

Multinational mercenaries: the dangers of private sector operational involvements

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When a drone from an adversary attacks an office in Amberley, how many of our industry partners will show up at work on Monday without substantial contract renegotiation? In today's globalised world, the line between national defence and private enterprise has blurred, particularly in the Air, Space and Cyber domains of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). Multinational companies have made themselves indispensable to modern militaries, providing advanced technologies, weapons systems, and now operational and staffing support. While these corporations have undeniably revolutionised air power for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and other militaries worldwide, reliance on private contractors poses significant risks for Australia—a reality that mirrors history, as described in the teachings of Niccolò Machiavelli, the 16th-century political theorist.

Tell me if you've heard this one,

- An ADF unit finds itself facing a five member under staffing issue
- It contracts civilian support to fill the gap
- Five members of the unit transition into those positions, privately hired to perform a military role for pay (e.g. mercenary (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)) and come to work wearing polo shirts.
- The unit is now down 10 members, and the process begins again.

In particular, the RAAF finds itself most deeply becoming trapped in this dynamic: As Australia has modernised its fleet — acquiring advanced platforms — and suffered the same recruitment and retention problems during the late 2010s and early 2020s as other militaries. It has increasingly turned to private contractors to fill capability gaps. First, I would like to acknowledge the undeniable benefits to arrangements with these entities. They are however, well outlined in other articles on the Forge (Brown, 2021). That being said, a reliance on corporate soldiers also comes with significant drawbacks, which will be the focus of this blog.

Consider the role of defence contractors in air power. These organisations are not just suppliers of equipment; they increasingly provide maintenance, training, and even operational capabilities. Take for example a program within RAAF to provide kinetic capability but exclusively operated by a multinational contractor, which includes proprietary software that requires company support to maintain and a 'just-in-time' logistics system that is managed exclusively by the contractor's office. RAAF's partnership with the contractor keeps costs down during peacetime, and during asymmetric operations such as strikes on ISIS, where the mission was to degrade and destroy an organisation (without breaking the bank). During wartime, however, it creates a dependency that erodes Australia's sovereign control over critical Defence functions if it's the contractor, not the user, that prioritises who gets supplies or support, and when they get them (Trevithick & Rogoway, 2023).

Second, a reliance on military contractors creates political, strategic, and social vulnerabilities. In a hypothetical conflict scenario, private firms might prioritise shareholder interests or allegiance to their home-nation over Australian national security. Consider a situation where a contractor withdraws support due to financial or political considerations. The result could be catastrophic, leaving military assets grounded or operationally compromised. Additionally, contractors often operate under different accountability standards than national forces, raising ethical and security concerns.

This comes to our final point; Machiavelli's scorn for mercenaries is well documented in works. In *The Prince*, he describes them as "disunited, ambitious, without discipline, unfaithful, bold among friends, cowardly among enemies." Though his critique was aimed at the condottieri of Renaissance Italy, the parallels to modern private military contractors are striking. Mercenaries, Machiavelli argued, fought not for loyalty or patriotism but for profit, making them unreliable in times of true peril. Brown (2021) states that some contractors see working with defence as "just a job", and that the ADF is required to be understanding of such attitudes. This is a logical prospect in peacetime. However, those that work purely for the money should be considered dangerous and unreliable in a high competition environment, as "he will always be trying to increase his power at the prince's (Nations) expense" (Machiavelli, 1532/1985).

A nation's ability to defend itself should not be contingent on private interests. Machiavelli's warning resonates here: "A prince must lay solid foundations for his power, for otherwise he must necessarily be destroyed." In the context of air power, those foundations must include a robust and self-sufficient air force, capable of operating collaboratively, but more importantly, independent of external actors if required.

Australia now stands at a crossroads. After years of budget cuts and personnel shortages, the RAAF is on a road to replenishment. Recruitment initiatives are gaining momentum, and technological advancements are making platforms more user-friendly. This period presents an opportunity to reassert sovereign control over air power by reducing, not removing, the reliance on private contractors.

Recommendations

The following steps can facilitate this transition:

1. **Invest in training and retention:** The RAAF is on the road to recovery. The training pipeline is filling, but it must continue to prioritise the recruitment and retention of skilled personnel. This includes pilots, engineers, and cybersecurity experts. Enhanced training programs and competitive compensation packages can make military careers more attractive, reducing the need for contractor support. By scaling back contracted workforces, there is an incentive for ADF members to remain in, or return to enlistment. This has the potential to reduce the lucrative incentives for the same roles, minimising competition for personnel (these positions are ultimately funded by the Defence budget). As ADF population increases, contracts scale back until most operational units are once again around 100% staffed by ADF members.
2. **Develop domestic capabilities:** Australia should invest in its domestic defence industry to build and maintain critical systems. Partnerships with universities and Australian contractors can foster innovation and shorten supply chains, reducing dependence on foreign contractors in particular, those with no stake in the success of Australian Defence.
3. **Establish oversight mechanisms:** Where contractor involvement is unavoidable, rigorous oversight is essential. Transparent contracts, performance audits, and contracts that include the Defence Values and Behaviours as part of employment. These accountability standards can mitigate the risks associated with mercenary behaviour that comes with contract engagement. Restrictions on headhunting and

recruiting serving members to do their same job for extra money, should be implemented to prevent loss of Defence knowledge.

4. **Leverage multilateral partnerships:** Australia's alliances, particularly within the AUKUS framework offers opportunities to share resources and expertise. Collaborative training programs and joint exercises can enhance readiness and fill training gaps without overreliance on corporate entities.

Rebuilding sovereign air power capability is not just a logistical necessity but a moral one too. Machiavelli's critique of mercenaries—their unreliability and self-interest—serves as a cautionary tale for modern defence policy. While private contractors have a role to play, they must complement, not replace, national capabilities. A robust, self-reliant RAAF is essential for the defence of Australia and its national interests in order to advance Australia's security and prosperity.

The stakes have never been higher for Australia. As the winds of Strategic Winter begin to blow in the Indo-Pacific, Australia cannot afford to have its defence compromised by mercenary-like dependencies. By heeding Machiavelli's warning and investing in a sovereign air power capability, Australia can secure its skies and its future.

We want to work with Industry Partners and appreciate their role in National Defence, but we must never ever need them.

References

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