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The Role of Proxies

The international security environment is a complex reality, a place where divergent interests collide, spheres of influence are drawn, and political, economic or military objectives are sought to be achieved by any means. However, these actions may lead to conflict with other powers that are interested in expanding influence in the same area or want to limit the influence of potential adversaries. Conflicts that arise in different areas of the world can be used by regional or global powers as a tool to promote their own interests, without fuelling tensions that can give rise to a large-scale confrontation with other powers. Regional or global powers may choose to support conflicting parties overtly or covertly during a conflict by providing material support, in the form of weapons, ammunition or military technologies, or in the form of intelligence, avoiding direct involvement in military action. Thus we are witnessing the birth of conflicts that go through intermediaries or proxy conflicts, which are a form of manifestation of the hybrid conflict. In this hybrid conflict, the great powers are involved, which play the role of sponsor, shadow protector and small states or even political, ethnic groups or organisations which play the role of intermediary, instrument of struggle, which actively participate in military actions and which have own objectives, but they also have in mind the promotion of the objectives of the protectors.

Considerations on proxy warfare

Hybrid confrontations are not specific to the modern era, they can be encountered throughout history, but in the modern era proxy wars have acquired a new dimension, becoming the main tool of the great powers.² Throughout history, states or even empires have used intermediaries to conduct military campaigns on their behalf, even encouraging them to attack more powerful but inconvenient opponents than the intermediary, in order to advance the sponsor's political and

¹ “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy.

² WATTS et al. 2023.

military interests. Thus, even the title of client state or client of the Roman Empire or later of the Ottoman Empire appears. The client states enjoyed the protection of the stronger state, its support, but in exchange for the protection, they obliged themselves to carry out military actions in support or even on its behalf, being *ex officio* allies of the protector in the event of a conflict. Limiting or prohibiting the right to have its own foreign policy actually meant turning the client state into an instrument of the powerful one, which could use it including as an intermediary in smaller or larger confrontations.³ Proxy wars became more popular when classical warfare became much more complex, when it turned into total war. Thus, with the development of destructive technologies, with the proliferation of weapons with great destructive power and with the extension of their range, war became a confrontation of the entire country, which applied its full power in a military conflict, the battle strategy becoming the art of using all resources and all means to achieve victory. World War I and II are examples of total wars, in which the achievement of objectives was done at an enormous cost to all parties to the conflict, and the military instrument of power was used, along with other instruments, to achieve political objectives. Based on the lessons learned from these two major conflicts, the conclusion was reached that political objectives must be met with as little loss as possible on both sides,⁴ because society became increasingly interconnected, and the costs of reconstruction had to be borne by everyone, victors and vanquished alike. When the spectre of the destruction of the planet and the extinction of life on earth became a reality, as a result of the emergence of the nuclear threat, the great powers became much more attentive to the confrontational relationship between them to prevent the outbreak of a new total conflict. The conflict through intermediaries starts from the idea that the enemy of my enemy becomes my ally, and as long as the parties have something to gain, they can develop collaborative relationships, being able to state, based on the analysis of recent conflicts, that “in the 21st century, the most success is to stand aside and let others fight for you”.⁵ The justification for the widespread use of proxy warfare is that the great powers USA and USSR avoided direct confrontation during the Cold War and thus reduced the chances of a nuclear war to zero. Later, after the end of the Cold War, proxy conflicts continued to exist as they represented a safe and cheap way to obtain strategic

³ DZWONCZYK 2020.

⁴ LIDER 1981.

⁵ HARARI 2018: 176.

advantages with minimal risks, using not only third world states, but also non-state actors and even terrorist organisations, the final state after these conflicts being influenced by the powers that played the role of sponsor and not by the intermediary,⁶ thus reinforcing the idea that this kind of confrontation is a form of hybrid warfare that is going on all around us, in all domains and dimensions and by using all means at our disposal. The global competition between the U.S. and the USSR fuelled local conflicts in different areas of the world, especially Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, high-tension areas artificially maintained by regional or global powers. Researchers analysing the Cold War period have concluded that the U.S. and the USSR participated in various forms in about 120 proxy wars that took place in developing states.⁷ Even before the Cold War and before the USA asserted itself as a world power after World War I, a position cemented during World War II, some scholars identified Russia as one of the states that used proxy warfare. The Romanov dynasty used the Cossacks as a proxy and as an amplifier of their own fighting power.⁸ In the 20th century, the most famous proxy wars are considered to be the Korean War (1950–1953), the Vietnam War (1953–1975), the Suez Crisis (1956–1957), the Angolan Civil War (1975–2002), the war in Afghanistan (1979–1989) and the war in Transnistria (1990–1992). In most of these conflicts, the role of sponsor was played either by the USA in the case of Afghanistan, or by the USSR (later Russia) or China in the case of the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Angola, but there were other regional powers that tried to defend their interests through intermediaries, such as would be France and Great Britain in the case of the Suez crisis. After the collapse of the USSR, proxy wars continued to take place, with other states being involved in the role of sponsor, states that identified regional opportunities. In this sense, we can mention the support given by Pakistan to the Taliban who were fighting in Afghanistan, the support given by Iran to the terrorist organisations Hezbollah and Hamas, the support given by Saudi Arabia, on the one hand and Iran on the other hand, to the fighters in the civil war in Yemen, the support given by the U.S. for Syrian rebels, support for liberation movements known as the Arab Spring or Colour Revolutions, or Russia's support for separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region. These conflicts through intermediaries had a different evolution and led in some cases to the sponsor coming out of the shadow and directly

⁶ KARABULUT–OĞUZ 2018.

⁷ KARABULUT–OĞUZ 2018.

⁸ FOX 2019b: 31.

supporting the protected party as its interests were threatened. In the post-Cold War era, the Western states and Russia remained faithful to the idea of avoiding direct confrontation, but tensions did not disappear, mainly due to the fact that Russia, after recovering from the shock caused by the collapse of the USSR, wanted to regain its influence and the international position in Central Asia, the Middle East or the Caucasus.⁹ Unlike during the Cold War, when confrontations through intermediaries took place at the state level, in the current period the role of states can be taken by non-state actors, terrorist organisations, private security and military companies, which can be either sponsors or proxies. The basic idea remains the same as the sponsor seeks to achieve its strategic objectives as efficiently as possible, at the lowest possible cost, with the lowest possible exposure both at home and abroad and minimising the risk of being involved in a direct conflict and ensuring that he always can deny any involvement. Most often sponsor states use intermediaries to advance military objectives and fight on their behalf, while non-state organisations and actors may use intermediaries to advance their political objectives and interests, while using the military capabilities of intermediaries to secondary security or logistics tasks and less for offensive actions.¹⁰ The only notable difference between the state-level sponsor–intermediary relationship and that involving non-state actors lies in their potential to support certain actions and perform certain tasks. A variant of conflict by proxy that has been used by both the U.S. and Russia has been the use of private security and military companies to carry out certain military actions. These companies, such as Blackwater (currently Academi), DynCorp or the Wagner Group take security contracts from different states and ensure the protection of important objectives, provide logistical support or even carry out combat actions in different areas of the globe.¹¹ The most recent proxy conflicts are considered by some researchers to be Operation Inherent Resolve, in which the U.S. and other coalition states fought Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria through proxy Iraqi and Kurdish groups, defeating them militarily.¹² On the other hand, the war in Ukraine that started in 2014 can be considered a proxy war waged by Russia against Ukraine, through the consistent support provided by Russia to the separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, in the Donbas

⁹ KARABULUT–OĞUZ 2018.

¹⁰ MOGHADAM–WYSS 2020.

¹¹ See Security Degree Hub s. a.

¹² FOX 2022.

region. Russian support consisted of military materials and equipment, intelligence, military trainers and even forces that actively participated in the confrontations, but without the Russian military presence being directly recognised, which amplifies the hybrid nature of the confrontation.¹³ Also, even the conflict that broke out in Ukraine in February 2022 can be considered a proxy war waged by the U.S., NATO and other partner states against Russia, using Ukraine as a proxy. This positioning is debatable, but Russian partisans may see the support of money, military equipment, weapons and ammunition, information provided by Western states to Ukraine as an indirect war, as it aims to weaken Russia and achieve certain objectives by Western states. The answer to this question is not very simple, it cannot be seen in shades of black and white, but we believe that this is not a conflict through proxies, because the USA and NATO did not encourage this invasion, they do not have direct and immediate goals to fulfil them, and the support provided is intended to strengthen the defensive capacity of Ukraine, to defend this country against an external and extremely violent military aggression. The support can be seen as a normal reaction of the international community that has no other means to condemn the aggression of a regional power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, support that consists of a wide range of coordinated measures, taken both economically, politically, diplomatically, as well as militarily. Moreover, Ukraine has its own objectives in this conflict – the defence of sovereignty and territorial integrity, its actions being defensive, which does not fit into the general framework of conducting a conflict through intermediaries, and the thesis of using Ukraine as a means of exhausting Russia and leading a war of attrition does not stand up to logical arguments.

Characteristics of proxy wars

Although proxy warfare was used long before the 20th century, it reached its peak during the Cold War,¹⁴ when the major nuclear powers used this type of warfare as a relief valve for international tensions, to promote interests, to limit the adversary's influence in certain areas, but also as a means of testing some concepts and technologies, without the risk of a direct confrontation, which could

¹³ MARPLES 2022.

¹⁴ WATTS et al. 2023: 7.

have degenerated into a nuclear conflict.¹⁵ We can mention here the most representative conflicts through intermediaries from the Cold War period, such as: the war in Vietnam, the war in Korea, the civil war in Angola, the war in Afghanistan (between the USSR and Afghanistan), etc. War through intermediaries differs from other forms of international intervention, in that it takes place on several levels, in several realities, as we have in the foreground the confrontation of the intermediary or intermediaries, and in the second plan we have the confrontation of the sponsors or the sponsor to achieve their own interests and accomplishing one's goals. Proxy wars have occurred and will continue to occur because there will always be sponsors willing to finance the efforts of other states, just as there will always be states or non-state entities willing to act as intermediaries in exchange for military advantages, in exchange for support that can influence the outcome of a confrontation with neighbours or internal or external adversaries. Conflicts through proxies are local or regional military actions, of high complexity and can be defined as "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving predominantly foreign goals and foreign strategies".¹⁶ From this perspective, proxy warfare can be seen as a low-cost, low-risk way for great powers to achieve their strategic goals while avoiding direct losses and avoiding international exposure, both at political and public opinion level. The better the support is hidden and the degree of direct involvement is reduced, the easier it is for the main power to avoid material and moral responsibility for the results of the conflict and for the consequences of the actions of the smaller state that plays the role of the fighting instrument, of the intermediary.¹⁷ Most of the time, a symbiotic relationship is built between the strong state and the proxy, as both sides have something to gain, at least theoretically, from this relationship. In the specialised literature, the two parts of the symbiotic relationship are called either sponsor and intermediary, or principal and agent. Regardless of the name given to the two entities involved in this collaborative relationship, their role and the characteristics of their actions are the same. On the one hand, the sponsor or principal has the role of protector, supplier of weapons, military equipment,

¹⁵ MUMFORD 2013.

¹⁶ KARABULUT–OĞUZ 2018: 78.

¹⁷ PFAFF 2017.

economic and financial assistance, training and advice, information, direct and indirect protection; moreover, it may also provide the element of deterrence against the intervention of other parties in the ongoing conflict. On the other hand, the intermediary or agent plays the role of the working tool, the means by which the sponsor or principal achieves its objectives, even if part of the resources and support provided are used, as is normal, also to fulfil the objectives of the proxy and to strengthening its local or regional position. The intermediary can provide the military means by which the fight against a common adversary is carried out, the collection of information, the securing of areas or the exercise of control over areas in its own name or on behalf of the sponsor.¹⁸ In order for the sponsor–proxy relationship to work, it is necessary that both have consistent advantages from the development of this relationship, and in order for the sponsor to benefit from the maximum freedom of movement, it is necessary that the support it gives is as well disguised as possible, not be obvious because by openly assuming this support the sponsor assumes from the start also the consequences of the conflict it fuels and supports. If the support is provided covertly and the influence exerted on the intermediary is not obvious, the sponsoring state can always deny involvement, shield itself from the direct and indirect effects of the support, manoeuvre if military operations do not go according to plan, and can protect its international reputation and internal and external credibility. In the case of conflict through intermediaries, most of the time the sponsor has more freedom of action, he can choose whether and how to support the proxy, while the proxy of course has the possibility to refuse support or to impose certain conditions, but his freedom to choose is less because the existence of this external support may depend on the fulfilment of its own objectives or even the survival of the state or entity that plays the role of intermediary. A powerful state may choose to use an intermediary because of the advantages that the latter can offer. A powerful state may choose to support a third party because of its potential, for it has certain knowledge or skills, knows the terrain, the population very well, or has certain operational capabilities that make it attractive. One can use as an example the support given by the U.S. to the Kurdish groups that fought the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.¹⁹ The U.S. has provided air support to Kurdish forces during ground operations, provided intelligence and even deployed special forces elements for a limited period to

¹⁸ MOGHADAM–WYSS 2020.

¹⁹ MAGUIRE 2020: 5–8.

support Kurdish forces in the fight against ISIS, and the support granted to Kurdish groups led to tensions with other states, such as Turkey. Another argument for the use of intermediaries is related to the costs of a conflict, as it is often more convenient to support certain forces, which assume the main effort and which will settle the human and material losses, as well as the image deficit, than to justify in front of political decision-makers, domestic and international public opinion, human losses, damage caused to the civilian population in the area of operations, etc. We can exemplify the use of private security companies to carry out certain tasks, both by the U.S. in Afghanistan or Iraq, and by Russia in Syria, but also the support of various groups fighting against terrorist organisations in certain areas of Africa or the Middle East. Another advantage of using proxies to achieve political or military objectives is that the sponsoring state can always deny any involvement and distance itself from the negative consequences of the intermediary's actions.²⁰ Another side of proxy warfare can emerge nowadays, when on the international stage there are not only states as relevant actors, but also non-state actors, terrorist organisations, etc. are beginning to appear, which can become fearsome tools for attacking and harming an adversary or potential adversary. By using non-state organisations as intermediaries, the conflict can be directed to any region, because these organisations, especially terrorist ones, are not tied to a territory to defend and to be the base of operations. They can act in small cells, in any area of the globe and take the conflict right into the territory of the sponsor state's adversary, where they can unleash terror and attack diverse targets with a high degree of vulnerability and exposure and with a high material and moral impact. Also, the internationalisation of crime and the criminalisation of war have become strategic issues, highlighting the complexity of transnational challenges to security, where conflicts between states can be replaced by hybrid wars and other asymmetric conflicts, where there is no clear distinction between crime, terror and war.²¹ Therefore, proxy wars where the intermediaries are terrorist or criminal organisations, non-state entities can be much more unpredictable, more difficult to control, their evolution can be more difficult to anticipate, and the consequences can be much more serious, there can be many and more serious violations of the norms of international humanitarian law, etc. because there is no central entity that can be held accountable, accountability being diluted behind an actor with

²⁰ IVANOV 2020.

²¹ DUPONT 2003.

no personality, no leadership structures, no legal and moral constraints. Analysing the relations between the sponsor and the intermediary that materialised in the conflicts carried out both in the Middle East and in other areas, it can be observed that there are two types of intermediaries. Those who are forced to act within the conflict, as was the case with the separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk that fought to fulfil Russia's goals in the war in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022, and those who act with their own motivation, such as the fact that there is an older conflict with the adversary, that they want to obtain a reward from the sponsor whose interests they promote and defend or improve its position in relation to the sponsor²² and we can take as an example the intermediaries in Yemen who sought the support of Iran and Saudi Arabia to fulfil their own objectives, and later became tools of the protectors. This situation occurs especially in case of civil wars when, during the conflict, when one or both parties, after the start of the conflict, seek support from outside. While proxy wars can help sponsors achieve their political and military goals, increase their influence in a region, or weaken their adversary, cause damage to their image, etc. They contribute decisively to increasing and perpetuating instability in certain areas as the conflicting parties will be encouraged by external support to seek confrontation rather than peaceful resolution of differences. They will also try to maximise their gains by relying on current and especially future support from the sponsor, who will be forced to support the intermediary in future conflicts. However, proxy wars will not disappear as long as the calculations of the great powers reveal that it is more convenient economically, financially, politically, militarily to support indirect confrontation, which also absolves them of physical and moral responsibility and to avoid a direct, violent, devastating confrontation with effects and consequences that are difficult to anticipate under conditions where weapons of mass destruction have the potential to guarantee mutual destruction.²³ On the international level, a paradigm shift can be observed with regard to proxy wars, in the sense that the place of intermediary states is often taken by local groups, terrorists, insurgents, etc. the relationship between them and the sponsoring state. This can be complicated by the fact that the intermediaries do not always have the same objectives as the sponsors, and the eventual collaboration can be based on momentary interests. Moreover, irregular groups can be difficult to control and rely on because of the way they

²² BAR-SIMAN-TOV 1984.

²³ FOX 2019a.

exist, operate, etc. An example in this case could be the Wagner Group which fought for Russia in Ukraine and which at a certain point even organised a revolt against Russia in 2023 or the terrorist group Hamas which, at least declaratively, attacked Israel in October 2023 without the approval or the prior notice of his sponsor, which is Iran. However, proxy wars will continue to exist on the agenda of the great powers, who will find reasons and arguments to settle their accounts, to maintain or expand their influence in certain areas, or to deny this to their adversary. Nowadays, we are witnessing atypical developments on the international scene, where major regional powers want to assert themselves and impose their own agenda, denying the supremacy of the U.S. and NATO, which can create the conditions for a direct, high-intensity conflict between the various blocs. In the current international context it is obvious that proxy war will continue to represent an attractive option for powerful states because it is more convenient for them to fight from a distance without getting directly involved. Even with the use of intermediaries, there will always be the risk of a direct confrontation between rival great powers, with catastrophic consequences regionally or even globally, but the advantages of using intermediaries outweigh the direct and indirect risks and costs. Using intermediaries can create problems in terms of command and control of forces and can increase the risk of conflict escalation, because in the contemporary era we are no longer talking about the existence of a state-level sponsor and intermediary but coalitions of sponsors and intermediaries, some of them being non-state level as well.²⁴

The role of proxy

The relationship between the sponsor and the proxy is extremely complex and to understand it one must consider the problems between the sponsor and the intermediary, the role of power in the symbiotic relationship, but also the role of the time factor in this relationship. Following the analysis of these three elements, two models of actions through proxies can be identified: the transactional model and the exploitative model.²⁵ Regardless of the type of relationship established between the sponsor and the proxy, we must not lose sight of the fact that in all situations it is about the existence of political interests that dictates

²⁴ WITHER 2020.

²⁵ FOX 2019b.

the need to establish relations between the two parties and that represent the engine of establishing military relations in order to achieve the primary military objectives and through them, the political objectives. Also, cooperation and support relationships involving a proxy have a limited duration, usually set by the sponsor, who will provide support as long as it has the necessary means and as long as its interests require it. The cooperation relationship can also reach an end when the proxy has accumulated enough strength to be able to continue on its own, as was the case with U.S. support for the Syrian opposition fighting ISIS, and as the power of ISIS declined, so did the level of U.S. support as the proxy was deemed strong enough to fend for itself, when the situation that led to the start of the cooperation has changed, when it has fulfilled its objectives or when the sponsor's requests exceed certain limits, beyond which the intermediary is not willing to pass for various reasons. The proxy being the instrument and interface of a sponsor, aiming to achieve his own objectives, but also those of the benefactor. The proxy has greater freedom in choosing the means of war used, and compliance with the rules of the conflict is easier to ignore, just as, in many cases, when the intermediary is a non-state entity, it is not limited by state-specific international agreements or treaties. For these reasons, the intermediary can wage a total war against the adversary using both conventional and hybrid means.²⁶ Powerful states may resort to proxy wars not because of the lack of ability to achieve victory in a conflict, but because of objective reasons such as: no vital interests are affected that justify direct military intervention; even if there are vital interests at stake, the risks of direct military intervention are too high; by using an intermediary the crisis can be managed more effectively to avoid direct intervention; there is no internal or external legitimacy to justify military intervention; there are no viable military options for the particular situation at hand, and a proxy offers the possibility of achieving objectives efficiently, with reduced cost and risk.²⁷ Returning to the two basic models of the proxy–sponsor relationship, the transactional and the exploitative model, we can identify some of their characteristic aspects, as well as the direct and indirect role played by each part of the partnership.²⁸ The transactional model is based on an exchange between the two parties. The sponsor provides support, protection, information, advice to the proxy in exchange for the promise that it will

²⁶ DEEP–BIBERMAN 2021.

²⁷ BAR-SIMAN-TOV 1984.

²⁸ FOX 2019b.

carry out activities that lead to the fulfilment of the sponsor's objectives, and the intermediary provides the armed hand, which fights against the common adversary, who assumes human, material and image losses in exchange for support from the sponsor. The common point is the desire to defeat a common opponent. In this type of relationship, the proxy has greater negotiating power and it is he who requests the support and can determine how much support and in what form it is provided. In the transactional model, the relationship between the two parties has a limited duration and ends when the objectives are met and when the proxy wants to return to the previous situation, without obligations. Within the transactional relationship, the proxy is not without power, but believes that the involvement of a sponsor increases its chances of success and will therefore try to maximise the benefits they extract from this relationship, with a little surrender of authority, freedom of decision and action in favour of the sponsor. An example of this type of model can be Iraq, which requested the support of the international community, and especially the U.S., to defeat the Islamic State.²⁹ In case of the exploitative model, most of the time one is dealing with an intermediary with little power and influence, with a limited ability to defend himself or to achieve his goals, and then he accepts the influence of the sponsor, who provides support in exchange for some submission. The sponsor being in a position of power from which he dictates how the relationship evolves, as well as the mode of action of the proxy, who is more of a tool in the hands of a higher power. The exploitative relationship is most often sought by the sponsor, who turns to a state or non-state entity in need of support and who is willing to accept submission in exchange for survival and benefits. The relationship between the two parties works as long as the sponsor has an interest in it. When he sees his goals fulfilled or when he is not satisfied with the actions of the proxy, his agent, he can decide to stop the support and end the relationship.³⁰ A good example of this exploitative relationship is the case of the support that Russia has given to the separatists in Eastern Ukraine who have formed the two breakaway republics and who wanted independence from Ukraine and even annexation to Russia, but who did not have neither their own economic, financial or other means for own survival, nor the ability to carry out military actions against Ukraine. In this case, Russia is the party that dictated, that established the terms of the relationship, and that will decide how it will evolve, what are the actions carried out by

²⁹ Fox 2019b.

³⁰ Fox 2019b.

the separatist forces and, most importantly, will decide what will be the final state and when this partnership will end. Another example of an exploitative relationship can be that between Iran and the terrorist organisations in Palestine, such as Hezbollah or Hamas, which are sponsored to fight against Israel. These groups are supported with weaponry and expertise, intelligence, etc. to oppose Israel, inflict damage on the Israeli military and reduce the influence of the Jewish state in the region in exchange for Iran providing the necessary support, providing some protection and training of the fighters.³¹ For proxy warfare to be viable, the proxy needs to be of approximately equal value to its adversary. When the difference in potential is very large, we can hardly speak of a proxy war, which can at best only be used as a *casus belli*, a reason for the sponsoring state to enter into conflict with a regional or global power. This argument can strengthen the idea that the war in Ukraine, the so-called “special military operation” of Russia, is not a war waged by NATO, respectively the U.S. against Russia through Ukraine. For the same reasons, one cannot consider a conflict to be of the proxy type if between the strong state and the supported state there was a prior military agreement of assistance, mutual support or defence in the event of aggression. The relations between the sponsor and the intermediary can be of the most diverse, depending on the characteristics and interests of the two, but in many cases, ideological approaches are what create the conditions for them to consolidate and amplify. Studying the proxy wars of the 20th century in particular, we can see that in many cases the relations between the two were closer when both were animated by the same ideology. When a potential common enemy appeared, it was much easier for them to materialise and to amplify the symbiotic relationship, sometimes without taking into account the risks to which they are exposed or the price paid by the proxy to fulfil the sponsor’s objectives. Regardless of the type of relationship established between the sponsor and the proxy, the essence of the partnership remains the same. The sponsor provides various forms of support and protection directly or indirectly, and the proxy acts to fulfil the sponsor’s objectives. Within the relationship, depending on the proxy’s potential, the sponsor’s interests and level of involvement, the intermediary’s negotiating ability, etc., each party will have more or less decision-making power, and the proxy may or may not decide what it does, when it does it and how it does it. Its freedom of action is determined by the desire of the sponsor, the degree of exposure of the proxy and its vulnerabilities. The more

³¹ WITHER 2020.

desperately the intermediary seeks the support of the sponsor, the less freedom of action and decision-making power it will have.³² The relationship between the sponsor and the proxy can also be favoured by the existence of cultural, economic, ethnic, historical affinities or the appearance of concerns related to the safety of the sponsor due to the proximity of the conflict zone. Other reasons that could encourage the development of the protector–protected relationship can be:

- the sensitivity of public opinion towards the suffering of the victims and the population
- the attempt to discourage a high-intensity conflict
- the creation, maintenance or expansion of spheres of influence
- the desire of obtaining economic advantages in the medium and long term

The sponsor–proxy relationship can be complicated and the importance and appreciation enjoyed by the latter depends on the character, goodwill and interests of the powerful one. There will never be equality in this equation and the sponsor will always want to have the last word, as legitimate reward for the support given. Once a state or group agrees to play the proxy role for an external power, it is virtually bound to act as long as the sponsor requests it and to pursue its own and the sponsor's goals in addition. Any refusal may mean the withdrawal of support and implicitly the possibility of defeat or, worse, the redirection of support to the opponent, who will perhaps be willing to do more. This does not mean that the proxy automatically becomes only an executor, cannon fodder, the party that assumes all the risks. The proxy–sponsor relationship must be mutually beneficial, win–win type, and involve guarantees and advantages for the intermediary.³³ In order for the sponsor–proxy relationship to be effective, it is necessary to have cooperative relations between them prior to the conflict, and the sponsor must be sure that he can control the intermediary, so that there are no serious slippages on his part, which could affect the general interests and the sponsor's reputation, the sponsor must reward the proxy's efforts both during and after the conflict, the sponsor must be ready to bear the consequences of any failure, etc. The relationship between the sponsor and the proxies is extremely complex and differs from one situation to another as the degree of dependence of the intermediary on the sponsor is variable and can change over time. The

³² TEMPLE 2021.

³³ FOX 2021.

more dependent the proxy is on the sponsor, the more he will be careful to follow the limits set by the sponsor and mainly follow the objectives set by him. When the degree of dependence decreases, then one can witness a desire of the proxy to emancipate, to establish one's own agenda and to prioritise objectives according to one's own interests, as it was the case of the Krajina and Bosnian Serbs who refused to accept peace proposals although their sponsor, Yugoslavia, openly embraced this option or the case of Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka who refused the accord intermediated by India and preferred secession. Also, regardless of the type of relationship that exists between the proxy and the sponsor, the limits set and the degree of compliance of the intermediary, there is a risk that at some point the sponsor will be tempted or even forced to intervene directly in the conflict, when the proxy is in major danger or when its own interests and objectives may be irreparably harmed.³⁴

Objectives in proxy warfare

Conflicts carried out through proxies involve a series of risks for the sponsoring state, such as associating its image with atrocities committed by proxies, violations of international law, supporting increased and unjustified expenses, supporting ideological movements that may have their own agenda in parallel, even the desire for emancipation, the increasing instability and unpredictability of the area, the need to directly support the proxy forces by providing instructors, advisers, specialists, etc.³⁵ A big problem with proxy conflicts is that the sponsoring state has no clear end state to achieve and no well-defined goals, everything depends on the actions of intermediaries. In a classic conflict, the desired end state is the defeat of the opponent and the creation of favourable conditions for the winning side, while the consequences of a conflict through proxies are limited to weakening it and possibly drawing some limits, some red lines beyond which one must not to pass, to avoid future confrontations.³⁶ One must bear in mind that the goals of war are not achieved only by military means, military means being complemented by economic, political, diplomatic means, etc.,³⁷

³⁴ GRAY 2011.

³⁵ MOGHADAM–WYSS 2020.

³⁶ BRYJKA 2020.

³⁷ FRANKE 2015.

all these means being employed both directly and through the use of proxies. Conflicts through proxies, whether the role of proxies is played by states or non-state entities, will continue to exist in different areas of the globe and will materialise especially when the objectives of global or regional powers cannot be achieved by using economic or political means. Direct conflict will be avoided as much as possible because its costs are high and war produces dysfunction in all areas, especially in the economic one. Western societies are less and less willing to support a conflict whose justification or necessity they do not understand and agree with. They are even less willing to accept the high casualty and indirect costs, and voluntary participation in the war effort as a member of the armed forces is increasingly less likely due to the transition to professional armies and the removal of the spectre of war from the ordinary population, which is in the second generation without any knowledge of the traumas of a conflict. Nowadays the threat of a classic conflict between great regional or global powers is increasing. At any moment the conflict in Ukraine can degenerate or China can provoke a conflict in East Asia, which can have unforeseen consequences, but the possibility of developing hybrid, asymmetric conflicts, which will lead to the creation of favourable conditions on a regional level for some states is in growth. With this in mind, it can be said that as long as the great powers do not have a direct interest, “developing states seldom have the means to fund expensive wars with neighbours”,³⁸ and proxy wars will exist, as a form of manifestation of the new hybrid conflict as long as there is a sponsor willing to finance the military operations of another state or non-state actor that does not have the capacity or resources to resolve its conflicts locally,³⁹ in exchange for obtaining favourable circumstances regionally or even globally. The essence of proxy wars lies in the fact that powerful states used smaller states eager to assert themselves as a tool to promote their own objectives, but also to reduce the influence of their opponents in certain areas. This was evident during the Cold War, when the two superpowers chose a hybrid form of confrontation, a proxy war to avoid a direct confrontation, with the risk of using nuclear weapons. The U.S. supported anti-communist or anti-revolutionary movements in various states, in Asia, Africa or Central and South America, while the USSR supported anti-colonial movements and revolutionary movements opposing

³⁸ DUPONT 2003: 10.

³⁹ VOTEL–KERAVUORI 2018.

Western states.⁴⁰ Proxy warfare will continue to exist as long as small states and non-state actors are willing to accept the patronage of other states, who play the role of protectors, who provide direct and indirect support in local conflicts, and as long as the great powers are able to settle their differences without a direct involvement in a potentially devastating conventional conflict. We are also witnessing a tendency to replace proxies, which are not only small, developing states, but may be non-state entities or private security companies. Ultimately, proxy warfare is a type of complex hybrid confrontation, which takes place on two parallel planes. On the one hand we observe the confrontation of the proxy or proxies, as the main instrument of struggle and as the main force involved in the conflict, which pays the greater price in terms of human and material losses caused directly and indirectly by military confrontations. On the other hand we are witnessing a confrontation of sponsors, of powerful states that are in the background and feed the war machines. They try to achieve political and military objectives without human costs and with some economic costs arising from support to the intermediary, but which are incomparably lower than the costs of direct involvement in the conflict.⁴¹ The sponsor's intervention in various conflicts to support one of the combatants may have cost-related reasons (an indirect war will always have lower costs than a direct war, both direct, visible and indirect costs related to image, perception, acceptance etc.), related to legitimacy (local fighters are easier to accept and can even gain the support and sympathy of the local population, while foreign forces could be seen as aggressors, invaders, oppressors).⁴² Supporting a proxy or accepting support from a regional power is based on the calculations that the parties make regarding the gains and losses that may result from this relationship. The intermediary will most often accept support to reduce a handicap or create an advantage over local opponents to increase their chances of victory in an ongoing conflict or conflict emerging, or even to deter the escalation of tensions and violence. On the other hand, for the sponsor, proxy warfare is a cheap and convenient way to achieve their foreign or domestic policy goals, to increase their influence, to strengthen their presence in certain areas, or to weaken opponents or potential opponents. The sponsor can provide support in organising, training, equipping forces, advising security forces from the lowest level up to the level of political-military decision-makers.

⁴⁰ WITHER 2020.

⁴¹ WITHER 2020.

⁴² MOGHADAM–WYSS 2020.

The U.S. has developed an operational approach that includes this sponsor–intermediary relationship, which is known as the approach⁴³ to conduct military action with less direct combat involvement of U.S. forces based on three options in terms of engaging in a conflict. Fighting by other, with others and through others, U.S. forces and decision-makers can choose the level of national and international exposure and determine the level of engagement. This approach can mean smaller and more covert support in the early stages of a crisis, which can consist of advice and force training, support that can diversify, amplify and even become overt if the situation goes in the wrong direction for the proxy and thereby endangering American interests and forces. The sponsor's involvement depends on the sponsor's desire to stand out or remain in the shadow. If the sponsor wants to maintain as little visibility as possible on its actions, it will choose that the support is as hidden as possible, so as not to be visible from the outside, and will ask the proxy to maintain the confidentiality of all support actions. If, on the other hand, the sponsor wants its actions to be more open or if the intensity of the conflict increases, then its support will be more open, it will no longer try to hide behind the proxy and induce the impression that it does not have direct interests and goals related to the ongoing conflict.⁴⁴ The proxy war strategy represents the art of influencing the course and finality of a conflict, in accordance with the interests of a third party, by supporting an intermediary party, without the need for direct military intervention and without the risks arising from it for the sponsoring state and even for the region or planet,⁴⁵ knowing that a direct war between the great powers can degenerate into a total conflict involving the use of nuclear weapons, as is happening today, when various representatives of Russia directly or indirectly threaten with the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, if Russia's interests as well as its security would be affected.⁴⁶ Making such a decision will trigger chain reactions, and the consequences would be difficult to anticipate, and de-escalation rather difficult to achieve. Launching such an attack would most likely mean entering a path of no return and total annihilation. For these motives, as long as reason still exists and the instinct of self-preservation prevails, any great power will favour the use of hybrid tactics to engage adversaries, and proxy warfare will not be missing from

⁴³ VOTEL–KERAVUORI 2018.

⁴⁴ MOGHADAM–WYSS 2020.

⁴⁵ BRYJKA 2020.

⁴⁶ SCHLOSSER 2022.

the list of options considered. The fluidity and volatility of the international environment, the changes taking place on a regional and global level encourage the use of proxies to achieve the goals of the great powers. Through this way of fighting without getting their hands dirty, the great powers streamline activities aimed at increasing or maintaining influence, with direct and indirect costs as low as possible. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the relationship between the intermediary and the sponsor does not always go according to plan, that the proxy may have its own agenda and objectives, which are not identical to those of the sponsor, that some actions may have consequences that could not have been anticipated, that the cascading effects cannot be controlled, etc., and the 2nd or 3rd order effects can affect the relations and the image of the sponsoring state.⁴⁷ Encouraged by the fact that strategic political, military, or economic objectives can be achieved without directly engaging in costly and bloody wars, some powerful states will support or seek intermediaries, tools to covertly use in a proxy conflict, fought between two powers, but fought on the territory of another country, using the resources, territory and population of another country⁴⁸ and avoiding as much as possible direct and violent confrontation with another power, a confrontation that could have devastating economic, political and military consequences. Achieving objectives through the use of proxies will continue to be a hybrid tool of the great powers, who will use pawns on the global chessboard, pawns they can use and even sacrifice at will, without major consequences in many situations.

Conclusion

Proxy warfare is not something new, but it gained notoriety during the Cold War, when the USA and the USSR, representatives of the two great political-military blocs, began to support certain military actions of third countries, through which they pursued their goals and they were trying to prevent their opponents from accomplishing their goals, all while avoiding creating the conditions for a direct confrontation that amounted to the potential destruction of humanity through nuclear war.⁴⁹ Proxy warfare during the Cold War period referred to conflicts

⁴⁷ IVANOV 2020.

⁴⁸ MUMFORD 2013.

⁴⁹ FOX 2021.

between two smaller states, each or at least one of which was supported by a superpower. Support provided by the superpower was limited to the provision of information, expertise, advice, funding, logistical support, armaments or munitions, without its forces being directly involved in military action. Thus, the superpower had the possibility to defend or promote its local or regional interests without exposing itself too much internally or internationally and without this involving major human, material or image risks. Also, there may even be situations where the stronger state is forced to intervene directly in the conflict, when the supported state is defeated or in danger of being defeated. To be able to speak of a conflict through proxies, one must bear in mind that at least one of the parties involved, either states if we are talking about an interstate conflict, or groups or organisations if we are talking about an intrastate conflict, needs to be directly supported by a third state whose interests it promotes directly or indirectly through the conflict. However, we consider that mere economic or humanitarian interests resulting from the sale of arms or military equipment, or the provision of strictly necessary goods, medical equipment, etc., are not sufficient to consider the conflict to be of the proxy type. For these reasons, we can state that it is sometimes difficult to say whether a conflict is of a proxy type or not. If we take the current war in Ukraine as an example, we will be able to consider it a proxy war from the perspective of Russia who accuses NATO and other states of waging a war with Russia by imposing sanctions and providing information and military equipment for the purpose of obviously to weaken Russia. On the other hand, NATO and other states do not consider that by helping Ukraine they are in conflict with Russia, they consider the support a moral, normal act of supporting a country that is the victim of an illegal and unprovoked aggression. We tend to say that this conflict is not a proxy conflict because NATO did not encourage the conflict, did not ask Ukraine to fight Russia and does not want a conflict with Russia, although Ukraine does not refrain from asking for support and even direct intervention of NATO forces to repel Russian aggression.

Questions

1. Is proxy warfare something specific to the post-Cold War period?
2. What are the sponsor's objectives in proxy warfare?
3. What is the role of proxies in this type of conflict?

4. What are the objectives of the sponsor and the proxy in proxy warfare?
5. What characterises the relationship between sponsor and proxy in modern conflicts?

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