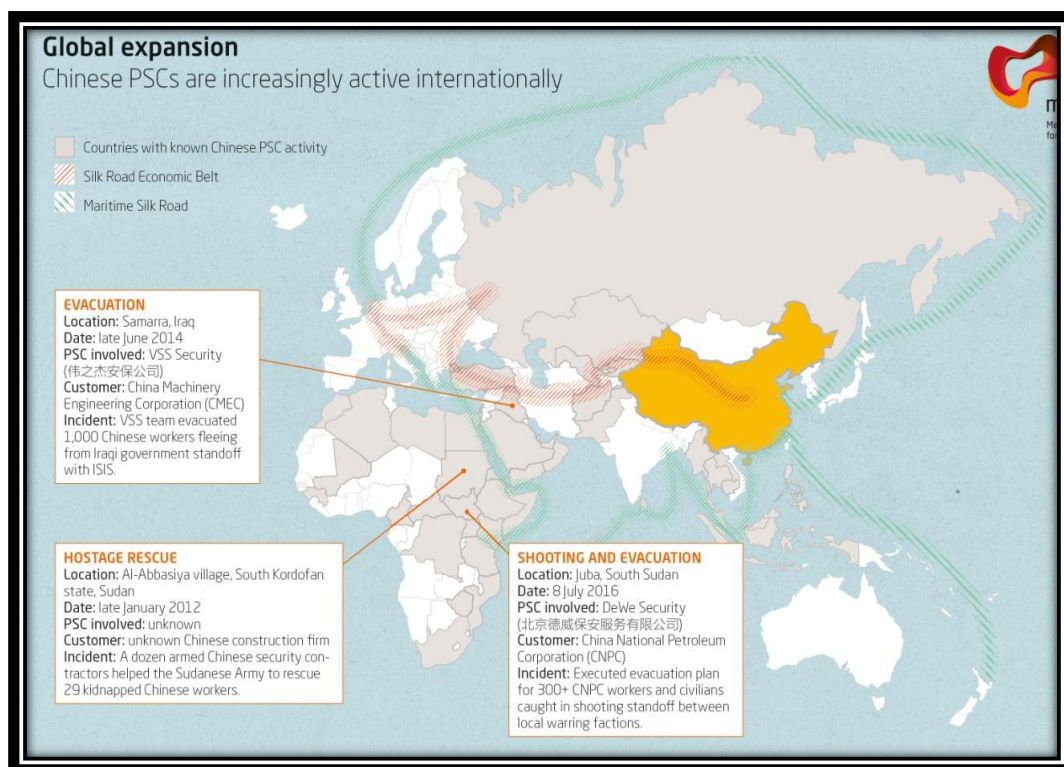
Source: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/tools/TLA2000/TLA2045-1/RAND\\_TLA2045-1.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/tools/TLA2000/TLA2045-1/RAND_TLA2045-1.pdf)

Interestingly, China does not officially accept the use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) for military purposes, yet, the country have set up a number of private security companies for ‘security purposes’ within the country and abroad. Since, the world is more cautious in dealing with China and its hegemonic potential, China’s increasing dependence on PSCs leaves much room for discussion. It is very clear that China’s PSC model is to accomplish its economic goals abroad. Nevertheless, the puzzle remains as to whether or not China will use them to fulfil its military goals in future. This, however, have become a matter of concern among countries, especially among its neighbours. The paper explicates the booming of Chinese PSCs— to increase their commercial influence overseas and examine its key takeaways.

## Profile of Chinese Private Security Companies

For a very long time, China have aspired to become a global security player by amplifying its arms export across the globe.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the steady growth of China's commercial and political activities, such as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road— an essential constituent of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect China with Asia, Africa and Europe. In similar vein, these PSCs' aims to protect the growing number of Chinese nationals living and working in countries through which BRI is passing and Chinese assets abroad from transnational terrorism, civil unrest, and anti-Chinese sentiment.<sup>8</sup> **Figure 2** illustrates the presence of Chinese PSCs' in several countries across the globe.

**Figure 2: Expansion of Chinese PSCs in Countries Connected to BRI**



Source: <https://www.merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>



The above figure illustrates that Chinese PSCs are very much active and present even though it is at a very nascent stage. Realising it as an opportunity to secure its place in the global market along with US and Russia, the Chinese Government did encourage the spreading of PSCs<sup>9</sup> rapidly. Similarly, a series of dreadful incidents—Chinese nationals being attacked abroad, have further instigated the mushrooming of Chinese PSCs. For instance, the assassination of eleven Chinese construction workers in Afghanistan in 2004<sup>10</sup>, attack on Chinese investors by the Baloch Liberation Army in Pakistan in 2010 near Gwadar Port, kidnapping of 10 Chinese nationals in Cameroon in 2014, and a similar incident in the subsequent year in Nigeria, followed by the death of several Chinese in a car bombing in Somalia.<sup>11</sup> Besides, the reduction of size of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as part of Xi Jinping's plan to modernise the PLA since 2013, provides enough evidence of the supposed recruitment of PLA veterans into Chinese PSCs.<sup>12</sup> **Figure 3** shows the timeline of development of Chinese PSCs especially in 2013.

**Figure 3: Development of Chinese PSC in Ascending Order**



Source: <https://www.merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>

Although, China claims that PSCs will only be used for security purposes, however, both PSCs and PMCs, enjoy 'plausible deniability', that prevents states from taking responsibility of the PSCs and PMCs when they commit a severe human rights violation or heinous crimes— no legality is involved in the functioning of the PSCs and PMSCs. It is essential to note that most of the personnel of PSCs are PLA veterans who are well-trained, skilled and efficient, suitable for both security and military purposes. Unlike other countries, the Chinese PSCs function under strict rules of the Chinese domestic market and regularity framework<sup>13</sup>, but it does not apply to those operating overseas. **Table 1** below highlights China's Private Security Companies who have international footprint. It shows that China relies on PSCs for an effective foreign policy and also to achieve its commercial interests abroad.








**Table 1: Various PSCs with International Footprint in China**

<b>Sr. No.</b>	<b>Top 10 Private Security Companies with an International Footprint</b>
1	G4S
2	Control Risks
3	Beijing DeWe Security Service
4	Huaxin Zhongan (Beijing) Security Service (HXZA)
5	Zhongguo Anbao China Security Industry
6	Shanghai Zhongchen Wei Security Service (HXZA)
7	Beijing Dingtai Anyuan Guard & Technology Research Institute
8	Shenzhen Zhongzhou Tewe Security Consultant
9	Beijing Guan'an Security & Technology
10	Shandong Huawei Security Group

Source: Swati Batchu (2020), "Chinese Private Security Companies Along the BRI: An Emerging Threat?"

**Figure 4: Most Active and Largest Chinese PSCs to Operate Worldwide**

The largest and most active Chinese PSCs all claim to operate worldwide

	China Security and Protection Group (中安保安实业有限公司)	HuaXin ZhongAn (花信中安保安服务有限公司)	Beijing Dewe Security Services Limited Company (北京德威保安服务有限公司)	Frontier Services Group (先丰服务集团)	China Overseas Security Group (中国海外保安集团)
Number of employees	+30,000	+15,000	Total unknown, +350 based abroad	Total unknown, 432 in headquarters	+20,000
Top leadership	Liu Wei (刘伟) (Chairman)	Yin Weihong (殷卫宏) (Founder)	Li Xiaopeng (李晓鹏) (Chairman)	Erik D. Prince (Chairman)	Jiang Xiaoming (蒋晓明) (Managing Director)
Date established	1994	2004	2011	2014	2015 (consortium formed by 5 Chinese PSCs)
Where they claim to work	Global, with a BRI focus	Global	Global	BRI focus	Global, with a BRI focus
Website	<a href="http://www.cspbj.com/">http://www.cspbj.com/</a>	<a href="http://www.hxza.com/">http://www.hxza.com/</a>	<a href="http://www.dewesecurity.com/sy">http://www.dewesecurity.com/sy</a>	<a href="http://www.fsgroup.com/index.html">http://www.fsgroup.com/index.html</a>	<a href="http://www.cosg-ss.com.cn/">http://www.cosg-ss.com.cn/</a>
Logo					

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Source: <https://www.merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>

### Chinese PSCs Operating in Various Countries

China is prudent with respect to its BRI projects in many countries; the list includes vulnerable countries and grey states which are facing constant conflicts. Owing to China’s ambition, it is very important to secure and protect its BRI project. Since, China avoids sending its PLA abroad, hence, PSCs could fill this void. China, therefore, supports the





employment of its PSCs overseas, subject to territorial state<sup>\*</sup> law and they are designated to serve as part of BRI.

### ***Pakistan***

Several Chinese nationals have been employed to serve various projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan. CPEC, being a part of land based Silk Road Economic Belt, aims to connect the BRI's Maritime Silk Road through roads, railways and pipelines. This 3000 km network will carry oil and gas from Gwadar on the Arabian Sea to Kashgar in north-western Xinjiang province<sup>14</sup>—about 30,000 Chinese nationals are present in Pakistan under the CPEC project.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, anti-China sentiments are high among locals especially among Balochis. To protect the Chinese nationals and assets, the Pakistan Army have deployed two Special Security Divisions (SSDs) comprising 34 and 44 Light Infantry Divisions with 15, 000 troops. The former was formed in September 2016 and the latter in 2020.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2012, in Pakistan, foreign private security companies are prohibited from operating.<sup>17</sup> There is no accurate data to prove the activities of Chinese PSCs in Pakistan, but their presence is traceable, through various means. It is clear that these companies work together with the local entity<sup>18</sup> under the strict provincial legislation of the state.<sup>19</sup> Frontier Services Group and China Overseas Security Group (COSG) are a few private companies that 'claims' to operate in Pakistan.

### ***Mekong Region***

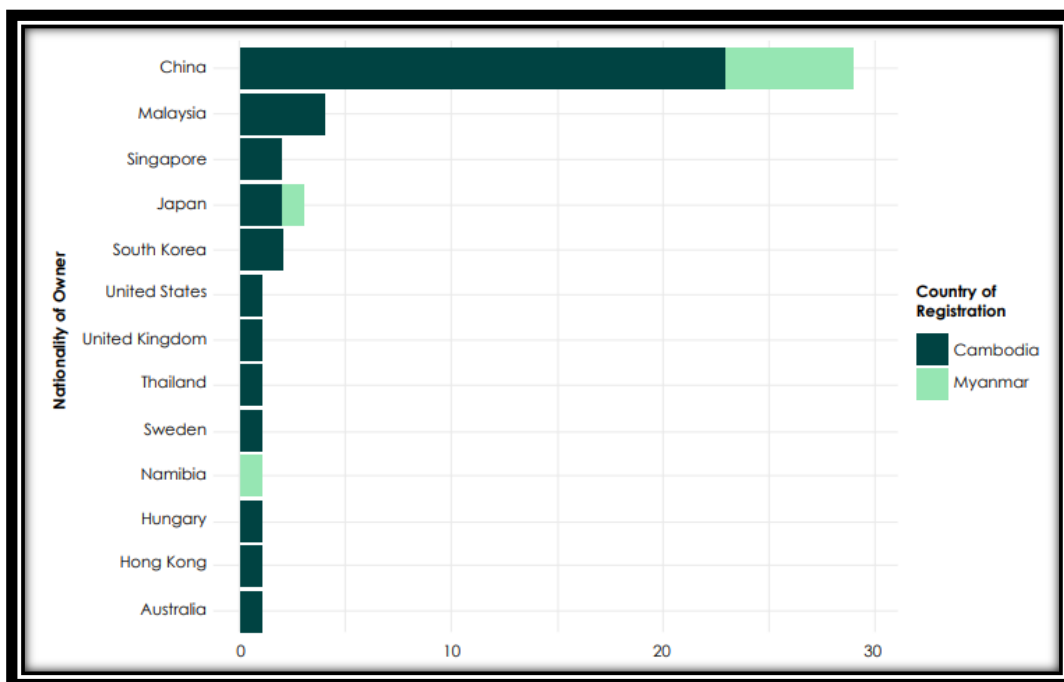
Chinese PSCs have the moot aim to protect China's interests abroad. Among other foreign businesses in the Mekong region, Chinese PSCs are most common especially in Cambodia and Myanmar. China controls 29 of the 49 foreign private security companies in Cambodia<sup>20</sup> and six out of nine across Myanmar.<sup>21</sup> In the Mekong region, the aim is to encourage

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<sup>\*</sup>States where PSCs/PMCs operate

Chinese nationals to establish PSCs as part of the BRI. Prior to Chinese PSCs, Chinese police operated in the area. However, after a violent attack, which led to the death of 13 Chinese nationals near Thai waters at the Golden Triangle, establishment of PSCs by replacing the Chinese police<sup>22</sup> was considered, whose functions range from running company safety training to developing security apps for tourists and providing armed guards for individuals or property. Chinese PSCs also facilitate support to state security forces and provide humanitarian aid in times of health crisis. Unlike other PSCs, Chinese PSCs (who are run by ex-policeman and military veterans of both China and host countries) are used as a soft power tool by China.<sup>23</sup> **Figure 5** shows the presence of registered PSCs in Cambodia and Myanmar.

**Figure 5: Various Registered PSCs in Cambodia and Myanmar**



Source: ZonedOut-Report.pdf



## **Central Asia**

Central Asia consists of five countries viz. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan wherein PSCs are prevalent in all countries. However, different rules are present in each of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) with respect to foreign PSCs. For instance, in Kazakhstan, foreign nationals and companies are prohibited from establishing private security firms. If foreign companies desire to operate then, they have to receive training provided by the Kazakh's local security companies. In Kyrgyzstan, foreign PSCs are only allowed to operate if they have necessary permits. There are at least six Chinese PSCs operating in Central Asia, which is shown in **table 2**—these PSCs aim to promote work related to the BRI.<sup>24</sup> Among all the five Republics, Chinese PSCs are prominent in Kyrgyzstan in addition to vigorous domestic private security sectors. Most of the personnel of these companies are PLA veterans and some of the companies are founded by PLA.<sup>25</sup> These personnel perform tasks which includes internal audit of project sites, emergency rescue, armed escort, personnel protection and mine clearance.<sup>26</sup> The following table shows six Chinese PSCs and their associated tasks in Central Asia.

**Table 2: Six Chinese PSCs Operating In Central Asian Republics**

<b>Sr. No.</b>	<b>Name of PSCs and Founder</b>	<b>Central Asian Nation</b>	<b>Uniqueness</b>
1	Zhongjun Junhong Group (People's Armed Police; led by Wu Guohua, Veteran PLA Colonel in 2015)	Kyrgyzstan	Largest footprint in the region and sometimes they carry weapons
2	China Security Technology Group (Founded by Tan Feng in 2016)	Uzbekistan	Membership at the International Code of Conduct Association (LCoCA); Security Supplier for China Ocean wide
3	Frontier Services Group (Joint Venture of Erik Prince and China's CITIC Group)	Kazakhstan	Recruit Logistics Experts since 2020
4	China Shield Consulting Service (Founded by Luo Ying, a former Police Chief in 2009)	Kazakhstan	Specialising in Security Risk consulting and intelligence to provide Chinese projects
5	Xinjiang Shamo Tewei (Founded by Han Hao, a PLA Veteran in 2013)	Kazakhstan	17 bodyguards to protect Chinese engineers
6	China Security & Protection Group (Founded by Liu Wei in 2013)	Kyrgyzstan	One of the first Chinese PSCs Overseas; total 60,000 security guards by 2020

Source: <https://oxussociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/the-growth-adaptation-and-limitations-of-chinese-private-security-companies-in-central-asia.pdf>



### ***Sudan and South Sudan***

Sudan and South Sudan are not officially part of BRI. However, due to their strategic location, both the countries have shown interest in Chinese investments in their country, for instance, the conversion of a port into a free trading hub in Sudan for BRI.<sup>27</sup> China established unnamed PSCs in both countries, from where personnel are sometimes hired by the China Power Construction Corporation to assist Sudanese Army's mission in rescuing Chinese workers from kidnappers.<sup>28</sup> Their presence in these two countries is prominent. Some of the popular Chinese PSCs operating in both countries are VSS Security Group or China Security and Protection Group.<sup>29</sup>

### **Chinese Maritime Security Companies**

China is expanding and investing heavily in maritime security— significant geo-strategic and geopolitical region. To operate in the Indo-Pacific and to serve its interest, especially to counter the US,<sup>30</sup> China actively recruits and employs its PLA veterans.<sup>31</sup> Chinese private maritime security companies were set up to facilitate commercial maritime interests and security of the Maritime Silk Road, which covers vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) across the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.<sup>32</sup> Since, China is aiming to build a modernised force, with regional power projection capabilities by 2035, and an 'excellent military' by 2049 with the Chinese Navy being able to focus more on traditional sovereign rights protection and military diplomacy, China, hence, employs PSCs to protect its commercial interest in the region. Huaxin Security Services represents the first Chinese maritime security company, followed by Zhongjun Junhong Security Group, called Sea Guards, who helped establish the Chinese Overseas Security Association. Hanwei International Security Services, China Security Technology Group and Dewei Security Group are a few examples.



## ***Functions***

Chinese private maritime security companies perform several tasks as per requirement that is providing both armed and unarmed escort services for merchant ships and fishing vessels near the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters, the Maritime Silk Road, personal safety training before dispatch, to formulate mitigation plans for vessels and security consulting.<sup>33</sup> Their services are more focused on Chinese enterprises operating abroad. These companies are very patriotic and very sincere about protecting Chinese businesses, citizens, and BRI projects overseas.<sup>34</sup>

Personnel from companies such as Hua Xin and China Security Technology Group joined the Chinese Navy's escort missions in the Gulf of Aden. Most of the private security forces are either Chinese military officers or belong to naval special warfare brigade or members of the communist party of China; for instance 80 per cent of the personnel belongs to the Communist Party of China.<sup>35</sup> In addition to Chinese nationals, some companies also hire personnel from Ukraine and Nepal.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Chinese private maritime security companies are vested with the duty of guarding Chinese commercial interests abroad.

**Table 3: Different Private Maritime Security Companies (PMSCs)**

<b>Sr. No.</b>	<b>Name of the Private Maritime Security Companies</b>	<b>Countries Operated</b>
1	China Security Technology Group	Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Algeria, Iraq, and Angola
2	Hanwei International	Laos, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, South Africa, and Papua New Guinea
3	Sea Guards	Unarmed Escorts in the South China Sea and Malacca Strait
4	Junhong Group	Strategic Alliance with National Government Agencies and Security Peers Across Southeast Asia

Source: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/who-guards-the-maritime-silk-road/>

### **Legal Limbo of PSCs**

Till now, there is no agreed framework to legalise PMSCs under international humanitarian law (IHL), since no country has come forward to legalise PMSCs officially. Like many countries, China have provisions to regulate domestic security companies under the Ministry of Public Security and the State Council Legislation (2009), but does not have official framework for those operating in a foreign country. The Ministry of Commerce, China, in 2018 mentioned that Chinese private security companies, working overseas, must follow the local laws and regulations of the territorial nation. In a similar vein, the Chinese private maritime security companies follow the Baltic International Maritime Council's (BIMCO) GUARDCON set rule for private security personnel to save their reputation as professional companies.<sup>37</sup> However, Chinese PSCs do not always oblige and maintain the laws & norms



regarding grey areas and loopholes while facilitating armed services overseas. For instance, Huaxin regulates both weapons entry and disembarkation operations in different ports of nineteen littoral states of the Indian Ocean region.<sup>38</sup> It signifies how the Chinese PSCs can be transformed into PMCs at any time, which is detrimental to other nations especially the territorial states. Therefore, China should have stringent laws to control and supervise its PSCs.

### Key Takeaways

- The Chinese PSCs are like a fulcrum in achieving China's commercial interest especially the BRI projects, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, by protecting Chinese nationals and their assets abroad.
- One reason for the rapid spreading of Chinese PSCs is the result of Xi Jinping's dream of 'Chinese Modernisation Strategy', which led to the reduction in size of the PLA since 2013. Consequently, many PLA veterans protested against the policy. Simultaneously, several Chinese PSCs have been recruiting veterans since 2013.
- The Chinese PSCs surround, and their presence is prominent in India's immediate neighbours such as Pakistan, Myanmar and extended neighbours such as Cambodia, Laos, and Central Asian States and even in the maritime domain. Hypothetically, this can be seen as China's two-edged sword strategy—**(a)** to have a more significant influence in Asia as compared to India—a regional competitor, and **(b)** a new step to cope with US and Russia as a global platform since PSCs because of the element of 'plausible deniability'. The Private Military Companies, that operate in grey areas, lacks accountability and legality, similarly, it also holds true to Chinese PSCs. Domestic PSCs are under the control of the state and follow strict rules and regulations, but it remains an open-ended discussion when PSCs operate abroad.
- China's use of PSCs can be portrayed as its new strategy to weaken India. In the name of providing security to its nationals and assets, PLA veterans are omnipresent





in most of India's immediate and extended neighbourhood, through which BRI passes. Also, deployment of large number of PLA veterans, next to the 'String of Pearls' could be a new tool for China to pressurise India, if not today but in near future.

- India, along with other countries, should take proactive steps to initiate a concrete regulatory framework for PSCs in International operations.

## End Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Sean McFate, "Mercenaries and War: Understanding Private Armies Today", *National Defense University Press*, December 2019. Available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2031922/mercenaries-and-war-understanding-private-armies-today/>. Accessed on 15 August 2022.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>NDT Bureau, "Analyst: Beijing Behind Rise of Chinese Private Security Companies", *New Delhi Times*, 18 November 2021. Available at <https://www.newdelhitimes.com/analysts-beijing-behind-rise-of-chinese-private-security-companies-worldwide/>. Accessed on 17 August 2022.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Zi Yang, "Chinese Private Security Companies Domestic and International Roles", *The Jamestown Foundation Global Research & Analysis, China Brief, Vol.16, Issue: 15*, 04 October 2016. Available at <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-private-security-companies-domestic-international-roles/>. Accessed on 17 August 2022.

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<sup>11</sup>Swati Batchu , “Chinese Private Security Companies Along the BRI: An Emerging Threat?”, *moderndiplomacy*, 25 September 2020. Available at <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/09/25/chinese-private-security-companies-along-the-bri-an-emerging-threat/>. Accessed on 18 August 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C Saunders, “Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications”, *Chinese Strategic Perspective*, 2015. Available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-10.pdf>. Accessed on 19 August 2022.

<sup>13</sup>N.3.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> APP, “CPEC, other projects being supported by 30,000 Chinese workers: Ambassador Khalid”, *The Nation*, 24 August 2017. Available at <https://nation.com.pk/24-Aug-2017/cpec-and-other-projects-being-supported-by-30000-chinese-workers-ambassador-khalid>. Accessed on 20 August 2022.

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<sup>19</sup> N. 17.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>N.20.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Niva Yau Tsz Yan and Dirk van der Kley , “The Growth, Adaptation and Limitations of Chinese Private Security Companies in Central Asia”, *The Oxus Society For Central Asian Affairs*, 2020. Available at <https://oxussociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/the-growth-adaptation-and-limitations-of-chinese-private-security-companies-in-central-asia.pdf>. Accessed on 28 August 2022.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Hammond, “Sudan: China’s Original Foothold in Africa”, *The Diplomat*, 14 June 2017. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/sudan-chinas-original-foothold-in-Africa/>. Accessed on 29 August 2022.

<sup>28</sup> N.7.

<sup>29</sup>N.3.

<sup>30</sup>N.6.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>N.24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>“Maritime Security”, *Maritime Escort [China Security] Sri Lanka Subsidiary*, 16 April 2018. Available at <http://www.shipmg.com/html/439.html>. Accessed on 05 September 2022.

<sup>37</sup>N.20.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

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