

Introduction

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In the initial three decades after the end of the Cold War, academics, politicians, and professional militaries worried about the loss of ‘ownership’ of states over violent conflict to non-state actors. While interstate warfare had waned to the point of disappearance, across the globe, weak and failing states were seen to spawn a profusion of armed groups that collapsed societies into brutal disorder. The change from the relative stability of the Cold War and the long-established orderliness of preparation and planning for interstate warfare led to the claim that the world had turned decisively away from outmoded interstate war and moved into an age of ‘new wars’. The most pessimistic analysts claimed that even strong states would struggle to withstand the onslaught of non-state-controlled armed groups because they neither understood the nature of the threat nor possessed an effective military capability to counter it. With state control and ownership over war and warfare slipping away, more excitable analysts predicted a ‘coming anarchy’ of a Hobbesian struggle of all against all.’

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the pendulum has seemingly decisively swung back to the primacy of interstate war. The current official narrative calls for the Western states allied in NATO and the EU to leave behind an exceptional interlude of humanitarian interventions and expeditionary warfare. Governments which for decades half-heartedly engaged with the distant interventions they ordered must once again firmly take the reins over national defence. The gap which had opened up between society and an underfunded and undermanned military must be closed. The public interest commands that governments, armed forces, and nations once more prepare for war by deploying the bureaucratic powers that only the modern state can bring to bear. In returning to the historical mean of great power (geo)politics, the immediate past appears an unhappy outlier marked by politically and militarily largely unsuccessful and unsatisfactory wars and can conveniently be forgotten.

It may be true that we have returned to a more familiar pattern of international politics and war, and it may also be true that renewed major interstate conflict poses the greatest and most immediate threat to global order, but dismissing wholesale the relevance of the years from the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991 to the

fall of Kabul in 2021 may be too rash a step. The prophets of the ‘new wars’ may have preached their cause too zealously, but the apostles of the return of ‘old wars’ must be careful not to fall into the same trap. The war in Ukraine gives cause for caution. While the regular Russian and Ukrainian armed forces may have borne the brunt of the fighting, they were joined by a hodgepodge of difficult-to-denominate armed groups and unarmed private actors that were not exclusively mobilised, commanded, and controlled by the state. The Russian state hired a ‘regular’ army, in terms of equipment and operations, which deployed in preference to the state armed forces to the more difficult front sectors and went on to stage a coup (the Wagner Group). Less familiar was the appearance of armed units created by political parties, oligarchs, companies (such as Gazprom in Russia), local communities, and even bands of ‘concerned citizens’ who chose their own theatre and mode of operations. The efforts on the frontline were further supported by private citizens, from the world over, with money, equipment, and technical skills (forming the ‘IT army’ of Ukraine’, for example), and companies who made their advanced technologies available (like Elon Musk’s Starlink and the data analytics firm Palantir).

The presence of non-state actors and the challenge to state control over both interstate and intrastate war and warfare persist. We may therefore not be fully leaving behind one period in which non-state actors were the main threat to return to a fully familiar period in which states once again dominate the threat picture and control the conduct of war. The persistence of non-state actors raises a host of fundamental, and urgent, questions. Do we overplay the contrast between state-controlled war and non-state uncontrolled warfare? If not limited to particular periods, are non-state actors perhaps also not limited to some special cases or types of conflict? Are they instead a generic, integral part of war and warfare? Or, in a dramatically changing world, is the role and variety of non-state actors in war increasing? Are the armed forces of the state as strong and effective as we keep being told and as the success story of the rise of the West supposedly proves? These are key questions that frame the contributions to this volume. By offering a variety of detailed studies, the chapters collected in this volume aim to provide a basis for further reflection and open up cross-disciplinary perspectives, in the context of the questions just posed, on the role, relationship and interaction between state and non-state actors.

In this introduction, we will first explain the special relationship between the state and war and why there is a general consensus in the modern Western literature on the importance of the state controlling, or as we put it, ‘owning’ war in the sense of taking full responsibility over the phenomenon. Next follows a section explaining, with a brief reference to a vast and diffuse body of literature, what we understand by the actors that avoid and threaten state ownership over war. The literature uses many different terms, but we have chosen to draw the lines around the phenomenon broadly and call them ‘non-state (armed) actors’, or NS(A)As for

short. The word ‘armed’ appears in brackets because we include actors which may not employ direct physical violence but who nonetheless can play a critical role in war and warfare. Private companies that operate in the cybersphere are an example, but so in a very different way is the Vatican. Technically a sovereign state, it abjures that critical tool of state, the ability to resort to the use of armed force, while counting one in six of the world’s population as its ‘citizens’, many of whom face armed conflict. As we will develop in more detail in the second section, what we are interested in, in short, is organised actors who are not counted as part of that select group of established sovereign states and which arrogate the right to involve themselves, in competition and in collusion with those states, with war and warfare. We then explain the prism through which the editors of this volume advised their contributors to approach the issue, before moving to the customary section where we announce and summarise the substance of each chapter.

The State and War

The concept of the state in Western political thought is inextricably linked, since Hobbes and Weber, with the idea of a monopoly of force.² The ability of the state to monopolise force allows it to keep the peace within its borders and protect itself and its population and territory against external threats. The control over force in defence of the national public interest provides the state with its essential legitimacy. The ways in which the state establishes and maintains itself are a two-step process: either by coercion (as in an authoritarian or totalitarian state) or by consent (as in a democracy), the population can be made to transfer the powers of mobilisation and organisation of national resources to the state and pay for the security apparatus through taxation. Thus emerges a ‘win-win’ situation for the nation united by the state: the state maximises national security capabilities through centralisation with – in democracies at least – maximum legitimacy. The ability to mobilise and organise military power through resource extraction and, consensual or enforced, popular legitimacy is generally regarded as the success formula that led the state to become the globally dominant form of political organisation. The classic accounts of the rise of the state emphasise how, over time, superior military capacity gave states a comparative power advantage over less efficient partisan, private interest and non-state armed groups. Viewed through a power struggle lens, the state is the stronger organisation which, if the critical bureaucratic ingredients of resource extraction and military organisation come together, is bound to prevail over smaller, fragmented armed groups.³

The general material benefits, as indicated, have been significant: domestic peace and stability and the best conceivable instrument for protecting national

independence in an uncertain world.⁴ But states possess a further specific benefit: centralised control over armed forces means that violence can be applied in a deliberate, directed and so discriminatory fashion. Or to put it slightly differently, force can be used in a regulated manner. Domestically, the monopoly of force invites regulation and accountability if a state – as it should be for the sake of its internal stability – is interested in maintaining popular legitimacy and loyalty.

In interstate conflict, regulation poses more of a challenge. However, one key reason states might embrace a regulative, restraining framework (as embodied most prominently in international law) is ultimately rooted in prudence: the patterns and predictability in behaviour engendered by customs and laws provide a hedge against wars spiralling out of control and losing any and all political instrumentality and utility.⁵ In short, they are a means of avoiding war ending up being fought only for war's sake. A second reason is that international law provides a framework for judging the relative legitimacy of wars and enemies. A common international language defining the lawfulness or unlawfulness and the justice and injustice in means and ends serves to reinforce the instrumentality of war and limits its destructive powers.⁶ This is reflected *inter alia* in the seminal work of Thomas Franck.⁷

In short, material and moral reasons make the case for state control over war a strong one. The state is widely regarded as the most efficient and effective war-making machine ever created by humankind. It remains the most widely accepted benchmark for harnessing military power and providing security.⁸ Not surprisingly, the literature on political and military organisation possesses an inherent bias against non-state actors. It not only exhorts states to bring the actors under their wing, but it also expects states to prevail in any armed contest.

What is therefore surprising is that success against disruptors of state control has not been much in evidence recently. Non-state armed actors have put up a stiff fight against Western states and, even if they have not defeated the latter's armed forces outright on the field of battle, they have forced them and their political masters to give up and withdraw from such places as Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2021, the Taliban decisively defeated the Western state-building project in Afghanistan. The victory proved not only Western ineffectiveness in supporting this agenda with military and political means, but also a defeat for the Western state-based model of building indigenous armed forces. The Afghan state army collapsed in a matter of days, just as their Iraqi brethren had in 2014 in the face of the onslaught by ISIS. The Iraqi state was more fortunate than the Afghan one, but that was largely due to the intervention of irregular Shi'a militias. In Yemen, Libya, Syria, the Sahel and elsewhere, the fight between insurgents and different conceptions of state and state-building continues with no clear end in sight. The examples do not stop there and extend to interstate conflict: in 2015 and again in 2022, Russian regular army

advances in Ukraine were brought to a halt after the self-mobilisation of non-state-controlled volunteers who rushed to the frontlines.⁹

In addition, there is also the growing intrusion onto the interstate battlefield of private commercial actors. The appearance of private military and security companies is a phenomenon that goes back some time but until recently seemed largely associated with proxy wars and wars of choice. The deployment of a US company like MPRI in the 1990s to advise the Croatian armed forces was a convenient means of avoiding direct US intervention in the Yugoslav war, yet also of influencing events in line with foreign policy goals. Later in Afghanistan and Iraq, the widespread employment of 'hire-and-fire' specialist PMSCs to support operations appeared a useful and efficient use of scarce state resources by Western states. One would, however, have expected that when wars came closer to home and involved higher political stakes, states would once again bring these resources under centralised control. That does not appear to be happening with the war in Ukraine.

Surprisingly for an apparent classic interstate conflict, the war in Ukraine is showing up the limits of state mobilisation, instead of its purported strengths. Despite the seriousness of the threat, European states, including Ukraine and Russia, are struggling to mobilise the available national resources for war. All rely, to a degree perhaps not seen since the French Revolution, on private initiative and on privately-owned and supplied resources to provide states with personnel, materiel and other support assets. Are we witnessing a break in history? There is ample reason, therefore, to study the emergence, resilience and success of non-state (armed) actors in war and warfare.

Non-State (Armed) Actors and War

The study of non-state (armed) actors and their relationship to war is a large, diffuse, and fragmented field. There are many findings and claims, with little coherence and many contradictions. This is a consequence, first, of the many groups that can be identified and the many types under which they can be classified – and for which there is no agreed catch-all term of overall classification. By comparison, the 193 sovereign member states of the United Nations are a model of tidiness in type, sub-types, and numbers. Second, the groups and the supposed phenomenon they represent are studied by different academic disciplines. Historians, sociologists, political scientists, and international lawyers – to name the most prominent – come to the table with different concerns, theories, and methodologies. Third, most suffer from the challenge of encountering an issue that they see as different from the prevailing norm or analytical paradigm that is dominated by the concept of the state. Non-state (armed) actors who meddle in war offer no obvious common point

of departure for analysis because they lack the unity of a specific, inscribed organisational rationality which flows from definable interest and produces predictable circumscribed modes of behaviour.

The number of entry points is too vast to develop a simple, unitary definition of the general phenomenon. It is therefore tempting, as the literature overwhelmingly does, to look at either particular aspects or specific groups, with the more ambitious trying to group some together to achieve some degree of generalisation. Nathasa Ezrow in her (very useful) introductory text on 'violent' non-state actors lists well over six hundred modern titles.¹⁰ We will therefore refrain from offering a literature overview for practical reasons. Pragmatism further dictated that for an annual that is produced by members of one institution, we must defer to the expertise and interests of the contributors. Paradoxically perhaps, the initial idea to focus on non-state armed actors had to be broadened to non-state (armed) actors. That is perhaps very expansive, but also usefully illustrates various ways in which non-state actors can influence others without partaking in the fighting themselves.

Contributing authors have therefore been left free to choose their own denomination for 'their' NS(A)As. They have chosen labels that fit their particular group, cause or mode of operation best. A rich panoply, with familiar and less familiar terms, is the result. Some are associated with insurgency and state-building, like separatists (Frerks), irregulars (Fliervoet) and national liberation movements (Van der Hoog), or very specifically, Ansar Allah in Yemen (Savelsberg, Voskuil and Mertens). Others refer to business entities: private military and security companies (De Waard, Wielders, Rustenhoven and Conijn, Cremers and Rothman, as well as Melissen and Schuur), information and communications technology companies (Pouw, Ducheine, Pijpers and Arnold), or more broadly, the private sector (Zwanenburg) and non-state cyber actors (Pijpers and Nietzman). More unusually, two contributions address the participation of civilians in war (Rouvroije, and Vermeer and Van der Put), while also unusually, one addresses the role of the Catholic Church (Brinkel). Finally, one considers volunteers, that is nationals from one state serving another (de Jong), and as mentioned, one chooses organised armed groups as the preferred label (Honig).

Still, some common, central points of departure need to be set out. We already mentioned that the volume looks at actors who are not counted as part of that selected group of established sovereign states and which arrogate the right to involve themselves, in competition and in collusion with those states, with war and warfare, with or without the direct use of force. So we, like the literature overwhelmingly does, also set our analysis against the benchmark of the state. The choice was further reinforced by the fact that the contributors are employed by a state benchmark organisation, the national armed forces of the Netherlands. However, it is the notable suspicion of non-state (armed) actors widely shared

by the literature which provided a frame for suggestions to the contributors. The central concerns, which are already implied in the discussion of the beneficial relationship between state and war, can be whittled down to three interrelated factors. The first is the issue of loyalty, which in the case of NS(A)As is quickly presumed to be to themselves, and not to the good of the wider society in which they operate. The second is their lack of accountability to this wider society, with the result that war and violence escape from the regulatory effect imposed by the state's presumed inherent sense of public responsibility. Non-state actor violence therefore tends to be unconstrained and transgressive. The third is the question of their effectiveness, both in the sense of these actors achieving their own selfish goals (since an expectation of such effectiveness by its members can be presumed to play a major role in their genesis), but especially in terms of their competition with state-controlled and directed armed forces.

The last point reflects back on the first two of loyalty and accountability. It leads one to investigate them anew. Could it be that NS(A)As possess hitherto underestimated or misrecognised sources of loyalty – which after all are a precondition for cohesion and military effectiveness? Furthermore, could it be that NS(A)As accept some degree of accountability to wider society because it facilitates their operation (whether it be in terms of recruiting people and garnering public support, in the case of armed actors, or in the case of the private enterprise, business) – which could further improve their effectiveness in the competition with state armed forces?

One unusual implication of this approach is that it also allows the inclusion of civilians and the Catholic Church as non-state actors. Both have a special status in being unarmed and possessing a special protective status of non-combatants in war. They are therefore in a sense independent of the state and not part of the 'state-at-war'. At the same time, though, they are each in a different way drawn into war as independent actors: civilians as a resource that can – deliberately or unintentionally – adopt combatant status, and the Church as an entity that has a responsibility to protect the faithful (and indeed all humans) from war.

The three issues of loyalty, accountability, and effectiveness reaching into wider society also apply to private commercial actors. Although the academic literature may generally be highly critical, the claim that private industry can effectively provide greater efficiency and better delivery than government has been a major force in the developed economies' politics since the Reagan Administration in the US and the Thatcher government in the UK in the 1980s. It also spread to the core competency of the state, the provision of national security, notably through PMSCs and IT companies. Again, this raises important questions about how sceptical one should be about their loyalty and need for traditional forms of state-related accountability.

The suggestion to prioritise loyalty, accountability, and military effectiveness as guiding principles for understanding non-state (armed) actors in war aimed to open up novel perspectives. For the contributors, it presented a rich array of possibilities, while it is hoped that readers find it a useful and informative framework for contextualising the contributions.

The Contributions to the Volume

Anyone with experience of editing volumes or organising other types of research projects will not be surprised that not all contributors followed the editors' suggestions closely. As they should, they let themselves be guided primarily by the nature and character of their chosen topics and the analytical possibilities their disciplinary and experiential backgrounds offered. The volume is divided into two parts. The first will discuss key current issues related largely to non-state actors in war, which are generally classified as civilian in nature. The second part of the book analyses a series of specific cases involving non-state armed actors, historical and contemporary.

Part I is subdivided into two separate themes relating to the involvement of civilian non-state actors in war. The first discusses the use of civilians in war from a legal and practical military operational perspective, and the second addresses the question of the loyalty and accountability of the private sector with particular reference to cyber operators and private military and security companies. But before these, in an opening chapter, Jan Willem Honig develops a general, sociologically inspired conceptual framework for understanding what he calls the 'strategic cohesion' of non-state armed actors. He argues that the ties that bind armed groups to society, which provide a key precondition to their military and political effectiveness, have been under-researched as a result of the bias in the literature towards the state as a benchmark model. His framework looks beyond the classic state-derived possibilities of coercion and nationality by focusing on the example of pre-state European history. Key to his model is a mapping of societally shared and supported ideas regarding the right forms of social solidarity, authority, and recruitment. Such a model, he claims, can help us understand what underpins the formation of loyal and accountable military actors and what makes them socio-politically effective. As such, the chapter aims to provide a novel approach to analysing the relative contemporary success of non-state armed actors against state-armed actors.

Honig implies that historically the distinction between military and civil society was unusual. The growing modern conviction that the two are separate and that civilians have a special protected status implies that civilians have in effect become

a peculiar kind of non-state actor: on the one hand, they need to be kept out of war but, on the other hand, they constitute the key reservoir for military power. This leads to major practical challenges. In the chapter, 'The Diversification of Civilian Agency in Armed Conflict and the Protection of Civilians under International Humanitarian Law', Arjen Vermeer and Steven van der Put discuss whether current international humanitarian law permits states resorting to the utilisation of civilians in their national war effort. They argue that historical state practice, 'operational and by way of [official] statements', as well as international humanitarian law itself does not 'ban all actions which could potentially endanger civilians'. They conclude that civilians must have adequate protection, but only if it meets a 'feasibility standard' and is not overridden by the needs of national defence.

The theme of civilian participation in war is developed further in Martijn Rouvroije's 'The Resistance Operating Concept: Towards Modern Day People's War'. He looks at an instance in contemporary military thinking which envisages that civilians would play a major role in war. With most Western countries only possessing small active professional forces, it is not surprising that their militaries are considering ways of strengthening national defence capabilities by demanding increased societal engagement. One of the ideas gaining traction at the moment is the so-called 'Resistance Operating Concept' which calls for civilians, as an enemy advances into national territory, to resist occupation. As Rouvroije explains, the idea is rich in historical intellectual and practical precedents, stretching, via Marxist concepts of insurgency, all the way back to Clausewitz's notion of people's war. Historically, however, these types of operations have acquired a reputation for descending into extreme spirals of violence. To avoid this, Rouvroije explains that current thinking in NATO is evolving towards constituting the resistance on a formal, professional military basis with the forces engaging in conventional rather than irregular type operations. The Concept therefore is evolving towards the creation of more formal territorial defence forces rather than clandestine, underground stay-behind organisations. Developing effective operational techniques and fortifying the national will to resist remain major challenges. The special forces community is taking a leading interest in the training and support of these forces, complementing their (possibly dwindling) role in expeditionary warfare and foreign military assistance.

Melissen and Schuur also look at the use of civilians in war, but from a mathematical perspective. They focus on the predictability of war, listing some contemporary approaches to forecasting the onset and duration of conflicts. They investigate the possibilities for statistical predictions in warfare and conclude that such predictions face important challenges. Similarly, despite the high expectations surrounding Artificial Intelligence (AI), the potential for this technology to contribute meaningfully to prediction in war remains highly uncertain. This is largely the

result of a lack of relevant data, particularly where non-state actors are concerned. The chapter then turns specifically to the use of Private Military Companies, and the use of mathematical forecasting techniques to predict the influence of this type of armed non-state actor on conflict dynamics. The authors conclude that despite also having their limitations, such techniques can offer valuable insights into the quantitative aspects of potential conflict scenarios.

The next set of chapters in Part I analyses civilian cyber actors. Pijpers and Nietzman start off by noting the high hopes that exist in some quarters that cyberweaponry in the hands of major powers could replicate and even extend the international stability which the superpowers enjoy as a consequence of their possession of nuclear weapons and a mutual assured destruction capability. The purported ability, or immanent threat, of cyber capabilities to totally paralyse societies and make them defenceless, however, has not been brought under sufficient state control and remains in the hands of an ever-increasing number of private actors of highly varied and therefore questionable loyalty. As the war in Ukraine already illustrates, they expect that political division and instability internationally will increase as a result.

Pijpers and Nietzman's analysis links into the argument that Ralph Savelsberg, Mark Voskuil, and Frederik Mertens make with respect to technological 'pockets of excellence' which give relatively weak actors great reach in influencing by 'holding hostage' far more powerful actors. In their chapter 'How Iranian Weapons Technology Increases Ansar Allah's Reach', they look at the unmanned aerial and missile capability that the Yemeni Houthi movement of Ansar Allah, the 'Supporters of God', has been using to threaten Israel and international shipping in the Red Sea since Hamas attacked Israel in October 2023. They note that an offensive technological 'pocket of excellence' employed by 'a relatively weak and primitive non-state/semi-state actor with limited technological and industrial potential, supported by a local minor power' can have an 'outsized strategic impact' which may be 'far greater than their purely military effectiveness would warrant' by holding at risk the interests of other powers over worryingly large distances. They conclude that this dynamic can also play out in other conflicts, like the limited Russian air offensive that is tying up major scarce Ukrainian air defence resources. Just as with cyber, it raises the strategically vexing issue of either paying the high price of protection against an in itself not majorly destructive risk or choosing the uncertain and even more expensive road of escalating and attempting offensively to destroy the capability.

Pouw, Ducheine, Pijpers, and Arnold build further on the same theme and look at the operational implications of the employment of private information and communications technology companies (ICTCs) in warfare. They underline the current massive and critical dependence of states and their armed forces on these

companies: 'Not states but ICTCs are in a dominant position in cyberspace'. The central power ICTCs exercise resides essentially in controlling the 'informational' sphere. By disaggregating information power into a number of forms, they then attempt to outline the ways in which these are critical to fighting power. Like Pijpers and Nietzsche, they question the loyalty of these companies. Judging by the many companies active in and around Ukraine, they claim that this currently inescapable dependence 'may endanger the ... application of fighting power' and so critically add to the vulnerability of states. The authors see their loyalty, at least on the Ukrainian/Western side, as determined by a whole host of factors, including selfish strategic and economic interests, as well as moral and reputational concerns. All these are inextricably linked yet potentially pulling in different directions. The authors conclude that it is exceedingly hard for states and their armed forces to get a grip on these companies as they operate across many jurisdictions the whole world over. This diffuses and limits the opportunities for shoring up their accountability. In short, in the view of the four authors, ICTCs 'practically keep the world in a stranglehold'.

The final tranche of chapters in Part I strikes a more optimistic note, however. In part, that is a result of their choice of a different starting point. Whereas the previous three chapters depart from a focus on technology and technological possibility, the next three chapters start from the perspective of private companies doing business, which, by implication, means that these actors open themselves up to the external discipline of the markets they serve. They thus highlight a different possible dynamic applying to non-state actors than do the technologically focused contributions. It leads the authors – cautiously – to see the pressures of complying with the wishes and demands of their employers, who are usually states, as producing a regulatory effect which reduces the private sector's independence and selfishness and induces them to show a degree of public loyalty and accountability. Market forces, through competition, moreover, also put a premium on providing an effective product.

In his 'Private Non-State Actors as Norm-Keepers in Armed Conflict: The Role of the Private Sector in Ensuring Compliance with International Humanitarian Law', Marten Zwanenburg opens by explaining the reasons for private companies, including those that provide international security services, to seek compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL), before setting out a number of practical steps in which the sector can contribute. He notes that private companies do not have a direct legal IHL obligation; so much depends on the promotion of norms (of which he gives existing examples), backed up by the obligation of states to 'ensure respect' for IHL.

While Zwanenburg addresses the private sector broadly and includes examples of IT companies and PMSCs, the next two chapters focus specifically on PMSCs.

Erik de Waard, Bart Wielders, Michael Rustenhoven, and Chiel Conijn provide a comprehensive literature review of the major themes in the massive body of English-language articles that have appeared between 2000 and 2024. As they indicate, the academic literature has mostly been stimulated by concerns about the behaviour of PMSCs and the consequent perceived need for regulation. These concerns mostly relate to what they summarise as ‘human rights violations and prolongation of conflicts’, as well as transparency issues. Importantly, however, they also draw attention to the fact that PSMCs received a massive boost from the 1990s onwards ‘as complementary security partners [to state armed forces] in expeditionary crisis response operations’. A major driver behind the ‘commercialisation of security’ was the claim of their providing a service at better cost and with greater efficiency and effectiveness than the state’s security apparatus. Although the literature gives ‘no clear-cut answer’ to the question of whether they did, they note the value of market competition and client government oversight to ensure value for money and that effective support for national security objectives is delivered. Furthermore, they mention that PSMCs are largely staffed by former military personnel ‘accustomed to high military standards and a Western *modus operandi*’ and that in Iraq, PSMCs ‘structurally outperformed local contractors and in many cases even regular U.S. troops’. This suggests a beneficial confluence in norms between state actors and non-state actors which may distinguish PMSCs from IT firms.

The private sector may thus find it hard to escape the modern state as the ultimate contractor and paymaster with the attendant regulatory pressures. The question of the quality and the weight of these pressures does open up the intriguing question of whether control is better assured through the workings of the free market or the coercive state. Or, to put it pointedly, whose PMSCs are a more reliable partner in delivering national foreign and security policy goals: US, Chinese or Russian companies? The final contribution to Part I, in which Thijs Cremers and Maarten Rothman investigate China’s use of PMSCs in Africa, addresses this very question.

Cremers and Rothman show that Chinese PSMCs are much more clearly a direct extension of state policy than their US brethren. They have this in common with Russia, but they differ from both US and Russia in that China is far more restrained and careful in what it allows them to do. The authors describe that the PMSCs merely provide security for Chinese commercial operations by, often state-owned, enterprises in Africa. In effect, they play a subordinate, tightly regulated, minor role in the Chinese foreign policy of expansion by economic means, as exemplified in the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative. And even that minor security role is further restrained by the concern of the Chinese government not to be seen to be interfering in the internal affairs of countries where it develops business interests. This means, for instance, that their possession and possible use of firearms are carefully circumscribed. In short, Chinese PMSCs possess nothing like the paramilitary capabilities

of Russian and some US PMSCs. The authors do note the existence of pressures and opportunities which might see their role expanding, like the growing need for mineral resources and the retreat of Russia, though they remain sceptical that it will.

Part II considers the cases of a variety of non-state armed actors. It approaches them largely from an effectiveness point of view and proceeds in roughly chronological order. First off is Henk de Jong's 'Fighting or Writing: Dutch Volunteers in the Anglo-Boer War, Motivation, Loyalty, Effectiveness and Self-Representation'. He analyses the Dutch nationals who volunteered (at the risk of losing their citizenship) to join the fight for independence of the South African Boer Republics of the Orange Free State and Transvaal against the British Empire between 1899–1902. Their numbers were small and militarily insignificant, but they were highly motivated, indignant at what we would now classify as a 'war of aggression' against two small sovereign states which were considered democratic for the white settler population. De Jong shows that the volunteers found it difficult to fit in and offer a meaningful direct contribution to the war. Despite very few possessing any military experience, the obvious place for them seemed to be on the front lines. Those experiences proved overwhelmingly disappointing, especially when the Boers began losing. Nonetheless, the volunteers remained deeply loyal to the cause and, as De Jong shows, devised narrative strategies to keep the flame alive and camouflage a disagreeable reality. Ultimately, their influence and effectiveness lay more on a political than a military level in the promotion of the Boer cause in their memoirs by abstracting the war into 'a story of perseverance, sacrifice, and victory in the long run'.

Theo Brinkel addresses a very different non-state actor in his 'The Pope's Divisions on the March: Soft Power and the Catholic Church'. The Catholic Church takes a deep, long-standing interest in war. Headquartered in a territory that is recognised as a sovereign state, the Holy See counts some one in six humans as members and represents them – without military and economic means of power – as a globally operating 'sui generis non-state actor'. Using Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, Brinkel investigates the role of the Church across four cases: the end of communist rule in Europe, the peace process in Northern Ireland, and the current wars in Ukraine and between Israel and Hamas. He argues that the Pope and Church represent an effective combination of ends, ways, and means in conflict mediation: a consistent philosophy forms the foundation for the operation of an enormous, permanent organisation through a network with a global outreach.

The next chapter forms the second contribution, which focuses on the southern African region. Tycho van der Hoog's 'The Battle for Recognition: National Liberation Movements and Military Assistance during the Decolonisation of Southern Africa' analyses the successful insurgency strategy pursued in particular by the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) to take over power in

Namibia. Contrary to conventional wisdom and official narratives, this was not primarily achieved through armed struggle. Rather, Van der Hoog argues, SWAPO cunningly played into international expectations that they formed a state-in-waiting which pursued its central goal by armed force. This narrative was critical to unlocking international assistance and recognition for the organisation at the expense of competitors who advocated a more peaceful route to power. Actual progress on the battlefield – which anyway offered little positive prospects against a much more powerful and effective white South African army – mattered little compared to the legitimacy SWAPO gained for itself and which put it in a powerful position to seize power when the apartheid regime peacefully collapsed, and its armed forces withdrew from Namibia.

In the case studied by Georg Frerks, the non-state secessionist armed actor was less successful. In ‘Fighting the State: The Comparative Advantages of the Tamil Tigers in Their Separatist Struggle against the Sri Lankan Government’, Frerks argues that in this case military effectiveness played a role, but to this should be added gradual failure, relative to the Sri Lankan government, across six further ‘dimensions’: rebel governance and territorial control, mobilisation strategies, loyalty and legitimacy, ideology and symbolism, unity versus division and international support. Eventually, the comprehensive failure across all these dimensions resulted in decisive military defeat in 2009. The case could thus be read as a competition in state-building where the established state ultimately won out against the upstart.

With Feike Fliervoet’s contribution, we move our focus to the Caucasus and what also can be seen as a case of competitive state-building. In her ‘Cohesion and Conflict Outcomes in Nagorno-Karabakh’, Fliervoet adopts a very different perspective and analytical framework from Frerks. Her focus is on the relative military and political cohesion between the two contenders for control over Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory located within the Azerbaijani state populated by an Armenian majority population which sought independence. At first, the better-equipped and much larger Azerbaijani army suffered defeat at the hands of Armenian irregulars. Fliervoet argues that this was due to political division translating into military ineffectiveness in Azerbaijan, while simultaneously the rebels achieved political and military cohesion and unity with support from the Armenian state and the diaspora community. When this cohesion waned, and Azerbaijan’s slowly grew over a period of twenty-five years, the stage was set for a rematch in 2020 in which Azerbaijan achieved a lightning victory. She concludes that ‘it is not the state or non-state designation of an army that determines its military prowess, but rather the extent to which political cooperation can be translated into military cohesion and, subsequently, battlefield success’. Fliervoet’s contribution thus provides a modern case study amplifying Honig’s argument on ‘strategic cohesion’ in the opening chapter.

A number of red threads may – cautiously – be suggested. First, on the basis of the sample of cases presented – and this is of course a limited one – the independence and self-centredness of NS(A)As appears constrained and checked by the political environment that produces and ultimately sustains them. Second, their effectiveness is not primarily determined by calculations of raw military power and battlefield technique. Socio-political conditions ultimately make or break them. The battlefield only confirms. Third, NS(A)As should be seen as subject to a strategic calculus, partly self-generated and imposed, partly externally determined or influenced. These claims may not be wholly surprising, but with respect to the issue of NS(A)As it means that, however unpleasant and suspicious many may find their behaviour, they are generally not as uncontrolled as often believed and feared. They can therefore be more powerful than simple anarchic destructive actors. And because the power of all states is never absolute and the will of their peoples never fully undivided, NS(A)As will persist. Finally, this volume brings together contributors from an unusually wide range of disciplines. Even if they do not fully succeed in bringing out the red threads, the extremely rich and varied set of references and the very substantial bibliography should prove a useful aid for further multi- and interdisciplinary research.

Notes

- ¹ Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy' (1994); Van Creveld, *On Future War* (1991); id., *The Rise and Decline of the State* (1999); Münkler, *The New Wars* (2004) and Kaldor, *New and Old Wars* (1999).
- ² Weber, 'Zweiter Vortrag: Politik als Beruf'.
- ³ For example, Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, and more concisely: id., 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime'; Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*.
- ⁴ For a recent rather deterministic account claiming the coercive state is the key engine for peace and prosperity, see Morris, *War, What Is It Good For? The Role of Conflict in Civilisation*.
- ⁵ Prudence tempering the naturally existing power struggles is seen as a key virtue in classical realism: Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, p. 10.
- ⁶ For some historical treatments, see Best, *Humanity in Warfare*; Howard, Andreopoulos and Shulman, eds, *The Laws of War*; and Koskeniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations*.
- ⁷ Franck, *Fairness in International Law and Institutions*.
- ⁸ Davis and Pereira, eds, *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, pp. 6–7; Ezrow, *Global Politics and Violent Non-State Actors*, pp. 4 and 10 (Kindle ed.). An indication of the strong pull the state exercises is provided by the lawyers who contributed to this volume: all capitalise the State. None of the other contributors do so.
- ⁹ Arel and Driscoll, *Ukraine's Unnamed War*; Kähkö and Honig, 'Ukraine's Not-So-Whole-of-Society at War'.
- ¹⁰ Ezrow, *Global Politics and Violent Non-State Actors*.

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