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The many faces of security along the Belt and Road: The construction of identity in the privatisation of Chinese security

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The many faces of security along the Belt and Road

The construction of identity in the privatisation of Chinese security

Thesis MA International Relations: Global Conflict in the Modern Era

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List of abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CSPG	China Security and Protection Group
CSTG	China Security Technology Group
FSG	Frontier Services Group
HXZA	Huaxin Zhongan Group Beijing
ICoC	International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers
ICoCA	International Code of Conduct Association for Private Security Service Providers
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PMSC	Private military and security company
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSC	Private security company
SOE	State-owned enterprise
UN	United Nations

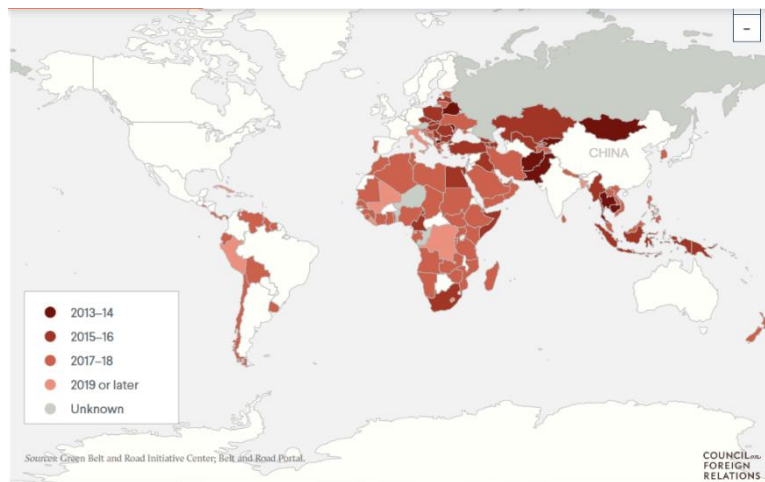
Introduction

Non-state providers of security have existed in many chapters of history. Some have survived for centuries and remain active to this day, such as the Swiss Guard protecting the pope. These Swiss soldiers have served at foreign European courts for over 500 years. Others have been incorporated into citizen armies, such as the French Foreign Legion, which was created in 1831 to allow foreigners from all over the world to serve in the French Army. More recent examples include companies such as Sandline International and Executive Outcomes, who fought both alongside rebels and government forces during conflicts in Africa and Papua New Guinea. They were usually described as mercenaries: bandits or outlaws making a profit from their taste for adventure by selling their skills to the highest bidder.

Today, such private actors are grouped together under the umbrella-term ‘private military and security companies’ (PMSCs). The nature of the conflicts they are involved in has changed and, in reaction to this, so has the way that modern private military and security companies portray themselves. Because they provide such a wide array of services ranging from active combat support to logistics or maintenance, it has proven difficult to develop one fitting theoretical framework or categorisation to describe what they do exactly. Additionally, the focus of the literature on this subject has until now often been on the Western private security industry, and especially on companies based in the United States and United Kingdom. The advent of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), however, is changing this.

The infrastructure project launched by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013 includes ‘new Silk Roads’ both over land and sea, spanning 146 countries as of March 2022 (Green Finance & Development Centre, 2022). Chinese companies are increasingly venturing abroad to take on often enormous infrastructure projects. These are often located in conflict-prone regions (as can be seen on the map below) and are therefore in need of protection. This is demonstrated by the growing number of attacks on Chinese nationals since the creation of the Belt and Road. In April 2021, for example, four people were killed in a suicide attack at a hotel hosting the Chinese ambassador in Pakistan (Haroon, 2022). Three months later, nine Chinese engineers were among the victims killed in an explosion on their way to work at the Dasu dam (BBC, 2021). The Chinese private security industry has gained more attention as a research topic in the last few years as it has been studied by a number of academics as well as think tanks such as Mercator Institute for China Studies (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018) and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (Markusen, 2022). However, the Chinese

private security sector, which was only legalised in 2009, is relatively young compared to the Western industry and still remains an understudied topic.



Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative (Sacks, 2021).

With a growing global presence comes a growing market for security, which is increasingly being filled by private actors in addition to state forces. China's growing influence on the world stage therefore warrants a closer look at not only the security-related activities undertaken by the state, but also by the Chinese private sector. The sector has been growing rapidly since 2009, but perhaps not as quickly as the Western private security industry. Some twenty Chinese companies are now estimated to operate abroad and business is booming thanks to the Belt and Road. Existing research has focused on the activities these companies engage in and the implications and limitations of their work. Not much attention has been paid to how these companies portray themselves. Looking at the identities of private military and security companies is of great value because it can tell us something about the development the private security has been going through and unveils the qualities and norms that companies find most important, thereby also giving us insight into how these companies attract clients. A review of the existing literature on (primarily American and British) PMSCs points to three types of identities: the military identity, the business manager identity, and the humanitarian identity. The central question of this research is therefore:

'To what extent do Chinese PSCs operating along the BRI assume similar or different identities than their Western counterparts?'

In an effort to contribute to this gap in the research, this thesis will first present a review of the literature relating to private military and security companies and their identities, as well as the private security industry's development in China and its link to the Belt and Road

Initiative. It will then present a content analysis of four company websites in order to assess how Chinese PSCs operating along the BRI portray themselves.

Literature review

Conceptualising private security

Private military and security companies (PMSCs) are companies operating for profit that perform tasks usually considered to be inherently governmental. They have existed in many different shapes and sizes, which is why the exact terminology has been subject to debate, with labels ranging from mercenaries and soldiers for hire to contractors or security professionals. Mercenaries were common practice for centuries, but they gave way to citizen armies in the beginning of the 19th century (Avant, 2000). It was only with the advent of the Cold War that PMSCs became common practice again, offering their services most notably in conflicts in Africa during the 1990s. They experienced a new wave of business opportunity with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over the last 50 years, PMSCs have encompassed everything from death squads to cooks and laundry service. While PMSCs previously only catered to state military forces, they have expanded their clientele to include NGOs, multinational corporations and even the UN and NATO (Avant, 2004; Østensen, 2013; Krahmman, 2016).

Contemporary PMSCs can generally be categorised according to their proximity to the battlefield, as Singer has done with his “tip-of-the-spear typology” (2008, p. 91). He divides private military firms (PMFs) into three categories with the military *provider* firms at the tip of the spear, as they are in fact engaged in offensive combat (think of companies like Executive Outcomes fighting in Sierra Leone or Sandline International in Papua New Guinea) (Singer, 2008, p. 92). Military *consulting* firms are somewhere in between the two ends, offering “advisory and training services integral to the operation” (p. 95). Military *support* firms are then on the other end of the spear, providing “nonlethal aid and assistance, including logistics, intelligence, technical support, supply, and transportation” (p. 97). This last category can also be called private *security* companies (PSCs), especially when they are hired by actors other than state militaries. They offer services further removed from the battlefield or perform non-military tasks such as guarding, providing bodyguards to private persons, maritime security (escorting ships), or risk assessments and trainings.

Wulf uses a more extensive typology and differentiates between five types of actors: private security companies, defense producers, private military companies, non-statutory forces, and mercenaries (Wulf, 2002, as cited in Schreier & Caparini, 2005, pp. 39-41). The last two categories include rebels, warlords, organized crime and combat troops, and thus do not apply to the kinds of companies that will be discussed in this thesis. The International

Peace Operations Association (now called the International Stability Operations Association), a lobbying organisation for PMSCs based in the US, distinguished three categories closer to Singer's typology: nonlethal service providers (e.g. providing logistics or risk consulting), private security companies (e.g. providing protection for industrial sites or embassies), and private military companies (e.g. providing military training, intelligence and engaging in offensive combat) (Schreier & Caparini, 2005, p. 35). As helpful as these types of categorisation are, they are sometimes criticised because they do not do justice to the fact that many companies span a wide array of services across the spectrum of possibilities all at once (Prem, 2018, p. 52). To go beyond comparisons in terms of the services companies provide, companies can also be examined with regards to their identity. The value of this line of research will be discussed below.

Overview of the literature

In the past two decades, the private security sector has been growing quickly. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provided ample business opportunities for new companies: in 2011 it was reported that the US Department of Defence alone had 155,000 PMSC personnel in these two countries as of March of that year, more than the total number of uniformed personnel (Schwartz & Swain, 2011). When their services were no longer needed there, PMSCs were quick to seek out new markets, ranging from maritime security and security sector reform to supporting humanitarian efforts. In researching these developments, PMSCs have been studied from a number of different angles.

First of all, a large body of work exists describing the historical development of private security (Tilly, 1992; Singer, 2003) and analysing the relationship between mercenaries and modern armies (Avant, 2000). Scholars have also discussed the political implications of the privatisation of security, debating the consequences for democracy (Michaels, 2005; Avant & Sigelman, 2010), the importance of a state monopoly of violence and how that might be undermined when hiring PMSCs. The question of accountability and legal consequences of privatisation has received growing attention, especially since the United Nations and other large organisations have started employing PMSCs themselves (Østensen, 2013). In addition to accountability, scholars have also been looking into the possibilities for regulating the market and the implementation of norms and rules of conduct, such as the Montreux Document and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers (Cusumano, 2012; Bakker & Sossai, 2012). Regardless of the legality of private security, there is also a lively discussion on the ethical implications of privatisation and the

legitimacy of PMSCs with numerous scholars arguing for both sides of the story. For example, Baker and Pattinson (2011) do not discover fundamental problems that should prevent from turning to PMSCs in humanitarian intervention specifically, while Percy (2007) argues that moral objections are crucial in order to prevent more violence from being used.

The identities of PMSCs

An angle specifically relevant to highlight and which will be the cornerstone of this research is the literature on the identity (or identities) of PMSCs. In the recent literature on PMSCs, there is a generally recognised consensus on the different types of identity that they take on. Carmola (2010) argues that the identity of PMSCs flows from a certain organisational culture, i.e. the “historical and cultural attitudes and ‘ways of life’ of an organization that guide action and judgment,” thereby stressing the importance of understanding the type of soldier that fights a war (p. 29). The author identifies three categories of organisational culture: military culture, business culture and humanitarian culture. Similarly, Joachim and Schneiker (2014) have researched how PMSCs use characteristics of three types of identities simultaneously to build their image. These three are the military identity, the business manager identity, and the humanitarian identity. It is necessary to dive deeper into these three categories before analysing if and how all three might be combined by one company.

The military identity, later also labelled as “the ethical hero warrior” by Joachim and Schneiker (2018), emphasizes connections between PMSCs and state militaries. Contractual relationships with or prior membership in state militaries can act as “a seal of approval” (Joachim & Schneiker, 2014, p. 255) and thus benefit the company’s legitimacy. The military background of employees, who very often were part of elite or special forces, is portrayed as “a way of life that extends beyond active service” (Carmola, 2010, p. 31). This implies that these employees will bring military values and attitudes with them to their new employer. According to Joachim and Schneiker’s analysis of different PMSCs’ homepages, the military identity is also immediately recognisable in companies’ self-portrayal on their websites. Here, companies display images of “men wearing camouflage [...] or combat gear [...], carrying arms [...] and sometimes even in shooting positions” (2014, p. 256).

The second type of identity is that of the business manager, also portrayed as “the professional security expert” (Joachim & Schneiker, 2018). This consists of characteristics that are typically ascribed to the corporate world: stressing exceptionalism, professional standards, and “claiming to be able to solve any problem” or describing their activities in terms of “agility, flexibility, (cost)effectiveness and innovative nature” (Joachim & Schneiker,

2014, pp. 256-257). Inherent to this identity are corporate priorities such as reputation and good PR, and any measures to gain legitimacy (Carmola, 2010, p. 31).

Finally, the humanitarian identity is recognisable in references to humanitarian principles, with companies striving to ‘make the world a better place.’ According to Joachim and Schneiker, companies may use imagery and language that is similar to that used by NGOs (2014, p. 259). PMSCs adhere to humanitarian values by incorporating the concept of “corporate social responsibility” in their company DNA, stressing their loyalty to “the mission” rather than to a certain organisation (Carmola, 2010, pp. 35-36). Additionally adopting this identity is a smart business move as well. Distancing themselves from their previous reputation as mercenaries opens up a whole new market for PMSCs (Joachim & Schneiker, 2014, p. 259).

There is a general consensus in this literature that these three identities are intertwined and that PMSCs use elements of all three simultaneously. However, viewpoints differ on the extent to which these identities depend on the types of services provided by PMSCs. Berndtsson claims that PSCs’ self-images differ “depending on what services they aim to sell and to whom” (2012, p. 305). In contrast, Joachim and Schneiker argue that these identities overlap and are used simultaneously by companies “independent of the services they perform, their market segment or their location on the battlefield” (2014, p. 248).

Joachim and Schneiker state that “discourses are also essential for PMSCs to speak to and sell services to different constituencies using language and symbols that resonate with the ideas, needs and the self-perception of their customers” (2014, p. 252). Moreover, identity can set a company apart from its competitors “as customers identify with all aspects of a business, including its social, cultural and ethical policies and not just with the company’s products and services” (Melewar et al., 2005, p. 60). Sculpting the appropriate identity can therefore provide companies with greater legitimacy within their industries, whilst also being influenced by that “external industrial environment” (Wilson, 2001, as quoted in Melewar et al., 2005, p. 61).

The twenty-first century has seen a “pictorial turn” in both society and the field of security studies. This means that visuals have a growing influence on how we experience and understand the world (Mitchell, 2018, p. 231). Roland Bleiker explains that when we look at an image, this experience is “intertwined not only with previous experiences, such as our memory of other photographs we have seen in the past, but also with the values and visual traditions that are accepted as common sense by established societal norms” (2018, p. 16). Additionally, summarizing the chapter by Dodds in the same volume, he states that images

“start to be part of societal values and assumptions” the more often they appear and remain visible to people (2018, p. 25). Although this was intended in relation to film and television, such repetition of images can take place in other formats as well, therefore warranting research into the ways PMSCs use visual content on their websites to convey their identity. An important part of this is how they make use of logos as a marketing tool and as a legitimisation strategy, and studying them provides insights into their clientele and their strategies (Cusumano, 2021, pp. 135-136).

Private security and the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative, announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2014, is an enormous infrastructure project in which 146 countries are now officially involved (Green Finance & Development Centre, 2022). Previously known as One Belt One Road upon its presentation and sometimes called the New Silk Road, it consists of land corridors from China’s east coast all the way into Serbia as well as sea routes crossing both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean to major ports in South America and Africa. The development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) fits into the Two Centennial Goals announced by Xi Jinping in 2012 to turn China into a “fully developed, rich, and powerful nation” by 2049, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) will celebrate its 100th birthday (Allison, 2017). The development of transportation networks, telecommunications as well as energy infrastructure are expected to contribute to “China’s position as the preponderant regional power” (Rolland, 2017, p. 127).

As the new hot topic in international affairs, the BRI has been studied from various angles. The economic aspects of the BRI have been extensively discussed, most notably because of the potentially significant debt implications for developing countries that welcome Chinese investments (Hurley, Morris & Portelance, 2018; Were, 2018). Research has also been done into the BRI’s impact on trade, be it in the region (Foo, Lean & Salim, 2020) or with other parts of the world such as Europe (Herrero & Xu, 2017), as well as into the consequences for the environment and biodiversity of countries hosting BRI projects (Ascensão et al., 2018). In the realm of international relations, scholars have discussed the geopolitics of the BRI. China has long been viewed as a revisionist power wanting to renegotiate its position on the world stage, thereby challenging the existing world order and ushering in what Walter Mead called ‘the return of geopolitics’ (2014). This explains why many countries are somewhat suspicious towards the project and why the US has announced its own alternative with a \$40 trillion investment plan in November 2021 (Shalal, 2021). On

the other hand, the BRI strengthens China's trade relations with global partners while also allowing China to alleviate reservations that countries may have against Beijing's political goals, as long as the advantages of common development reign (Rolland, 2017, p. 134).

A project of such enormous value, both physical, economic and symbolic, needs to be protected. That is why this thesis sets out to look at the BRI from a security perspective. Taking into account the fact that China has, until now, been wary of tasking its military with protecting Chinese companies or citizens abroad (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018, p. 4), I aim to explore the role of private security companies active along the Belt and Road. To date, not much has been written about the security implications of the BRI, let alone on the role of private security companies in it. Nevertheless, a handful of researchers have dived into the subject. A report for the Mercator Institute for China Studies describes how the BRI has allowed the Chinese private security sector to flourish and venture out internationally, after having been constrained by very strict regulations at home. At the same time, the authors warn that the relative inexperience of Chinese PMSCs and the lack of proper legal regulations could lead to dangerous situations (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018). However, the BRI brings vast business opportunities for Chinese companies, some of which may venture abroad for the first time. These companies need to be prepared for and sometimes protected during their journey, especially taking into account the high level of insecurity of companies along the BRI, hence the importance of *Chinese* private security companies (Arduino, 2018).

The history of PSCs in China is quite different than in the West, where the number of modern private military and security companies has grown exponentially in the last 30 years (Singer, 2008, p. 16). While Chinese history was also full of soldiers for hire for centuries, the establishment of the PRC meant that "there no longer was a concept such as 'private security' as the state retained total control and was solely responsible for the exercise/use of legitimate force" (Yuan, 2022, p. 179). However, this changed with reforms and the opening of the market in the early 1980s (Yuan, 2022, p. 179). Chinese PSCs especially gained traction following lethal incidents with Chinese nationals in Afghanistan, Lebanon and various African countries in the early 2000s (Sukhankin, 2020). The problem persists today: in July 2021, nine Chinese engineers were killed in an attack while they were travelling to work by bus. They were on their way to the Dasu hydropower plant that is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, one of the Belt and Road Initiative's flagship projects (BBC, 2021). These incidents demonstrate the need for better protection of Chinese workers abroad. As of 2020, 84% of China's BRI investments are located in medium to high-risk countries (Devonshire-Ellis, 2020). Because local security forces often prove incapable of protecting

Chinese companies and citizens, they increasingly rely on private security companies. This is a huge market that Chinese PSCs are increasingly tapping into.

Although it only obtained legal status in 2009, the private security sector has been growing quickly with some 5000 companies registered in China by 2017 (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018, p. 4). However, only 20 of those are authorised to operate overseas (Nantulya, 2021). With the expansion of the BRI in mind, it is no surprise that “Chinese PSCs offering overseas services took notice of the growing security threats faced by rich SOEs operating in the Middle East and Africa and decided to establish local branches within these regions” (Ghiselli, 2020, p. 33). For example, three of China’s largest PSCs claim to focus specifically on BRI locations: China Security and Protection Group, Huaxin Zhongan and Beijing DeWe Security Services Limited Company. Expert opinions on the companies’ independence from the state varies: Arduino (2018) argues they are indeed separate from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese Communist Party, while a report by the Mercator Institute for China Studies argues that PSCs “are entirely under the control of the state, through the Ministry of Public Security” (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018, p. 9). Fact remains that they all employ from a large pool of PLA veterans. It is therefore plausible to say the least that their management does not operate without support from the state.

Research question

The goal of this thesis is to build on the existing literature by applying the knowledge of Western private security companies’ identities to the Chinese private security sector. This will both provide knowledge on PSCs in general and specifically on those operating along the Belt and Road, as well as giving new insights into the ways that they use identity (or identities) to claim legitimacy. The research question that is central in this thesis is therefore:

‘To what extent do Chinese PSCs operating along the BRI assume similar or different identities than their Western counterparts?’

The main research question warrants further discussion about the implications of Chinese PSCs’ construction of identity and how this relates to Western experiences. The chapter following the analysis will therefore address the question:

‘What are the implications of the identity/identities used by those PSCs?’

The following section will explain the methodology used to find an answer to the research question.

Research method and case selection

To assess which identities are taken on and expressed by Chinese private security companies, I have chosen to focus on the companies' internet presence. The Internet is the place where a company has the possibility to portray itself as it *wants* to be seen by the website's visitors, i.e. potential clients. The value of a website is that "it is self-directed and, unlike many structural features of the organization, it is relatively resource-neutral" and analysing them can therefore provide "a new and useful form of data about an organization's identity and priorities" (Pudrovskaya and Ferree, 2004, p. 118). Moreover, what also makes website such a valuable source of information is the fact that it gives its makers the possibility to combine visual and textual elements in order to appeal to their target audience in the most effective manner.

Building especially on the work done by Jutta Joachim and Andrea Schneider over the past years in which they have conducted analyses of British and American PMSCs' webpages (2014; 2018), this thesis will conduct a content analysis of the webpages of four Chinese PSCs. Both the text and visual elements on their websites will be included in the analysis, as Joachim and Schneider have shown that both elements contribute to an understanding of the image a company conveys. The selection of the companies included in this analysis will be discussed below.

Content analysis is a very broad and flexible research method that is used in social sciences and beyond. Krippendorff describes content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (2013, p. 24). Building on this definition, Drisko and Maschi (2015) provide a useful overview of different versions of content analysis and discern three approaches to the method: basic content analysis, interpretative content analysis and qualitative content analysis. As this thesis uses a qualitative approach to discuss the meaning of content, rather than a quantitative approach, the concept of qualitative content analysis is most helpful. Drisko and Maschi describe this as a method that "may describe the content found in texts, or they may summarize the key themes found in texts, or examine the process or form of the delivery of content, or seek to develop a conceptualization of the content" (2015, p. 85). Its broad applicability makes this method especially useful to research text on web pages, precisely because the method is not limited to long texts such as speeches or interviews, which are more often used in content analyses that involve coding.

In addition to analysis of written text and relating to the growing importance of visual security, Cusumano (2021) points out the importance of looking at company logos. He argues that logos can serve as “symbolic acts that shed light upon the shifting identities and legitimization strategies of the international private security industry” (Cusumano, 2021, p. 135). The author notes that “the choice of logos without any direct connection to the provision of combat can be read as a deliberate attempt to keep a low profile and display a legitimate corporate image” (2021, p. 144), allowing them to blend military and corporate cultures into one identity (2021, p. 150). It is therefore clear that looking at their logos can reveal valuable insights into the image that Chinese PSCs are aiming to convey.

As was recently pointed out in an article by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, there is no (publicly available) exhaustive list of Chinese PSCs (Markusen, 2022, p. 4). The report by Legarda and Nouwens for the Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies (2018) provides the most comprehensive overview of Chinese PSCs operating worldwide, which is why I have heavily relied on this list to determine which companies to analyse. It is important to note that all websites had a Chinese and an English version. In some cases, it became clear that the Chinese version had more information available than the English version. This is why, for each company, both versions were analysed by using the automatic translation tool provided by Google Chrome when opening the Chinese websites.

1. China Security and Protection Group

China Security and Protection Group (CSPG) is listed as the largest Chinese private security company by Legarda and Nouwens (2018, p. 6). It was founded in 1994 and while its website does not mention an exact number of employees, it does say that its consulting and management team provides “operational and management support to more than 30,000 security guards providing security services on the front line” (China Security and Protection Group, 2021). On the Chinese website (automatically translated by Google), there is a page under ‘About Us’ that shows the locations in which CSPG is active: many locations are visible in China, but also Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Middle East and the US. Interestingly, this page does not show up on the English version of the website. However, the English website does list the range of different services offered by CSPG from rail traffic security and VIP protection to financial security and overseas security. This last category is most of interest to this thesis, as this department is said to focus on the Belt and Road (China Security and Protection Group, 2021).

2. Huaxin Zhongan

Huaxin Zhongan (HXZA) is listed by Legarda and Nouwens as one of the five biggest Chinese PSCs operating worldwide (2018, p. 6). The company was established in 2004 by Yin Weihong and it currently has over 15,000 employees according to Legarda and Nouwens, although the HXZA website boasts a number of 30,000 employees. HXZA claims to operate in over 60 countries along the BRI and also explicitly mentions that it is “committed to the Belt and Road initiative” (HXZA, n.d.). Additionally, HXZA is the first Chinese private security company that is a certified member of the International Code of Conduct Association. This can be interpreted as actively working towards complying with existing (Western) industry standards. Its website is available in both Chinese and English, although when browsing through and comparing both versions, it becomes clear that the texts on the English site are often shorter than on the Chinese site. It can therefore be assumed that the Chinese site provides information that cannot be found on the English one. To make sure that all relevant information can be included in this analysis, I have decided to work with the English translation of the Chinese page that is automatically generated by Google when accessing the website.

After some more research on Google, I found out that there is a second website of HXZA in English that looks more polished and recent. This website will be referred to as HXZA Security when mentioned in the analysis, because the weblink is hxzasecurity.com as opposed to hxza.com. Although there is an option in the top right corner to show the website in Chinese, clicking on it redirects you to the original Chinese website. The content is not significantly different from the original website (both the Chinese and English versions), other than that this website also has a section called ‘Social Responsibility’ on the About page, discussing the company’s socially responsible agenda. Both websites will be used in the analysis of HXZA.

3. Frontier Services Group

Frontier Services Group (FSG) was founded in 2014 by Erik Prince, who led the company until he resigned in 2021. It is interesting to note that Erik Prince is primarily known as the former CEO of Blackwater, a large PMSC that was especially active in Iraq. FSG is also listed in the top 5 largest Chinese PSCs and claims to focus its activities on the BRI (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018, p. 6). It is unclear how many people the company employs, but its website mentions that the business headquarters are located in Beijing (although the company is listed in Hong Kong) and that it has branches in Shanghai, Dubai, Nairobi and Johannesburg

(Frontier Services Group, n.d.). The news section on the FSG websites also lists a specific “Belt and Road Column” displaying the company’s interest in the BRI, although it is not entirely clear whether all those news items actually involve Frontier Services Group.

4. China Security Technology Group

China Security Technology Group (CSTG) is listed in Hong Kong since 2016 and was founded by CEO Tan Feng. As he says himself on the company website, CSTG is a “new security force born in the domestic private sector.” The fact that this company is a relatively new addition to the Chinese private security industry might explain why it is not included in the overview of largest and most active companies listed in the MERICS report. However, its ambitious goals make it an interesting addition to the analysis in this thesis. For instance, CSTG aims to become part of the industry’s global top five companies within eight years (CSTG, 2020). It wants to add Chinese characteristics to overseas security, catering to Chinese companies investing in major projects along the Belt and Road by offering them services that range from security escorts and VIP guards to safety training and risk assessments (CSTG, 2020).

Table 1. Summary of analysed companies

	China Security and Protection Group	Huaxin Zhongan	Frontier Services Group	China Security Technology Group
Number of employees	+30,000	+30,000 ¹	Unknown	Unknown ²
BRI countries	Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates	Bases and sites in more than 60 countries along the BRI	Offices in Shanghai, Dubai, Nairobi and Johannesburg. Active in Southern Africa, MENA, Northwest and Southwest Regions	Offices in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Pakistan. Also active in Algeria, Angola, Iraq.
Founded in	1994	2004	2014	2016 ³
Current leader	Liu Wei (Chairman)	Yin Weihong (Chairman and CEO)	Li Xiaopeng (CEO) Ko Chun Shun (Deputy Chairman) Luo Ning (Deputy Chairman)	Tan Feng (CEO)
Owned by	Zhongbao Industrial Group Co., Ltd.	HXZA Group is the holding company of 10 subsidiaries	CITIC Group	Beijing Huatai Zongheng Investment Management Co., Ltd.

Sources: Legarda & Nouwens (2018); Nantulya (2021); CSPG website; HXZA website; FSG website; CSTG website.

¹ This number is ambiguous: HXZA’s website says there are over 30,000 employees, while Nantulya (2021) and Legarda & Nouwens (2018) both mention a number of 15,000.

² Nantulya (2021) states 30,000, but it is unclear where this number comes from.

³ Incorporated in 2016.

Analysis

This section will present the findings of the content analysis. As described in the section on research method and case selection, both the English and Chinese versions of the websites of four Chinese private security companies were analysed by examining both language and visual elements. Following the categorisation into the three identities put forth in the literature review, this section will discuss how the results fit into the military identity, the business manager identity and the humanitarian identity.

Military identity

The military identity is generally characterised by a focus on the company's connections with state militaries, which can act as a "seal of approval" according to Joachim and Schneiker (2014, p. 255). In addition to a possible link to national armed forces, this identity is built upon the employment history of a company's employees, who have often served in the military. The research by Joachim and Schneiker has shown that the military identity is also visually showcased for example by images of men wearing arms or combat gear (2014, p. 256).

The companies included in this analysis differed greatly from each other with regards to their appropriation of a military identity. China Security and Protection Group (CSPG) for example did not mention once whether their personnel had a military background. It is unclear whether that is because their employees do not actually have any military experience, or whether the company just chooses not to highlight this background on their website. Frontier Services Group (FSG) mentions its "highly trained ex-military personnel" just once (FSG, 2019). Huaxin Zhongan (HXZA) on the other hand does explicitly recognise the company's ties to the military, both of its management team and the rest of the employees.

Coincidentally, HXZA is one of the few Chinese PSCs that carries out armed operations. The employees tasked with guarding commercial shipping on the high seas are often "ex-Navy/Marine officers with actual experiences in the Gulf of Aden with the Chinese Navy Escort Fleet or law-enforcement officers with actual crisis-management experiences" (HXZA, n.d.). On the page dedicated to information on the armed escort at sea, they are described as "outstanding veterans from the Marine Corps, the Army Special Forces, and the Armed Police Special Police Force" (HXZA, n.d.). Furthermore, HXZA states that "military temperament" is embedded in their company culture (HXZA, n.d.). This also speaks to the importance of military values for these companies, and how the military temperament relates to their way of

doing. For example, the website states that “You can rest assured that HUAXINZHONGAN will treat you with honesty and respect,” values often associated with military reputation.

It is not only the employees in the field that are praised for their military background. CSTG mentions that two of its senior executives have previous military experience listed in their profile (CSTG, 2020). HXZA mentions that the company was founded by Yin Weihong, “an ex-army officer with extensive military and commercial experience” (HXZA, n.d.) and that “its management team is staffed with college-educated ex-servicemen or ex-police officers, who are dedicated to the company’s mission.” The fact that HXZA and CSTG mention that also members of the management team have a military background reiterates Joachim and Schneiker’s finding that “PMSCs conceive of the military and business identity as being relatively compatible” (2014, p. 256).

As for contractual relationships with state militaries, none of the companies make references to the People’s Liberation Army specifically or allude to protecting ‘homeland China’ although references to the Belt and Road Initiative are made on numerous occasions. HXZA states that it is “committed to providing all-round security for domestic and foreign customers, and is committed to the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative” (HXZA, n.d.). While the company does not mention any cooperation with the Chinese army, it does underline its support of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Huaxin Zhongan Group Party Committee was founded in 2014 and has 265 members, a number of which are photographed in front of a giant CCP flag (HXZA, n.d.). China Security Technology Group (CSTG) states that it “mainly provides security service and support for the major China-invested projects, employees and assets in the countries along ‘Belt and Road’” (CSTG, 2020) and FSG has a news section dedicated to the BRI (FSG, 2019).

The military identity is further emulated through the visual elements of the websites (see Appendix). The homepage of CSPG shows pictures of a group of men in military-like uniforms and in police uniforms. HXZA specialises in maritime security and portrays this on its homepage with images of men standing on a ship while holding guns and binoculars. Other pictures show a sheet of paper with the words “high risk area” and bullets laying on top, two people engaged in physical combat, and a big group of men wearing military-like uniforms – although they are holding up their hands in a peace sign.

The importance of logos to convey a certain meaning also becomes apparent from the companies’ websites. CSPG also describes the meaning of its logo, explaining that the shield stands for “security, protection, fidelity, bravery, integrity, resistance” thereby referring to “ancient legends, which manifests the business philosophy of security, protection, fidelity,

bravery and wisdom first” (CSPG, 2021; see Appendix, image 3). HXZA uses the upward arrow in its logo to reference “the epaulettes of the soldiers, representing the core of the team by a group of determined and loyal soldiers” (HXZA, n.d.; see Appendix, image 4). Additionally it should be noted that HXZA has four versions of the logo representing its different business segments (see Appendix, image 6). The gold in the first logo represents the ‘golden signboard’ of the company. The red and blue in the second logo represent the domestic and overseas security services. The third logo represents intelligent technology and the green logo finally stands for education and training.

Business manager identity

The business manager identity is prevalent on all analysed websites. Between business philosophies, slogans, tenets, and principles, the analysed companies seem eager to promote their professionalism and efficiency. Elements of the business identity include an emphasis on exceptionalism and professional standards, so as to promote the company as leading experts in their field. Moreover, good PR and reputation are equally important in order to strive for greater legitimacy (Carmola, 2010, p. 31). Characteristics that are often associated with the corporate world can be found in all four companies. This becomes clear for example from the fact that companies are expanding quickly and becoming active on a global scale, such as CSPG having “established branches and acquired local security companies in the United States, Kyrgyzstan, Cambodia, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates and other places” (CSPG, 2021). HXZA boasts “bases and sites in more than 60 countries along the ‘Belt and Road’ and its business scope covers 31 countries” (HXZA, n.d.).

It is very clear that these PSCs adhere to corporate norms and values that fit with the business manager identity. All companies highlight their excellency and professionalism, using keywords on their homepage such as “legal, professional, effective” (HXZA, n.d.), mentioning “the core values of ‘loyalty, responsibility, morality and trustworthiness’” (HXZA, n.d.), or stating their “word class security solutions to the highest international standards” which are part of “a holistic approach to security” (FSG, 2019). FSG wants to “engage with all stakeholders within your organization, and conducting an overarching gap analysis of your needs” in order to “provide you with a roadmap for integrating security into the heart of your business” (FSG, 2019). CSTG promotes “responsibility, dedication and integrity” as keywords as well as their “core values of solidarity, persistence, vision and decisiveness” and a “service tenet of legal compliance, cooperation and win-win” (CSTG, 2020), and CSPG’s business philosophy is to be “professional, efficient, honest and sharing”

(CSPG, 2021). HXZA relies on “scientific management and excellent team, to provide customers with loyal, reliable, professional and efficient security” (HXZA, n.d.).

Companies also make references to their exceptionalism and stress that they either are already or strive to become the best in their field. CSTG states its ambition “to possess at least 30 overseas branches by the year 2019” and has set three developing goals: “to become China’s largest overseas security service provider in three years, [...] Asia’s largest overseas security provider in five years and to strive to enter the industry’s global top five in eight years” (CSTG, 2020). CSPG strives “to become the world’s leading security service provider” and “to build an international first-class security service brand” (CSPG, 2021). HXZA relies more on the goals they have already accomplished. The company mentions that it “has been repeatedly recognized as a leader in the security industry in China” and has posted images of all qualifications and licenses awarded to them (HXZA, n.d.). Additionally, the company reiterates on different sections of their website that they are the “only Chinese member of the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Companies (ICoC) and the Maritime Security Industry Association (SAMI)” (HXZA, n.d.).

Another reminder of the business manager identity is the fact that the analysed companies are part of larger companies or conglomerates, which is reflected in their investment activities. For example, CSPG is owned by Zhongbao Industrial Group and under the ‘Services’ page on their website, the company describes how Zhongbao Group “has actively explored diversified development paths [...] through equity investment based on its main business” in the fields of sustainable development, safety and emergency training, and finances (CSPG, 2021). This demonstrates that the security company is just one stream of revenue for a larger investment company. Frontier Services Group is majority-owned by CITIC Limited, part of CITIC Group (one of China’s largest investment companies) which is in turn owned by the Chinese Ministry of Finance (CITIC, 2020). Interestingly, while its headquarters are in Hong Kong, FSG is actually registered in Bermuda (Irasia, 2022). Bermuda is an attractive location for companies to register as it does not impose any taxes on profits or income and does not limit the accumulation of profit (PWC, 2022). These facts point to the companies’ focus on the financial side of the business manager identity. For HXZA, it was not possible to find further information on all its subsidiaries. For CSTG, it was not possible to find further information on the financial or investment activities of its parent company.

Humanitarian identity

The humanitarian identity is not quite as visible as the military and business manager identity. While companies are quick to mention their professional qualifications, business goals or the military background of their team, little points towards their ambition of making the world a better place (instead of merely safer). Nevertheless, rare mentions of some kind of awareness of this aspect of their role can be identified. CSPG states that their logo (a shield and ribbon) “contribute sense of social responsibility to building a peaceful and developing security China [sic]” (CSPG, 2021). FSG describes how “corporate social responsibility is a vital part of our business every day” and says the company “strive to make a positive social impact,” a statement which is accompanied by a picture of a small globe held in a pair of hands (FSG, 2019). CSTG merely mentions that they have employees with some experience of peacekeeping.

Of the four analysed companies, HXZA pays the most attention to humanitarian values. Its English website has a section dedicated to Social Responsibility which states that the company wants to be “a genuine force for good” and “place significant importance on the promotion of human rights and protection of the environment throughout our worldwide operations” (HXZA Security, 2020). Their understanding of social responsibility is based on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the Voluntary Principles (on Security and Human Rights), and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers. Interestingly, in an effort to act socially responsible towards its own employees as well, HXZA also established a union in 2010, “insisting on mass and democratization, and building the trade union into a ‘home of workers’ which has been supported by the majority of employees and recognized by superiors” (HXZA, n.d.).

Conclusion of the analysis

The results of the analysis were, for the most part, not surprising and largely overlap with Joachim and Schneiker’s (2014) analysis of American websites. Chinese private security companies’ identities resemble those of Western (primarily American and British) companies, especially with regards to the mix of the military and corporate identity. The way in which they convey their identity on their websites also matches the Western model, for instance by using images depicting employees in uniform, sometimes carrying arms, and emphasising their professionalism and goals for expansion. It became clear however that the humanitarian identity was rarely propagated, an observation that stands in contrast with the way in which Western companies portray themselves. The next section will discuss the implications of the

findings and link the results to the existing literature on private security companies and their identity.

Discussion

Implications of the findings

The literature review relied on three types of identities for private military and security companies in the Western context put forth primarily by Carmola (2010) and Joachim and Schneiker (2014; 2018). These are the military identity, the business manager identity and humanitarian identity. As was noted in the literature review, there is a consensus among academics that Western private military and security companies apply these identity traits separately as well as simultaneously, although a shift in priorities has been noticeable from the military to the humanitarian identity. At first glance, the results from the analysis seem to apply to Chinese private security companies as well. Chinese companies are emulating some aspects of the Western identity: the military background of the team is often underscored by making references to their former membership of Special Forces, Special Police or Marine Corps, and a myriad of references are made to the professionalism, exceptionalism and integrity of the company demonstrating the importance of corporate norms. However, it became evident that the humanitarian identity is largely missing from the picture, which suggests that China is not entirely part of the norm that generally applies to Western companies.

Although the humanitarian references are not abundant, special attention should be paid to the mention of peacekeeping on the company's websites. While the concept was not mentioned very often, it is still striking as peacekeeping has been receiving more and more attention in China over the last twenty years. Back in 2012, Huang described how becoming involved in peacekeeping activities "provides an opportunity to display a more positive side of the PLA's military capabilities, reassuring neighbours about its peaceful intentions, and at the same time signalling that China is further integrating into the international community and acting as a responsible power" (Huang, 2012, p. 12). Additionally, taking part in such missions "will also help to modernize and professionalize the security forces" (Huang, 2012, p. 19). Although the former statement is debatable ten years later, the latter is still relevant as the Chinese armed forces are stepping up on the world stage with much less active combat experience than other states' armed forces.

The reason for the current absence of the humanitarian identity in Chinese PSCs might be that it is still developing. It does look like Chinese companies are emulating the West, but it may take some time before all elements are incorporated into the Chinese version of these identities. Priorities of the national armed forces are often translated to the private security

industry as well. It therefore raises the question what China's relationship with humanitarianism more broadly looks like. China's approach to humanitarian assistance can be described as "state-centric and infrastructure-oriented" (Hirono, 2013; Krebs, 2016). However, it has increasingly participated in international multilateral cooperative efforts over the past two decades and has regularly taken part in UN peacekeeping efforts. By 2015, China was "the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations among the five permanent members of the Security Council" (Krebs, 2016, p. 174). According to Zhao Lei, China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations serves to "project a more benign and positive image to the world" and resulted in stronger cooperation between Chinese and Western armed forces in the previous decade (Lei, 2011, pp. 346-347). More importantly, the author states that "Chinese peacekeepers have also been guardians of China's overseas national interests" by protecting Chinese enterprises and citizens abroad when their own government could not do so (Lei, 2011, p. 348).

China's view on peacebuilding, however, is very different. The country's long history of non-interference means that China is wary of infringing on another country's sovereignty. It therefore prioritises economic development in its global peace engagement strategy rather than sending combat troops into a conflict area (Lei, 2011, p. 355). On one hand, it therefore makes sense that Chinese PSCs, which are generally believed to be closely linked to the state (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018, p. 9), follow this guideline and do not send manpower into conflicts. On the other hand, the fact that the state does not provide these services means that there is a bigger market opportunity for private companies to become active in this area. It is therefore surprising that the Chinese private security industry has not yet tapped into this humanitarian sector and made this a more prominent part of their identity.

The private security industry has noticeably evolved over time and so have PMSCs' legitimisation strategies. The industry's development has been brought to light by Cusumano (2021) through his analysis of companies' logos. Cusumano identifies three phases: the inception, during which "groups of Western mercenaries and small private security companies operated in the developing world throughout the Cold War" (p. 142); the growth of the market, during which demand for armed security skyrocketed in reaction to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan (p. 144); and the regulation and consolidation of the market, during which PMSCs tried to distance themselves from previous scandals of the industry (p. 146). Cusumano notes that company logos explicitly referenced the military industry or at least had an aggressive undertone during the second phase, such as Blackwater's bear paw in the scope of a rifle or L3-MPRI's sword (2021, pp. 144-145). This changed, however, in the third phase,

when companies no longer wanted to be associated with misbehaviour and incidents within the sector or the military realm and changed their logos accordingly. Now displaying simple acronyms or company names, the logos no longer suggest “a direct association with the provision of combat” (Cusumano, 2021, p. 147). Chinese companies are relatively new to the game, so it is possible that Chinese companies are still at the beginning of that development process. Their current logos make obvious references to the military realm with shields representing security and protection, and arrows representing the epaulettes of soldiers. The Chinese private security industry has possibly not existed long enough to witness the shift away from the military identity and towards the humanitarian identity, which could consequentially also be identified in their logos.

The variety of services offered by Chinese PSCs differs from that of Western companies. This is also the case for the employees they hire. While both Western and Chinese companies often hire ex-military personnel, it is interesting to note that many Western PMSCs hire local staff or nationals from other developing countries to perform services on location. Although HXZA noted it may hire different nationalities if needed, stating that “both Chinese and mixed nationality teams can be supplied depending on your specific requirements and budget” (HXZA, n.d.), Chinese PSCs rarely mention hiring locals. The primary advantage for Chinese firms to hire Chinese PSCs is a shared language and culture with the client, but Chinese PSCs also tend to operate at a lower price range than their Western counterparts (Nouwens, 2019, p. 15), which explains why HXZA refers to budgetary constraints regarding the employment of mixed nationality teams.

The claim that private military and security companies use and combine all three identities simultaneously does not hold up in this analysis. Many examples of references to the military and business manager identity can be found on the analysed websites. The humanitarian identity, however, is much less apparent. This finding implies that Western conceptualisations of private security cannot be transferred directly to the Chinese industry, and the same is likely true for other non-Western cases. Although the activities of Chinese PSCs and their implications (and possible dangers) have been discussed, especially in light of the Belt and Road Initiative (see Yau & Van der Kley, 2020 for Chinese PSCs in Central Asia; see Arduino, 2020 for Chinese PSCs in Africa), the same cannot be said for theoretical frameworks or concepts. This is also true for categorisations unrelated to companies’ identity. Singer’s widely accepted “tip-of-the-spear typology,” for example, categorises companies as military *provider*, military *consulting*, or military *support* firms based on their distance to the battle field (2008, p. 91). Firms falling into the third category can also be labelled private

security companies because they do not provide armed services. Chinese legislation prohibits its citizens from carrying weapons, although there are exceptions on an ad hoc basis (Arduino, 2020, p. 13) and legal regulations for the private security industry are accordingly very strict. This means that no Chinese PSC would be on the offensive side of the spectrum and almost all Chinese companies would fall into the last category, leaving little possibility for further differentiation. This typology thus becomes less interesting to apply to the Chinese private security sector. Assessing the applicability of the existing concepts and possibly broadening them allows us to include more global experiences in the existing frameworks. This would provide new opportunities to increase our knowledge and understanding of the private security sector around the world, with more possibilities to conduct comparative analyses to find new gaps in the research.

While it is true that, as Joachim & Schneiker (2014) put forth, elements of all three identities can be identified in Chinese PSCs' communication, the claim made by Berndtsson that PSCs' self-images differ "depending on what services they aim to sell and to whom" (2012, p. 305) holds up best here. The clientele of Western PMSCs is more diversified: they are hired by the state, as well as NGOs or multinationals. PMSCs need to appeal to all those different types of clients and therefore diversify their identity as well. The clients hiring Chinese PSCs, on the other hand, are mostly companies investing in important infrastructure projects overseas, thus seeking out security to protect their economic gain. Often, these companies are state-owned enterprises. It is therefore not surprising that Chinese PSCs primarily present themselves through the business manager identity lens in order to appeal to these corporate actors and demonstrate that their interests are aligned.

Limitations and future research

While carrying out this research, various limitations presented themselves. Firstly, difficulties arose with regards to language. There is generally very little information available in English about the Chinese private security industry. This may have to do with overall secrecy of the Chinese government in terms of sharing any data on this industry, or with the fact that it is quite a niche subject and therefore not many researchers, apart from the authors this thesis has built upon, have written about the topic. Furthermore, it quickly became apparent that most of the websites analysed had much more information on the Chinese version of their website than on the English version. However, without any knowledge of the Chinese language I was forced to rely on the automatic translation provided by Google Translate when opening the

Chinese versions. Although the translations seemed to be accurate based on the grammar and spelling of the English translations, it was of course not possible for me to check whether Google Translate entirely grasped the nuances of the text in its translation.

Secondly, the fact that not many researchers deal with the subject of Chinese private security companies means that it is difficult to fact-check data that cannot be found on company websites. Authors previously working on this topic seem to be recycling each other's information even though it is unclear where the numbers come from. A telling example of this came to light when trying to find the accurate number of employees of the companies in this analysis. In an article for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Nantulya (2020) stated that China Security Technology Group has 30,000 employees. To back up this number, he provides a link to an article by Sergey Sukhankin for the Jamestown Foundation, even though that article does not mention this company. Nantulya also links to the MERICS report to support his claim that the company was registered in 1994. However, the company is not included in the MERICS table on page 6 (which was also used to complete the company profiles in this thesis), which makes his claims problematic. This makes it seem like the author has confused this company with China Security and Protection Group, which is mentioned by Legarda and Nouwens as well as Sukhankin and is said to have been established in 1994 and to employ either 15,000 or 30,000 people (see the footnote under Table 1 of this thesis).

Aside from limitations, the fact that this topic is still relatively new and is therefore developing quickly also provides many opportunities for further research. One element that has been underexposed in this thesis is the *private* aspect of private security in China and the role of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Some informative articles on this topic exist already which discuss the role of SOEs in the development of the BRI (see for example: Nie, 2021) and it would be valuable to look further into the relationship between such SOEs and security providers, especially along the Belt and Road.

The development of the Belt and Road Initiative, consisting of infrastructure projects and trade routes over land and sea, is supposed to help the People's Republic of China realise its goal of becoming a "fully developed, rich and powerful nation" by its centenary in 2049 (Allison, 2017). With the BRI now involving over 100 countries, China is becoming much more than merely the "preponderant regional power" described by Rolland (2017). But with China's increasing need to pay attention to the security issues surrounding the BRI, it is questionable whether good trade relations will be enough to alleviate countries' reservations against China's political goals. The advent of Chinese PSCs abroad increase the visibility of

Chinese security forces, making it difficult to maintain the claim that China is not pursuing any goals other than economic ones.

Furthermore, the involvement of PMSCs in the BRI raises questions of accountability, something that has long been discussed as one of private security's main difficulties. The growth of the Chinese private security sector has, among other things, been attributed to the state's unwillingness to send the PLA abroad. Having rarely been involved in actual armed conflict, this means that the PLA has very little first-hand combat experience. This is also a potential problem for Chinese veterans that make the move to the private industry. When Chinese PSCs protect the BRI, a project developed under the auspices of the Chinese state, it may be difficult for the rest of the world to distinguish between the state and private actors. When an incident happens involving a Chinese PSC working along the BRI, what does this mean for the reputation of the BRI? And coincidentally, what could this mean for China's reputation? Could China then decide to get its national military involved after all? Or will the Chinese government allow for more professionalisation of the private security sector by updating the current legal regulations?

An interesting entry for future research would be to compare the Chinese private security industry to that of other revisionist powers. China is strengthening its position in the world through the Belt and Road Initiative and private security has a significant role in that regard. It has become clear that it has been inspired by the process of privatisation in the West and emulating this allows Chinese companies to claim legitimacy by following the norms of the industry, such as becoming a member of the International Code of Conduct Association. Gaining legitimacy puts China in a position where it can permit itself to question the established international order, which is now happening more clearly. China's approach is different than that of other revisionist powers. Russia, for example, makes ample use of private military and security companies that are closely linked to the state. Russia has been accused of using these private identities in proxy wars or "surrogate warfare" (Karagiannis, 2021). The Wagner Group, for example, is said to be backed by the Kremlin and has been active in Mali, Libya, Sudan, and most recently in the war in Ukraine, where it has been accused of very serious crimes (Weinbaum, 2022). This comparison brings many new questions to mind. How do Russia's covert activities compare to China's approach? What, then, can be said about the construction of identity in the privatisation process of Russian security? And why are Chinese PSCs less closely linked to the Chinese state military than Russian PMSCs apparently are? These questions are yet to be addressed in the academic debate on private security.

Finally, to be able to make statements about the Chinese private security industry more generally, it would be interesting to compare the companies that carry out armed services to those that do not, to see if they promote themselves any differently. A specific category that would be useful to highlight in that context would be companies that carry out maritime protection services, as this is done by companies that are allowed to carry arms (HXZA being one of the few Chinese companies that provides this service).

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the private security industry and specifically Chinese private security companies, and link this to the literature on the construction of identity by such companies. A content analysis of four Chinese private security companies' websites was carried out to find an answer to the following research question:

'To what extent do Chinese PSCs operating along the BRI assume similar or different identities than their Western counterparts?'

Relating to this question, it was necessary to pay attention to the implications of Chinese PSCs' construction of identity and how this relates to Western experiences. That is why the following question was discussed in the implications section of the discussion:

'What are the implications of the identity/identities used by those PSCs?'

The literature review discussed existing research on private military and security companies as well as the relationship between PMSCs and the Belt and Road Initiative, China's global infrastructure project that was announced in 2013. Specifically, this thesis dove deeper into the subject of identity and how PMSCs present themselves. The works of Carmola (2010) and Joachim and Schneiker (2014; 2018) formed the basis for this angle of research. They have argued that PMSCs can use three identities, possibly simultaneously: the military identity, the business manager identity, and the humanitarian identity.

Four private security companies were selected for a content analysis of their websites: China Security and Protection Group, Huaxin Zhongan, Frontier Services Group, and China Security Technology Group. This selection was primarily based on a report by the Mercator Institute for China Studies that included a list of the biggest Chinese PMSCs (Legarda & Nouwens, 2018, p. 6). The analysis of these companies' websites included text as well as visual elements (i.e. images on the website and company logos) in order to uncover references to any of the three identities mentioned above.

The results of this research largely overlap with Joachim and Schneiker's analysis of American websites. This suggests that Chinese private security companies use these identities in a very similar way to how American PMSCs portray themselves. Both the military and the business manager identity were clearly identifiable. The military identity was portrayed mostly through mentions of the team's former membership of the Chinese military, often also having been active in the Special Forces. While the companies' support of the Chinese state

was made apparent by mentioning their link with the Belt and Road Initiative or with the Chinese Communist Party, no mention of any relationship with the Chinese military was made, or any other country's military, for that matter. The business manager identity was identifiable through the many references to corporate norms and values such as professionalism, loyalty and efficiency, as well as their ambitious goals of striving to become a leader in the industry. The humanitarian identity, on the other hand, was not as apparent in Chinese PSCs. This may have to do with China's ambiguous relationship with humanitarianism more broadly, but most of all this can be seen as a consequence of differences in clientele. While Western PMSCs are often hired by state militaries and NGOs, their Chinese counterparts are rarely hired by such actors. Their clientele is mostly limited to Chinese companies in need of protection for their Chinese personnel and projects abroad, such as mines, oil rigs or infrastructure projects – especially along the Belt and Road.

In terms of visual references, as has been described in the literature review based on Cusumano's work (2021), Western PMSCs have gone through an evolution from being highly militaristic to trying to conceal military ties and presenting themselves as new humanitarians, which can also be identified in their changing logos. Chinese private security companies still rely mostly on the military and business manager identity, which is clearly visible through their use of images and logos as well. It will therefore be interesting to see whether they will go through the same evolution that Western companies went through and eventually start demonstrating more elements of the humanitarian identity.

Finally, in this thesis, I have used existing research on American companies to say something about the way Chinese companies relate to those. A more thorough comparison could possibly be made if both are included within one comparative research framework. In order to continue to develop the exploration of the private security industry, however, it must be recognised that the existing theoretical concepts and frameworks have been developed mostly around Western experiences and companies. Including non-Western cases will allow for fruitful new comparisons and thereby significantly increase our understanding of recent and future developments in this field. One suggestion to achieve this is to compare China's development of security privatisation with that of other revisionist powers such as Russia, which is often said to use private actors such as The Wagner Group to carry out covert missions. Many new questions arise from this thesis, proving that the topic is a very important one in this day and age, while the world is witnessing unsettling developments in terms of conflict and peace.

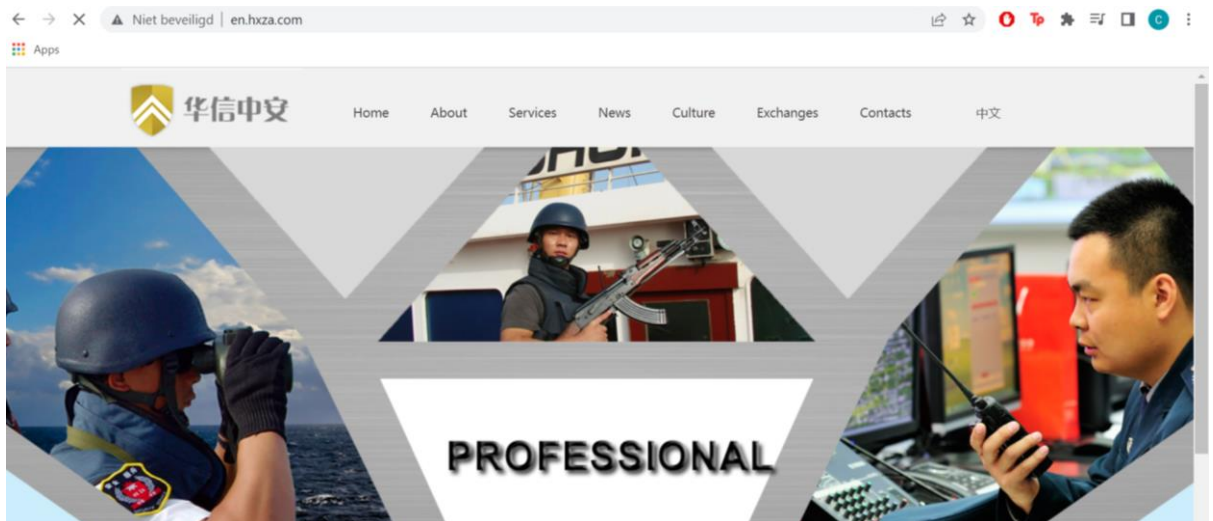
Appendix

Image 1. Homepage of China Security and Protection Group website



Source: <http://www.cspbj.com/#>

Image 2. Homepage of Huaxin Zhongan website



Source: <http://en.hxza.com/>

Image 3. Homepage of Frontier Services Group website



Source: <http://www.fsgroup.com/en/index.html>

Image 4. Homepage of China Security Technology Group website



Source: <http://www.cstghk.com/>

Image 5. Logo of China Security and Protection Group



Source: <http://www.cspbj.com/AboutUs/Culture/>

Image 6. Logo of Huaxin Zhongan



Source: http://www.hxza.com/about_jt/i=13&comContentId=13.html

Image 7. Logo of Frontier Services Group



Source: <http://www.fsgroup.com/en/index.html>

Image 8. Logo of China Security Technology Group



Source: <http://www.cstghk.com/profile.html>

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