

# Mercenaries in the Battlespace

Assessing How Private Military Companies Shape  
Escalation Management, Deterrence, and WMD Risks

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Cover photo: Wagner Group training Belarusian troops, captured in a 2023 news segment by Belarusian news agency BelTA. Via Wikimedia Commons.

## Introduction

Private military contractors (PMCs) are no longer novelties of irregular warfare. From Ukraine to Sudan, PMCs are now operating across theaof conflict, taking on roles once considered the exclusive purview of national militaries. But despite their expanding presence, there remains little study of how PMCs' unique pseudo-state functions, the ambiguous nature of their affiliations, and their independent institutional interests fit within existing U.S. operational concepts and doctrine, particularly in the field of escalation management when weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are present.

This policy memo briefly describes how the presence of PMCs in various conflict settings and domains altered, disrupted, or exposed gaps in existing U.S. approaches to escalation management, deterrence, and WMD risks. The memo is based on a project conducted for the Department of Defense's Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), using three scenario-based discussions – one centered on the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, one on the Korean Peninsula, and one in Northern Africa – to discuss the ways in which PMCs uniquely shape policy responses related to escalation management, deterrence, and WMD risks.

## The Equalizing Power of WMDs

While the presence of PMCs during a crisis can alter risk perceptions and policy responses, the gravity of the threat posed by WMDs eventually supersedes the nuances of the types of forces involved. At early stages of a crisis, distinctions between PMCs and regular uniformed soldiers have important implications for methods of avoiding escalation, the likelihood of military responses, and the ability of the United States to manage political and diplomatic fallout. However, as crises progress and escalate, the theatre of plausible deniability gives way to the severity of the WMD risks. As those risks become more acute, policy formulation refocuses on state actors and is guided by existing WMD escalation management doctrine.

The centrality of state actors in managing WMD-related risks relates closely to the question of escalation management and deterrence. While PMCs may be the catalyst for a crisis, the production, proliferation, and use of WMDs remain largely the responsibility of state actors. Accordingly, as the risks become more severe, states naturally turn their attention to deterring or compelling sponsoring states to refrain from or change their behavior.

However, the type of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) material also has a bearing on the degree to which WMD risks override the relevance of PMC involvement in a crisis. Crises related to chemical weapons, for example, may lower the immediate pressure to act, while incidents involving radiological and nuclear material may eventually nullify the influence PMCs played in shaping policy outcomes.

## Plausible Deniability and Operational Flexibility

The employment of PMCs often reflects a sponsoring state's desire to achieve plausible deniability and create political and cognitive distance between itself and the military activities it is sponsoring. However, the deniability the sponsoring state enjoys by employing a PMC can also apply to targeted state(s). By claiming that it is not affiliated with the actions of its PMC, a patron provides an escalation off-ramp to targeted states – retaliatory actions can be directed narrowly at the PMC force and not their state backers. Whereas an attack perpetrated by a conventional force creates a narrow set of response options centered on the perpetrating state, the use of PMCs widens the menu of policy choices and presents an inherently less escalatory target for retaliatory action. In this way, both sponsoring and targeted states have the option of isolating a PMC-related crisis from their direct bilateral relationship and diminishing immediate escalation risks.

The depth and nature of the relationship between the PMC and its state backers has implications for mutual plausible deniability. In circumstances where the PMC is closely associated, aligned, or controlled by a state backer, it may be more difficult to leverage plausible deniability to redirect crisis responses away from a state backer. However, even where the veneer of plausible deniability is very thin, engaging in the pretense has its advantages. While the distinction between a PMC force and its state backer is largely performative, it offers a non-obligatory opportunity for the United States to engage in a forceful response isolated from broader escalation risks.

For crises involving WMDs, the ability to insulate an incident from the typical escalation ladder is especially important. The presence of CBRN immediately raises the stakes and inevitably creates a risky escalatory spiral. In this context, responses directed at uniformed military personnel or which are targeting state actors can accelerate a crisis, creating pressure on both sides to escalate and thus increasing WMD risks. Conversely, the mutual deniability provided by the PMC creates opportunities for both the sponsoring and targeted states to delay, practice restraint, and engage in more methodical response formulations.

## Lowered Threshold for Kinetic Action

While PMCs diminish immediate state-on-state escalation risks by providing a plausibly deniable target for retaliatory action, their presence can also encourage kinetic responses. By creating a political and psychological buffer between the force and its state backer, PMCs allow both parties in a crisis to feign that violent action against the PMC force is not directed at the sponsoring state. The ease of the kinetic response creates its own logic for direct intervention. Accordingly, relative to the appeal of targeting a conventional military force, kinetic responses during a crisis involving a PMC force become more attractive by diminishing the pressure on the sponsoring state to respond in kind.

The diminished sense of risk associated with kinetic actions against a PMC dovetails with the political pressures that are likely to be acting on policymakers during a crisis. In the event of a WMD-related attack or provocation directly against the United States, there would be various domestic and international constituencies demanding urgent and forceful action. These demands may conflict with strategic rationales for restraint, for engaging in more deliberate fact finding, or for allowing



Instruction on the M240B given to Triple Canopy defense contractor personnel in Iraq in 2011. Photo by Sgt. John Couffer via DVIDS.

immediate tensions to cool. In this context, kinetic responses against a plausibly deniable and, presumably, expendable force can both satisfy political pressure for swift and forceful action while minimizing escalation risks.

In this way, PMCs can have a paradoxical effect on a crisis response – while the presence of PMCs provides greater opportunity for both the sponsoring and targeted states to de-escalate, their presence also makes hostilities more likely.

The lowered threshold for kinetic action, therefore, presents a dilemma for policymakers, especially in terms of risk management. While making the PMC the object of retaliatory responses may serve to minimize the immediate risk of engaging in direct hostilities with the PMC's state backer, the increased incentive to respond violently injects an additional element of volatility into a crisis. Once hostilities have commenced, they can be difficult to contain and can have unpredictable second and third-order consequences. Moreover, the appeal of using force can complicate efforts to formulate more deliberate, evidence-based, or non-kinetic policy responses, a fact that is especially problematic during crises involving CBRN. Indeed, the added risk presented by WMD threats demands good intelligence, fact-finding, and strategic assessments, efforts that often require time and patience. But in altering the risk calculus for kinetic action, the presence of PMCs can have the knock-on effect of injecting impatience into decision-making, thus diminishing the immediate salience of diplomatic or intelligence-gathering missions, and potentially clouding the opportunity to craft more thoughtful and strategically sound policy responses.



A U.S. soldier conducts a medical evaluation after a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear exercise. Photo by Cpl. Anna Mae Tumacder via DVIDS.

## Escalation Management vs. Deterrence

While attributing a WMD-related crisis narrowly to a PMC can provide a useful means to manage escalation risks, such a response can undermine efforts to maintain or re-establish both conventional and nuclear deterrence. Ultimately, the use of PMCs by a state to engage in WMD-related coercion suggests that deterrence has broken down. But rather than re-establishing deterrence against the patron state, isolating the crisis from escalation risks by participating in the theatre of plausible deniability validates the use of PMCs and could encourage further destabilizing behaviors on the part of sponsoring states. Accordingly, even forceful kinetic responses directed narrowly at a PMC still absolve the sponsoring state of its responsibility for the crisis. This is especially true in WMD-related crises; generally speaking, CBRN materials remain the purview of states, meaning that deterrence around their use, production, or proliferation remains focused on state actors.

Relatedly, the nature of the relationship between the PMC and its state backer is an important element for gauging responses. When a PMC is seen as more closely associated – politically and operationally – with its state backer, action directed against the PMC was seen as more likely to have secondary deterrent effects against its patron. However, under circumstances where the relationship between the state and the PMC was more ambiguous or primarily commercially driven, the deterrent value of targeting the PMC becomes more ambiguous as well.

## The Political and Diplomatic Complexity of PMC-Related Crises

The ambiguity of motive and affiliation introduced by PMCs can complicate efforts to marshal a cohesive domestic or diplomatic response to a crisis. While a crisis initiated by a conventional force is likely to offer a degree of clarity in terms of attribution, political narratives, and response options, a PMC's plausible deniability can exacerbate disparate views on the nature, severity, target, and timeliness of a response.

The severity of a crisis involving WMDs creates significant political pressure to act swiftly, which may conflict with efforts to verify information or develop more strategically grounded policy responses. Moreover, while there may be strategic reasons to exhibit restraint, in crises involving WMD, there are also likely to be competing pressures for immediate military action. Though these realities would be present whether or not the crisis involved PMCs, they are amplified by the lowered threshold for kinetic action afforded by PMC involvement.

Similarly, the indefinite relationship between the PMC and its state backer can also invite disagreement, both within the U.S. government and between allies, as to whether the patron or proxy should be the target of any military response.

Additionally, in politically or diplomatically polarized environments, the ambiguity of PMC motives and affiliations can be seized upon by different constituencies to advance their preferred policy responses. In other words, the nuances and obfuscations surrounding a PMC can be more easily manipulated to support competing narratives and policy preferences, both domestically and internationally.

Such challenges have serious implications for alliance management, especially during crises involving WMDs. While the targets of a PMC's attack are able to exploit plausible deniability to expand the menu of options available for a response, that wider selection risks exposing divergent interests and preferences between allies, which tend to be more disparate when a crisis involves WMD.



The USS Dwight D. Eisenhower conducts flight operations in response to Houthi activity in the Red Sea in 2024. Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Jorge LeBaron via DVIDS.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

The ambiguity surrounding PMC motives and the plausible deniability they afford can alter how policymakers and military planners consider deterrence, escalation management, and political imperatives in the context of a crisis. When the severity of WMD risks are low, the presence of PMCs – as opposed to regular uniformed military personnel – can alter incentive structures and risk calculus in ways that generate distinct policy responses. As WMD risks escalate, those nuances become less significant as actors refocus attention on state actors and patrons.

As the United States endeavors to meet the challenge of an increasingly contested, tense, and complex international environment, it is essential to consider how evolving developments in armed conflict intersect with longstanding WMD risks. Well-armed, well-resourced, and politically powerful PMCs are now a feature of the international security landscape, a fact that U.S. defense planners must be prepared to confront in all domains.

As a starting point, the Department of Defense should work with interagency partners to establish clear guidelines for responding to PMC crises in the WMD domain, to determine when a crisis allows for more narrow policy responses focused on PMCs or when the risks demand an escalation towards state-oriented policy response.

Critically, because the degree of WMD risk is central to orienting the object and target of policy responses, any such guidelines should provide criteria for determining when a crisis meets a threshold that requires a transition from a PMC-oriented doctrine to one focused on traditional escalation management and nuclear deterrence.

In the development of any such doctrine, the Department of Defense and its interagency partners should determine how it can best exploit the phenomenon of reciprocal plausible deniability. Because PMCs provide plausible deniability to both the sponsoring and targeted states, the Department should consider how their presence expands the menu of options available for a crisis response, including in terms of isolating intervention from broader bilateral relationships, creating opportunities for de-escalation, and offering crisis off-ramps.

However, the Department of Defense must also recognize how the plausible deniability afforded by PMCs can lower the threshold for kinetic action and increase the likelihood of unplanned hostilities. Because PMCs provide an immediate, seemingly low risk target for retaliatory actions during a crisis, they may create strong incentives for kinetic responses that do not necessarily align with strategic goals or that obscure the availability of more effective approaches. Accordingly, Department of Defense should develop operational procedures that recognize the increased political and tactical incentives for kinetic action and ensure that any use of force, including against PMCs, aligns with broader strategic imperatives and does not become the driver of decision-making.

Similarly, while mutual plausible deniability may help contain a crisis by allowing the targeted state to focus on the PMC as the isolated object of a crisis response, the Department must also recognize how responses that leverage mutual deniability may undermine deterrence. Rather than

The Korean Demilitarized Zone from the South Korean side. Photo by Daniel Oberhaus via Wikimedia Commons.

re-establishing deterrence vis-à-vis the sponsoring state, insulating the crisis through plausible deniability legitimizes the use of PMCs and risks incentivizing further destabilizing actions. As such, in the development of any new doctrine, Defense planners should ensure that their contingencies for PMC-related crises do not conflate immediate responses to PMC activity with the requirements to broadly deter the patron state. Responses and deterrent actions with respect to PMC-related crises must depend on the nature of the PMC forces' relationship with the adversary and should be nested within larger strategic frameworks.

Lastly, defense planners and the U.S. government must wrestle with the political and diplomatic complexities introduced by the presence of PMCs amidst high stakes crises. This is very challenging. The uncertainty surrounding PMC intent and affiliation can hinder efforts to achieve consensus around a policy response and may prey on existing fissures within alliances and among domestic constituencies. Accordingly, the Department of Defense should collaborate with its interagency partners to ensure it is prepared to manage the more complex political and diplomatic narratives stemming from a PMC-related crisis. This should include a willingness to conduct information operations by strategically declassifying information and developing procedures with allies to resolve disputes related to PMC crises.



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