Civilising military functions

Geoff Harris

Introduction

The intervention of government in economic activity may be justified by the presence of market failure so that the free market does not deliver a socially optimal outcome. The four major reasons for market failure are: monopolies (the restriction of competition so that prices of a good or service are higher and its output lower than otherwise); externalities (where spillovers from an activity impinge positively or negatively on the well-being of people outside the activity’s boundaries); an unacceptable income distribution resulting from the free operation of the market; and public goods.

The last of these is particularly relevant to the military. A public good or service, as opposed to others which are publicly-provided, has two defining characteristics. The non-excludability of consumption (people cannot be stopped from consuming it) and non-rivalry in provision (consumption of it does not diminish its availability to others). Governments therefore maintain a military on behalf of their populations and finance it from general taxation.

The economic explanation is not the sole reason why defence is almost always a government activity. The military is closely associated, for example, with national pride and prestige. There is also a very widespread belief that security must be directly provided by the state although, as we will see, this is a fairly recent fashion and increasingly subject to modification.

The privatisation of security

Privatising government activities has been a major activity in many countries, both developed and developing, since the late 1970s. In essence, it involves the
transfers of publicly-owned and operated enterprises in such areas as transport
and the supply of electricity and water into private hands. The economic
erationale for privatisation is the presumption that the private profit motive
will result in greater efficiency than would occur if the enterprise remained
under public ownership, although comparisons of performance in industries
where both publicly and privately owned enterprises operate frequently do
not support this presumption. The outcome of the very large number of priv-
atisations completed thus far is the subject of ongoing debate. In some cases,
there appear to have been important efficiency gains while in others these
have been modest. In most cases, the privatised enterprise provides a differ-
ent level of service to its publicly-owned predecessor, making it very difficult
to judge whether the outcome is indeed more socially desirable. In some cases,
the quality of service has declined and/or charges to consumers have risen. In
most cases, significant job losses have occurred in the quest for profit. Another
point which needs emphasising is that adequate monitoring of the privatised
enterprises by the state is typically difficult and costly.

As to the first, the case for privatisation of activities within the military is
based on the usual principle – the need, based on budget constraints, to focus
on core business and to outsource non-core activities currently undertaken by the military to
other government departments or civilian bodies (civilisation).

Mercenaries

With the increasing employment of private security companies to protect eco-
nomic assets such as mines operated by transnational companies and to fight
alongside local armed forces, mercenaries have been recently subject to con-
siderable academic study (e.g. the books edited by Cilliers and Mason 1999,
Mills and Stremmel 1999 and Musah and Fayemi 2000). While mercenaries are not the main interest of this chapter, several points can be made.

Although current thinking condemns ‘soldiers of fortune’ fighting for eco-
nomic reward, (e.g. United Nations General Assembly 1989; United Nations
Commission on Human Rights 1998), such thinking is both recent and out of
step with trends in much of Africa. Throughout the twentieth century, many
countries employed foreigners – both as individuals and in units – to supple-
ment their own militaries. Lock (1999) examines the employment of such per-
sonnel in the context of the downsizing of national military forces following
the end of major armed conflicts. Such a trend is consistent with the weaken-
ing of the state throughout Africa and the resulting privatisation of its func-
tions. Security has become a commodity, purchased in formal or informal
markets. Lock regards this, in all but name, as ‘demobilization in slow motion’
(p.20). On the supply side, he points to the strong trend towards the ‘out-
sourcing of foreign military policy’ by the US government to private compa-
nies offering military advisory and training (p.28).

Three types of services may be offered by these private military companies:
combat services, advice and training, and specialized services (e.g. airborne
surveillance, signal interception) with a military application.

The first of these were or are provided by such companies as Sandline, the
South African-based Executive Outcomes (disbanded in 1999) and Gurkha
Security Guards (see, for example, Vines 1999a; 1999b; O’Brien 2000). The sec-
ond and third types are carried out by US companies like Military Professional
Resources Inc. (MPRI) and Dynaworps, made up of former military personnel
(see, for example, Silverstein 1997; Adams 1999; Cilliers and Douglas 1999).

Whilst I believe that the use of any armed force to settle disputes violates
most of the seven reasons for demilitarisation (see chapter 1 of this book), this
belief may be less applicable to the employment of hitech, noncombatant mil-
itary units from other countries. That is, it is likely to be more cost effective for
African countries to employ, say, ocean-going naval vessels from another coun-
try rather than own and operate a complete navy of their own. This echoes
Moller’s suggestion (see chapter 2 of this book) of African states agreeing, in
the spirit of non-offensive defence, to a division of labour as regards military
forces. Each country would contribute to a joint task force which would pos-
sess the whole range of military capacity, but no one country would have a
complete offensive force of its own.

Privatisation, outsourcing and the military

Two types of privatisation will be discussed: the outsourcing to civilians of
various activities which support the military organization, and the use of pri-
ivate military companies for tasks previously carried out by the US military.

As to the first, the case for privatisation of activities within the military is
based on the usual principle – the need, based on budget constraints, to focus
on core business and to outsource activities which are tangential to the core.
Thus McNerney and Pages (1998) list military housing, information technolo-
gy, conversion of excess military bases and inventory management as major
Clearly, these secondary functions provide social benefits but two points need to be made. First, involvement in these non-core functions may be used to secure a larger budgetary vote than is justified by the primary function. Second, the military may not perform these functions particularly effectively. Accordingly, we will examine the number of examples where a transfer of such tasks into civilian hands is likely to mean that they are carried out more cost effectively.

1. Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping has been traditionally seen as a military function. Depending on the context, it may involve the enforcement of peace by military action. More usually, peacekeepers are deployed after a peace agreement has been reached to assist in the disarming and demobilising of ex-combatants and to help in the restoration of civilian rule. There is a debate concerning the capacity of combat troops to act as peacekeepers. According to Wood et al (2001), quoted by Iribarnegaray (2002), military combat training assumes a battlefield setting, whereas peacekeeping activities involve a level of disassociation from activities it deems unpleasant necessities (Burton-Rose and Madsen 1999, p.19).

Civilianising military functions

The military in SSA typically undertakes a range of functions, some of which are clearly at best tangential to its core functions. On the face of it, it seems sensible to utilise military personnel to perform other social functions during those times when they are not deployed on security duties. Apart from their primary function – to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation, the military has taken on such other tasks as:

- internal security operations against opponents of the government
- internal security operations, often together with the police services, against crime and as domestic peacekeepers
- guarding land and sea borders against illegal immigrants and smuggling
- protection of marine and other resources against poaching by locals and foreigners
- civil defence during natural disasters
- rescue work
- international peacekeeping
- development tasks e.g. building infrastructure

Examples of US military outsourcing. This has been extended to supporting military forces engaged in combat. Private contractors to NATO forces in Bosnia, according to The Economist, provided a range of logistical and support services at about two-thirds the cost had they been supplied by the military (Anon. 1999). More recently, civilian contractors have become more directly involved in combat. In charting the increasing participation of civilians in war, Zamparelli (1999) notes that civilian contractors now maintain and operate high-tech weapons systems. The distinction between civilian and military personnel in such situations is blurred.

This outsourcing of military activities is not without its critics. Brower (1998, p.64) comments that US’ Department of Defense outsourcing and privatization savings generally remain ‘inconsequential at best, anecdotal at worse’. Such savings as have occurred have been the result of replacing permanent employees by cheaper contract staff.

Private military companies like MPRI often perform advisory and training functions for foreign governments when these would have previously been undertaken by the US military. Some observers (e.g. Silverstein 1997; Burton-Rose and Madsen 1999), have large questions about the lack of accountability as affairs of state are outsourced to corporations beyond public control. This trend has allowed the US government a ‘lesser scrutiny of its foreign activities, and a level of disassociation from activities it deems unpleasant necessities’ (Burton-Rose and Madsen 1999, p.19).

Clearly, these secondary functions provide social benefits but two points need to be made. First, involvement in these non-core functions may be used to secure a larger budgetary vote than is justified by the primary function. Second, the military may not perform these functions particularly effectively. Accordingly, we will examine the number of examples where a transfer of such tasks into civilian hands is likely to mean that they are carried out more cost effectively.

1. Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping has been traditionally seen as a military function. Depending on the context, it may involve the enforcement of peace by military action. More usually, peacekeepers are deployed after a peace agreement has been reached to assist in the disarming and demobilising of ex-combatants and to help in the restoration of civilian rule. There is a debate concerning the capacity of combat troops to act as peacekeepers. According to Wood et al (2001), quoted by Iribarnegaray (2002), military combat training assumes a battlefield situation which is rarely the case in peacekeeping operations. They emphasise the difficulty of combat troops switching to peacekeeping mode, and note that peacekeeping activities result in a degrading of war fighting skills. To such analysts, battlefield responses are ingrained in combat soldiers. An alternative view is there is no need to undo a soldier’s fighting skills; rather, there is a need to add new skills such as negotiation and cross cultural communication to enable soldiers to deal with conflicts nonviolently. This second view seems to be wishful for military units as a whole. If they are limited to some individuals, the question needs to be asked whether these individuals need to belong to the military. There are also major differences between military and civilian organizations concerning degrees of hierarchy, participation in decision-making and short-term versus long-term time horizons (Gourlay 2000).

The need for military personnel as peacekeepers is clear enough if fighting is likely to be part of their duties, or if their presence is necessary to deter armed conflict. That is, the presence of armed peacekeepers is meant to be coercive. The downside of armed peacekeepers is that their presence represents a continuation of dealing with disputes by force or threat of force and this delays a return to civil society. The need for military personnel as peacekeepers is less obvious if their functions are in such areas as providing logistical support and organized manpower. Civilian groups could do these tasks more cheaply and more effectively, and will lead more quickly to a return to civil society. Insofar as the tasks involved are those of peacebuilding, the military is almost certain to be far less competent than trained civilians. These
Again, there is the question of the effectiveness of the military in such activities, given the orientation of their training (see chapter 1 of this book). Reference was made in chapter 1 to the frequency with which the military engages in human rights abuses as part of their involvement in internal security operations. In a candid comment following criticisms of the military for assault and theft during one such operation in South Africa, the Minister of Defence stated that ‘we train our soldiers to kill and not to arrest. I don’t want them among communities because they can be dangerous when provoked’ (Vapi 2001).

3. Surveillance, natural resource protection and rescue

A third area to which military resources are allocated are surveillance, natural resource protection and rescue activities. These could certainly be carried out more cheaply by other government departments or NGOs; in addition, it is likely that they would be carried out more effectively using personnel and equipment specific to the task.

The performance of such tasks by civilians is the norm in many countries. Examples include:

- the detection of such activities as illegal immigration and drug smuggling, as well as environmental and fisheries protection along Australia’s coastline and offshore maritime zone are the responsibility of Coastwatch, a branch of the Department of Customs. Coastwatch operates 17 aircraft and eight 38 metre ocean-going patrol vessels
- the volunteer Swedish Sea Rescue Society operates 85 boats from 45 stations and carries out 70 per cent of rescues on Swedish seawaters and lakes
- the South African National Sea Rescue Institute, a volunteer organization with 24 stations and 50 rescue craft, which carries out 97 per cent of rescues along South Africa’s coastline at an annual cost of around R5 million

The patrolling of coastal and EEZ waters can be carried out by civilian rather than defence force vessels and aircraft. It does not make economic sense for sophisticated fighting ships and aircraft to be engaged in patrol and fisheries protection work. In 2002, South Africa’s Department of Environment and Tourism placed orders for three 45 metre inshore patrol vessels and one 80 metre deep sea patrol vessel, principally for fisheries and environmental protection duties. The estimated total cost of R500m is a fraction of the initial cost of R4.9 billion for price of the four Meko class frigates ordered for the South African navy in 1999, and the cost of the latter has subsequently doubled. The operating costs of the civilian vessels will also be much less.
It is also possible to use satellites for surveillance purposes e.g. to detect and produce images of illegal fishing activity and of environmental hazards such as oil spills, as well as for military purposes (see, for example, Anon 2000; Covault 2002). Commercially-operated imaging satellites can readily produce images with a spatial resolution of one metre and could be employed in place of patrols by aircraft or ships. To use expensive naval vessels and aircraft for routine patrol work is both unnecessary and wasteful.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to locate military activity within the dominant paradigm of privatisation of public activities. It has shown that in fact much military activity – at both combat and support levels – has already been privatised. The principal motive for this has been economic, but there have also been political benefits for governments.

More specifically, the chapter has argued that the military is typically involved in a range of tasks which lie outside its core functions. If the general presumption for privatisation is accepted, the military is likely to be less effective and more costly in performing these tasks than relevant civilian bodies, government or NGOs. The benefits of such a transfer are not only measured in terms of the cost effectiveness of the particular task. It will allow the military to focus on its core tasks and it will form part of a country’s demilitarisation (see the definition at the start of chapter 1).

This transfer of responsibilities for the military to the civilian sector must be accompanied by a transfer of financial resources in the same direction. It may also involve a transfer of personnel. In 2002, some 7,700 defence force personnel were transferred to the South African Police Service as part of a reduction in SANDF numbers (Koopman 2002). One concern has been the need for the retraining of soldiers in community-based policing, as distinct from the attitudes relevant to combat situations which dominate military training.

**References**


Defending without the military

Brian Martin

Introduction

When faced with the threat of organised violence, often the only option considered is ‘defence.’ This is invariably military defence, which is itself a form of organised violence. The result is arms races, military races or, more generally, violence races. The assumption that defence requires violence is so deeply seated that alternatives are seldom considered. Yet there is another, very different option: develop the capacity for using nonviolent methods such as strikes, boycotts, rallies, sit-ins and setting up alternative institutions.

Historical examples show the potential of nonviolent action:

- In 1968 the Czechoslovak people used nonviolent resistance against the Soviet invasion, and were much more successful than military resistance would have been. They were able to convince many soldiers that the Czechoslovaks had a good cause. Czech solidarity was so strong that no one could be found for months to head a puppet regime. The nonviolence of the resistance had the important impact of undermining the credibility of the Soviet Union with communists parties around the world (Windsor and Roberts 1969).
- In 1986 in the Philippines, tens of thousands of people came onto the streets to oppose the Marcos regime and to defy his troops. Government soldiers refused to attack the civilians. This massive display of “people power” helped topple the dictatorship (Thompson 1995; Zunes 1999a).
- In 1989, East European regimes collapsed in the face of popular resistance (Randle 1991). For example, in East Germany masses of people emigrated to West Germany, while at the same time street protests became larger and larger. In the face of this vote of no confidence, the government resigned (Bleiker 1993).
- The most famous use of nonviolent action was the campaign for independence of India from Britain, led by Gandhi, involving mass civil disobedience and other techniques. It was the nonviolence of the Indian movement that inhibited the British from being more violent themselves (Gandhi 1927; Sharp 1979). In contrast, when British colonialists faced a violent rebellion in Kenya, they set up numerous concentration camps and ruthlessly killed thousands of people (Edgerton 1989).