



*Scott Fitzsimmons. Mercenaries in Asymmetric Conflicts. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.*

**Kai Chen, Zhejiang University**

The history of mercenaries can be tracked back to the Greek mercenaries that fought for the Persian Empire during the early classic era. The decades after World War II have witnessed the re-emergence of mercenaries around the world. It's worth noting that academia pays little attention to mercenaries involved in asymmetric conflicts, and leaves several critical questions unanswered. So how do we measure the outcome of the asymmetric conflicts involving mercenaries? Why do some mercenaries prevail in front of materially superior opponents, while other mercenaries fail? Are there any testable theoretical explanations for predicting mercenaries' military performance in future

asymmetric conflicts? In *Mercenaries in Asymmetric Conflicts*, Scott Fitzsimmons provides well-supported answers to the questions above, explores the causal relations between military culture and effectiveness, and highlights that culturally-determined military effectiveness has more influence on mercenaries' military performance in asymmetric conflicts than the materially-determined military effectiveness.

This book has an introduction and seven chapters. The introduction overviews the methodology and outline of chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 outline the two complementary theories on military performance, that is, the normative theory of military performance and the neo-realist combat balance theory. The normative theory of military performance has close relations with six norms of military effectiveness (i.e., creative thinking, decentralized decision-making, personal initiative, free transmission of accurate military information, technical proficiency, and group loyalty) which will ultimately influence the outcome of the interplay between mercenaries and their opponents. For instance, a mercenary will work "within the established normative context to devise a course of action" (18). The latter neo-realist theory prioritizes the balance of "the military capabilities that the combatants actually field during the conflict" (42). Based on examinations of both theories, it appears the most fundamental divide between them is "whether a combatant's material resources or its ability to effectively use its material resources are the most important determinants of its military performance" (43).

The following pages (chapters 3 to 6) analyze four significant cases of asymmetric conflict involving mercenaries, that is, the Simba Rebellion in Congo (1963–65), the mercenaries of Costas "Colonel Callan" that were defeated in Northern Angola (January-February 1976), Executive Outcomes' participation in Angola's Civil War (1993–95), and the White Legion's defeat in the First Congo War (1996-1997). Using these case studies, Fitzsimmons examines the extent to which the two theories' predictions could explain the mercenaries' military performance in the asymmetric conflicts. He concludes that the normative theory of military performance could offer more inclusive explanations in three of the four cases, the one exception being the case of the White Legion's defeat in the First Congo War. As Fitzsimmons believes, material superiority could not influence the outcomes of asymmetric conflicts in the First Congo War as much as the military effectiveness influenced by the six behavioral norms.

Combining the two theories with each other, Fitzsimmons contextualizes four broad predictions about the relationship between military culture, military effectiveness, and military performance. First, the victories of materially inferior mercenaries in asymmetric conflicts are context-sensitive. In other words, if the mercenaries exhibit higher military effectiveness, and their opponents exhibit lower military effectiveness, materially inferior mercenaries can defeat their materially superior opponents. Second, if conflicting parties exhibit similar military effectiveness, the outcome will be determined by material capabilities. Third, if mercenaries exhibit lower military effectiveness than their opponents, the inferiority of military effectiveness will prevent them from “overcoming the material superiority of their opponents” (33). Fourth, if mercenaries exhibit lower military and material effectiveness, they will be defeated.

In the final chapter, Fitzsimmons does not deny the importance of military advantages advocated by the neorealist combat balance theory. As he argues, the extent to which this theory can explain the outcome of mercenaries’ performance in asymmetric conflicts depends on whether mercenaries made “better use of their material capability” (300). In the case of the White Legion, the mercenaries compensated for their material inferiority through making better use of their material capability.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature on the private military/security industry and asymmetric conflict. However, it’s necessary to consider the extent to which the arguments in this book are suitable to modern private military/security contractors, who are also illustrated as mercenaries in many cases. For example, many modern private military/security contractors have high mobility, and work for more than one company. It’s hard for them to develop unit cohesion or group loyalty in a comparatively short period of time. Moreover, this book pays less attention to scenarios in which the conflicting parties are both mercenaries. What will happen when mercenaries counter mercenaries?

From a comparative perspective, Mercenaries in Asymmetric Conflicts examines the military performance of mercenaries in different contexts, and establishes a testable theoretical framework to predict the outcome of asymmetric conflicts involving mercenaries, particularly when encountering materially superior opponents. In addition, this thought-provoking book advances an alternative approach to enhance

military effectiveness through cultivating military culture, and in turn strengthen military performance in the battlefield.

*Dr. Kai Chen is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Non-Traditional Security and Peaceful Development Studies, College of Public Administration, Zhejiang University, China. Previous positions include visiting scholar at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore (November 2013-May 2014), and postdoctoral fellow at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, China (2009-2011). His principal research contributions are in the areas of international security, geo-strategic relations, and security governance in East Asia, especially Southeast Asia and China. He is the author of Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar-China Border: Evolutions, Challenges and Countermeasures (2014).*