

ISS Today Home / ISS Today / Are foreign-owned private security companies a threat to South Africa's

Are foreign-owned private security companies a threat to South Africa's national security?

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The South African Minister of Police, Nathi Mthethwa, is on record as saying that foreign ownership of private security companies is a threat to national security. However, to date there has been no substantive explanation to show how this may be the case.

The idea that foreign-owned private security companies are a threat to national security emerged in a debate over the recently adopted Private Security Industry Regulation Amendment Bill. Indeed, the

private security industry faces various shortcomings. These include the non-registration of personnel and businesses, poor training, inadequate vetting and background checks, the issuing of firearms to persons who are not competent to use them and the failure to pursue criminal or disciplinary action against security personnel who break the law. These are all credible and legitimate reasons for improving regulation.

Currently, there are 445 000 registered active private security 'guards' in South Africa. This means that private security officials far outnumber the 270 000 public security officers, a number that includes those working for the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Given the large number of people that the private security industry employs – many of whom are armed – it is important that it should be well regulated.

The minister also argued that the growth of the private security industry in South Africa 'has outstripped other countries.' However, according to a [2011 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#) that compares civilian private security services internationally, South Africa is not that different to many other countries. In fact, South Africa's ratio of private security officers to police officers

(2,87:1) did not differ much from that of developed countries (the USA has a ratio of 2,26:1 and Australia 2,19:1). It also compares favourably to other middle-income or developing countries (Honduras has a ratio of 4,88:1, India 4,98:1 and Guatemala 6,01:1).

The 2013 draft Green Paper on Policing referred to another threat when it expressed concerns about the private security industry's 'ability' to 'destabilise any security situation' in South Africa.

This was ostensibly due to the involvement of 'former military and police officers at management level,' and the deployment of 'highly trained, legally armed operatives' within this industry. However, most of these former security officials are South African citizens, which therefore does little to support concerns relating to foreign ownership.

“Less than 10% of the local private security industry is foreign owned”

The Green Paper also alleged that the private security industry is 'increasingly performing functions which used to be the sole preserve of the police.' However, the growth of the private security industry is directly linked to high levels of crime and violence, along with public perceptions that police officers are unable to provide adequate security. The Green Paper also contradicts itself by pointing out that private security companies have no special powers beyond those of private citizens. It is therefore difficult to see how these companies can be seen to undermine the state's law enforcement power.

Once again – as has been the case with the Protection of State Information Bill and the security ministers' attempted cover-up of the exorbitant amount of public money spent on the president's private Nkandla homestead – the term 'national security' is being used to justify government decisions or behaviour that cannot be properly explained. It is for this reason that Barry Buzan, in his 1991 book titled *People, states and fear*, says that elites in weak states more readily view various threats as 'national security threats' – especially when they seem to have negative implications for the power of those elites.

Similarly, much of what the current administration refers to as national security threats, appears to have more to do with removing the duty to account for political decisions, rather than any real danger to South African sovereignty.

“Many businesses in SA have foreign ownership, so why single out private security?”

Craig Snyder, in his 1999 book titled *Contemporary security and strategy*, says that 'national security' should be about freeing people from constraints such as poverty, poor education, political oppression and war. This is why, both internationally and locally, there has been a move away from the term 'state

security,' which often narrowly equated a nation's security with 'regime security.'

Indeed, South African policy has largely been in line with progressive understandings of 'national security.' For example, the [South African White Paper](#)

on Defence (1996), states that (in the absence of any external or military threat), 'the greatest threats to the South African people are socio-economic problems like poverty and unemployment ... as well as the high level of crime and violence.'

National security, therefore, can best be described as freedom from external and internal threats, which may manifest as military, political, economic, societal and environmental threats, crime and violence and the threat of anarchy.

It is therefore difficult to see how foreign ownership or majority shareholding of private security companies by foreigners can be a threat to South Africa's national security. Many businesses operating in South Africa have foreign ownership, including those in the field of information technology, which could be perceived as a potential threat. So why single out the private security industry?

Less than 10% of the local private security industry is foreign owned, and the 445 407 security officers that are registered as active are all South African citizens or have permanent resident status. They do not constitute a coherent, well-organised semi-military force ready for deployment against a particular target. Rather, they're spread across 9 031 registered businesses, providing more than 20 different categories of security and services as locksmiths, car guards, body guards and armed reaction teams. So, where is the threat?

Surely, limiting foreign investment and the jobs it may bring is more of a threat to our national security than the mere foreign ownership of a small number of companies. Most of these companies are listed on stock exchanges and are therefore subject to rigorous oversight. Unfortunately, given the absence of a rational, evidence-based argument to explain why foreign ownership of security companies is a threat to national security, questions now arise as to the real reason behind the controversial clause in the Private Security Industry Regulation Amendment Bill.

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