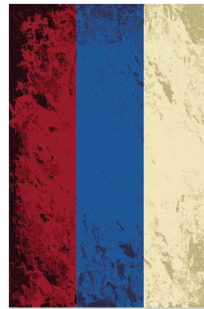


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# Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition

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State Motivations and Future Trends



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# About This Report

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *State Support to Violent Non-State Actors: Assessing Risks to U.S. Overseas Contingency Operations*, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army. The purpose of the project was to provide insight into the determinants of state support for violent nonstate actors, assess the risks that third-party support poses to U.S. overseas contingency operations, and analyze policy options available to the United States to counter such foreign support.

This research was conducted within RAND Arroyo Center's Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program. RAND Arroyo Center, part of the RAND Corporation, is a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the United States Army.

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# Summary

*The research reported here was completed in July 2021, followed by security review by the sponsor and the U.S. Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, with final sign-off in June 2022.*

This report examines the causes and likely future trends in *proxy wars*. More specifically, these reports focus on *intrastate proxy wars*: civil wars in which at least one local warring party receives support from an external state that could be useful for waging armed conflict, such as funding, arms, equipment, advising, training, intelligence, and/or troops. The report addresses three main questions:

- Why do external states provide military support to parties to a civil war?
- Do these motivations provide any indication of whether proxy warfare, and especially proxy warfare by major or regional powers, might increase substantially within the time horizon currently driving long-term U.S. defense planning (i.e., through 2035)?
- If a state not currently engaged in proxy warfare were to decide to dramatically expand the geographical reach or military sophistication of its proxy activities, how long would it take that country to develop the necessary capabilities to do so?

The research to answer these questions was conducted in three steps. First, we conducted an extensive review of the existing literature on proxy warfare. Second, we used quantitative analysis to assess trends in and drivers of proxy warfare. Third, we conducted case studies of three of the major powers that have used proxy warfare over the past several decades—Russia (and the Soviet Union before it), China, and Iran—to determine why they had engaged in proxy warfare and, for the periods in which they had turned away from this instrument of competition, why they stopped such practices.

It should be noted that this report was written before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While that war has added urgency to the

issue of proxy warfare and the findings and related recommendations in this report remain important, the analysis herein contains no assessment of the events that have occurred during that conflict. Moreover, the long-term impacts of that war on the findings and recommendations developed here remain to be seen.

## Research Findings

### Why Do States Use Proxy Warfare as a Tool of Strategic Competition?

States engage in proxy warfare for a complex mixture of geopolitical, ideological, domestic political, and economic motivations. Geopolitical and, to a lesser extent, ideological concerns appear to be the primary motives for such conflicts, while domestic political and economic considerations play secondary roles. We summarize our assessment of these factors in five main points.

First, geopolitical considerations appear to be paramount in the decision to provide support to violent nonstate actors (VNSAs), across most actors and at most times. While there are exceptions, the desire to undermine rivals and shift regional balances of power is the most clearly and consistently supported factor in the report. This desire to use proxy warfare in a proactive manner, including in regions far from a state's borders, often has its roots in a reactive concern, driven by acute perceptions of the vulnerability of the state's own security to adversary proxy warfare. However, once states have developed these proxy warfare capabilities, they often use them much more widely than simply to address the initial vulnerability. This pattern was observed across multiple states, including the People's Republic of China under Mao and post-1979 Iran.

Second, while difficult to separate fully from geopolitical considerations, ideological factors also seem to have played an important role for many states in decisions to engage in proxy warfare. Postrevolutionary regimes appear to be more likely to support VNSAs than other states. State ideology is also a crucial factor in shaping which VNSAs most states will consider supporting, from the Iranian focus on Shia groups to the Soviet and Chinese focus on leftist or communist groups. Finally, ideology plays a role in driv-

ing the overall perception of threat from a rival that motivates much proxy war activity in the first place.

Third, we found less support for domestic politics as factors motivating states to pursue proxy warfare. We found little evidence, particularly in the case studies, that public attitudes, such as concerns for diaspora groups or particular rebel groups, were an important factor in state decisions to support VNSAs. However, we did see repeated evidence that support to VNSAs is often attractive to policymakers (both in democracies and autocracies) precisely because it avoids, or at least limits, the domestic political costs and scrutiny that would accompany the use of the country's own military forces, especially in large numbers. The fact that states that develop a capability for fighting proxy wars seem to expand their use of this tool over time may also suggest that a bureaucratic mechanism is at play. That is, politically powerful actors within a state's bureaucracy, such as Iran's Quds Force or the *siloviki* in Russia, may be empowered by initial successes and press to expand their activities.

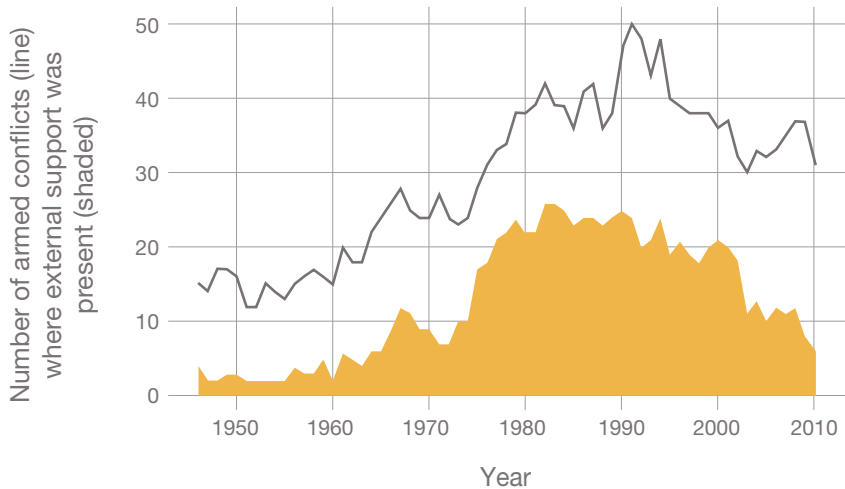
Fourth, similar to the previous theme, we found considerable evidence that states turn to proxy warfare to lower the economic costs of their efforts to undermine their rivals. However, there is little evidence that the potential for economic gains (e.g., through seizing natural resources and/or the profits that derive from them) plays a large role in most major powers' support for VNSAs (with some notable exceptions).

Finally, despite the lower direct costs of proxy warfare (compared with conventional warfare), it was repeatedly clear in our case studies that there can be considerable indirect costs. Surrogates sometimes turn on the sponsoring state, embarrass it with their behavior, or contribute to undesired levels of escalation between the sponsoring state and its rivals. If the sponsoring state gets drawn more deeply into a direct role in what started as a proxy war, the associated costs can skyrocket. In many cases, sponsoring states terminated particular proxy relationships or turned away from proxy warfare altogether (at least for a period of time) due in part to either these indirect, often strategic costs or the costs associated with getting drawn into more direct roles.

## Might the Use of Proxy Warfare Increase Substantially in the Coming Years?

As can be seen in Figure S.1, the use of proxy warfare in the modern era peaked in the late Cold War and declined substantially over the subsequent 20 years. In the post-Cold War era, proxy warfare changed not only in the number of instances but also in the nature of the countries involved. During the Cold War, proxy warfare was often a tool of major powers, such as the United States, Soviet Union, and China. In the post-Cold War era, proxy wars were often used by much weaker, less-capable states.

**FIGURE S.1**  
**Number of Proxy Wars over Time**



SOURCES: RAND Arroyo Center synthesis of the following datasets: the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Peace Research Institute Oslo dataset (Magnus Oberg, Therese Pettersson, and Stina Höglblad, "Organized Violence, 1989–2018 and Peace Agreements," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 2019; and Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2002), the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict dataset (David Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, "Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 30, No. 5, 2013), and the Nonstate Armed Groups dataset (Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016); details provided in Appendix A.

Unfortunately, at the time our research was conducted (2019–2020), systematic data on the incidence of proxy warfare after 2010 were not publicly available. But at least anecdotally, proxy warfare seems to have changed again in recent years. As the examples of ongoing wars in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine suggest, major powers, including Russia, the United States, Iran, and others, have again been players in these and other civil wars. As might be expected from their involvement, the resources available to both insurgents and governments, including advanced weaponry and military training, have similarly increased.

From a policymaker's perspective, the key question is whether the recent apparent increase in proxy warfare, and especially proxy warfare conducted by more-capable states, is likely to continue in the future. Our analysis suggests a complicated answer, but there are a number of reasons for concern.

With the renewed focus in many regions on strategic competition, there seems to be increasing risk that states will feel increasingly threatened by their rivals and take greater steps to counteract these threats in the years to come. Our case studies highlight how such an environment can often, though not always, lead to an increased interest in supporting proxy warfare. Of even greater concern, geopolitical drivers of proxy warfare can often be self-reinforcing. In the past, regimes that have made widespread use of proxy warfare have typically begun such campaigns out of an acute sense of vulnerability and a lack of other tools that are appropriate (affordable, sufficiently low risk of escalation, and so on). Often the use of proxy warfare expands over time, however, from instances in which it appears clearly defensive (responding to specific threats that are geographically proximate) to much more aggressive, wide-ranging uses of proxy warfare. Furthermore, the use of proxy warfare has historically prompted similar behavior in adversaries and rivals, creating a spiral in which one state's use of the tool increases its use by others. There are also numerous instances of spillover effects, where support for one local proxy leads to support for others in nearby countries (e.g., U.S. support for South Vietnam leading to involvement in wars in Laos and Cambodia, or Iranian support to Lebanese Hezbollah helping to draw Iran deeper into the Syrian civil war). These factors highlight the potential risks that may accompany the apparent recent increase in proxy warfare.

While difficult to disentangle fully from geopolitical factors, as noted above, ideological factors emerged in our case studies as important parts of the explanation for why states have historically pursued robust proxy warfare programs. On this front, the current environment and anticipated trends are not as grim. Neither of the two current major U.S. competitors, China and Russia, has a particularly ideological regime, certainly not in comparison with the regimes of China and the Soviet Union during the earlier Cold War period. Neither represents a globalized ideology with a ready-made set of potential partners throughout other parts of the world (and, conversely, potential local partners lack a ready-made ideology to appeal to China or Russia for assistance). Indeed, the main professed ideological difference that China and Russia represent relative to the United States and its allies is a focus on state sovereignty and the continuity of existing governments, regardless of those governments' behavior or treatment of their people. (Russia's activities in Ukraine since 2014 and other activities of both Russia and China justify some skepticism of how sincerely these ideologies are held.) This stated ideology may or may not increase their willingness to provide support to governments in the midst of civil conflicts, but it does not seem likely to increase their interest in providing support to VNSAs.

Our research suggests that economic motivations have often served to restrain proxy warfare by great powers in the past, as major powers concerned about international reaction or instability held back in their support to potential proxies in order to maintain economic growth or access to international markets. There is reason to believe that such motivations are likely to continue to play a restraining role on the decisions of China in particular going forward, as the country continues to become increasingly integrated into the global economy and economically invested in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe through its Belt and Road Initiative. The likelihood that investments in those regions would pay off could be substantially undermined by a widespread resurgence in proxy warfare. This is not to suggest that geopolitical concerns cannot override economic concerns in particular countries or contexts, however. And Chinese economic concerns may themselves become more limited in some countries. If, for example, U.S. efforts to prevent or limit Chinese economic penetration of a country succeeded, perhaps most likely in U.S. allies or partners, then

China could conclude that geopolitical factors would motivate close consideration of support to VNSAs in that country.

China may be an outlier among U.S. competitors in the extent to which economic considerations may be restraining its consideration of proxy support. Russia's economy largely remains focused on natural resource extraction and, indeed, is already under a host of international sanctions and does not appear to have been inhibited in its willingness to support proxies in the Middle East and elsewhere. Similarly, Iran has been under extensive economic sanctions for decades, with no apparent reduction in its interest or willingness to support proxies in its region.

## How Long Does It Take States to Develop Capabilities for Proxy Warfare?

Two current U.S. competitors, Russia and Iran, already have sophisticated proxy warfare capabilities. But if China were to reengage in this form of strategic competition, how long might it take Beijing to develop such capabilities again? To answer this question, we distinguish between how quickly a state may be able to initially create a proxy warfare capability and how long it tends to take states to refine that capability and make it more effective or robust.

The states considered in our case studies were usually able to develop at least a rudimentary capability for proxy warfare very quickly, within a couple of years, often building on the capabilities of prior efforts or regimes. Beyond this baseline capability, however, a relatively lengthy period of learning and growth to better develop proxy warfare capabilities appears to be common. Iran, which inherited a substantial proxy support infrastructure from the prior regime, still took years to build relationships and capabilities with groups such as Hezbollah. The Soviet Union took decades to progress from its early focus on coordination with potential partners through Comintern to its later, more robust Cold War capabilities, though this timeline was substantially affected by limited initial Soviet motivation to do so. The United States had a mixed track record of success in its proxy support relationships throughout the Cold War, but it seems clear that by the 1980s it had learned lessons and gained capabilities not present in earlier periods. The early post-1949 Chinese experience of having become highly

effective at proxy support relatively quickly therefore appears to be more unusual and is likely a product of the Chinese Communist Party's lengthy experience as a rebel movement itself. For most states, while an initial capability might be stood up relatively quickly, a longer learning curve should be expected for greater proficiency.

## Policy Recommendations

The analysis in this report highlights several strategic-level lessons for U.S. national policymakers, including those in the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army, focused on strategic competition with China and Russia, as laid out in the recent National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy.

### Strategic Competition: Limiting Proxy Warfare Where Possible

The first lesson to emerge from our analysis is that proxy wars typically impose considerable costs, both on the United States (when it is a participant) and on the other countries involved. Before becoming involved in a proxy conflict, the United States should carefully assess the interests at stake and the risks.

There may well be circumstances in which adversary proxy support threatens important U.S. interests, and a response, either through an escalated level of U.S. proxy support to the affected states or through direct U.S. military intervention, is warranted. To the extent that the United States can avoid or minimize such situations without sacrificing vital national interests, however, it should do so. Seeking to establish limits or "rules of the road" in strategic competition, such that leaders of other countries do not feel an acute sense of threat from the United States to the security of their states or regimes, could mitigate what has historically been the key motivation for states to expand proxy warfare and, in turn, reduce the likelihood that the United States will be directly drawn into such potentially costly conflicts. Where non-vital U.S. interests are threatened, the United States also has a wide range of indirect military and nonmilitary instruments, such as economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, with which it can impose lesser costs on other major powers that employ proxy warfare with-

out the same risks of military escalation. Though the effectiveness of such tools may be limited, they may nonetheless represent important leverage in more-peripheral contexts.

### Attribution

One potential counter to the use of proxy warfare is the ability to publicize the role of outside powers in a conflict. States often pursue proxy relationships precisely because of their greater deniability, both internationally and at home. To the extent that the U.S. government can establish the nature and extent of these relationships publicly, it can help undercut one of the key benefits that states seek in choosing proxy warfare and potentially reduce its attractiveness and frequency. While information that the United States can collect to understand these relationships at a private or classified level can be helpful for policymakers, by itself it lacks the benefits that could accompany public attribution. Additional investments in capabilities designed to uncover such information in ways that could be publicized without compromising vital sources and methods would therefore be useful. Such investments might be either direct (such as through U.S. technical means) or indirect (such as through information-sharing with partners).

### Shaping and Resilience

Recognizing that the United States may not be able to avoid or deter all instances of adversary support to VNSAs in strategically important countries, the United States can also help prepare countries that are vulnerable or likely to be targeted by such support. The United States should conduct a strategic-level assessment of key U.S. allies and partners that are potentially vulnerable to proxy warfare where additional stabilization support could be provided in advance. The additional support provided by the United States to such countries could include economic development assistance and transportation links for subnational regions with a history or potential for separatist or other grievances. Support might entail diplomatic and political support for reconciliation efforts and political settlements with separatist groups that could become targets for adversary proxy support in the future. Or it could include resources dedicated to improving security governance in at-risk states, especially in states that show a willingness to undertake reforms. In parallel, the United States should also identify countries that

could serve as safe havens or transit corridors for potential proxy groups in key U.S. allies or partners and invest in advance in their stability and relations with the United States.

### Hedging Investments in U.S. Military Capabilities to Counter Proxy Warfare

Great powers have frequently discovered that the costs of proxy warfare cannot be justified by the national interests at stake. In some cases, however, the United States may determine that critical interests are threatened by foreign support for VNSAs. The United States should therefore continue to make investments in U.S. military capabilities critical to combating such threats. Indeed, by remaining prepared for such contingencies, the United States may help to deter the sorts of hostile activities that would be most likely to draw it into such an intervention.

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# Introduction

Around the world, civil wars rage that have been fueled or even caused by the involvement of foreign states pursuing their national interests. For years prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, separatists organized, armed, and directly supported by Russia waged war against Ukrainian government forces. In Yemen, a Houthi rebellion militarily supported by Iran has fought forces supported by Saudi Arabia and (until recently) the Emiratis. Perhaps the most prominent example is the devastating war that began in Syria since 2011, which has drawn in Iran, Turkey, Russia, the Lebanese militia group Hezbollah, and a broad military coalition led by the United States. But these are just the best-known cases of the proxy wars taking place throughout the world, especially in the Middle East, Eurasia, and Africa.

Foreign involvement in civil wars can have serious consequences, especially when foreign powers enter on different sides of the conflict. Such wars typically last longer and are deadlier than those conflicts without such competitive intervention.<sup>1</sup> Even once these wars conclude, the postconflict states

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<sup>1</sup> On the duration of such wars, see, for instance, Aysegul Aydin and Patrick M. Regan, "Networks of Third-Party Interveners and Civil War Duration," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2011; Noel Anderson, "Competitive Intervention, Protracted Conflict, and the Global Prevalence of Civil War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 63, 2019; and Matthew Moore, "Selling to Both Sides: The Effects of Major Conventional Weapons Transfers on Civil War Severity and Duration," *International Interactions*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2012. On the intensity of these conflicts, see Moore, 2012; Idean Salehyan, David Siroky, and Reed M. Wood, "External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse: A Principal-Agent Analysis of Wartime Atrocities," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, Summer 2014; and Kenneth A. Schultz, "The Enforcement Problem in Coercive Bargaining: Interstate Conflict over Rebel Support in Civil Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, Spring 2010.

typically suffer from worse governance and are more likely to resume conflict because of uncertainty about whether foreign powers will either renew their support to local proxies or continue that support in ways that are not easy to observe.<sup>2</sup> Proxy wars also run the ever-present risk of escalating to large-scale interstate conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Wars conducted through local proxies or surrogates were a central concern of the Cold War. The U.S. war in Vietnam and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan were two such cases that drew the superpowers into direct military roles on a large scale, but much more common were lesser conflicts, such as those that occurred throughout southern Africa and Central America in the 1980s. With the end of the Cold War, such conflicts were often fought in regions peripheral to U.S. interests, conducted by weak or poor states that seldom ranked high on the U.S. policy agenda. In contrast, the recent wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, in addition to the conflict beginning in 2014 in the Donbas region of Ukraine, have drawn major powers into conflict in countries that touch on important U.S. interests. If such wars were to become common in a new era of great-power competition, they would have significant implications for U.S. foreign and security policy.

This report examines the causes and likely future trends in proxy wars. More specifically, the report addresses the following questions:

- Why do external states provide military support to parties to a civil war? Why might they avoid such conflicts or seek a way out of them once committed?
- Do these patterns provide any indication of whether proxy wars, and especially proxy warfare by major or regional powers, might increase substantially in the future?

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Colaresi, "With Friends Like These, Who Needs Democracy? The Effect of Transnational Support from Rivals on Post-Conflict Democratization," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 2014; and Schultz, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The classic discussion of these risks is Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1957. For evidence on the relationship between proxy warfare and intensified international rivalry, see Belgin San-Akca and Zeev Maoz, "Rivalry and State Support of Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs), 1946–2001," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4, December 2012.

- If a state were to dramatically expand the geographical reach or military sophistication of such activities, how long would it take that country to develop the necessary capabilities?

## What Is Proxy Warfare?

*Proxy wars* refers to wars (and specifically, in this report, civil wars) in which an external state sponsor provides at least one local warring party with support that could be useful for waging armed conflict, such as funding, arms, equipment, advising, training, intelligence, and/or troops, for the purposes of accomplishing some strategic objective.<sup>4</sup> We will refer to the local armed actor, whether a rebel group or government, receiving the support from the external state as a *proxy* and the relationship between the local actor and the external state sponsor as the *proxy relationship*.

For a potential intervener, the option of sponsoring a local armed actor is distinct from other tools of intervention (such as direct military operations or economic statecraft, including sanctions or blockades) in several ways. Some of these distinguishing features can be benefits or liabilities for the intervener, depending on the context. Supporting a proxy involves the following actions:

- **Delegation to a local actor:** Unlike the other intervention options, a proxy strategy cannot be undertaken unilaterally. Sponsoring a local armed actor involves cooperating with or delegating a task to a *local* partner. This cooperation can range from a relatively hierarchical

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<sup>4</sup> This definition is similar to those of Karl Deutsch and Andrew Mumford. Karl Deutsch defined *proxy war* 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 the country and using some of that country’s manpower, resources and territory as a means of achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies” (Karl W. Deutsch, “External Involvement in Internal War,” in Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964). Andrew Mumford defined *proxy war* as “the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome” (Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013a, p. 1). We use the term *proxy wars* to refer to the conflicts themselves, while *proxy warfare* refers to the practices by which those wars are fought.

relationship, in which the sponsor exercises strong influence over the decisionmaking of the proxy, to more-equitable relationships, and it can range from close to very loose coordination. The sponsor may employ some of its own forces directly, but the bulk of the manpower is provided by the proxy. As the next two points make clear, a sponsor typically chooses to rely on proxies to reduce two types of costs: the direct costs (financial costs and casualties) incurred by employing combat power abroad and the potential costs that would arise if the sponsor's involvement causes the conflict to escalate. This two-actor feature, however, has two main costs of its own. For one, setting up the partnership can involve upfront costs in both effort and time, delaying when the strategy can start to see its benefits. Better documented among scholars of proxy warfare is the other, downstream consequence: Because cooperating with another actor requires delegation, the intervener must cede some control of the outcome to another actor, who can act as a veto player or potential spoiler to the state's desired ends.<sup>5</sup> Other intervention options may not incur the costs of cooperation that proxy strategies do, but they also do not benefit from the local knowledge or legitimacy of that local actor, which may be helpful for certain ends.

- **Investment:** A proxy strategy typically requires substantially less investment than direct military intervention, a feature that many studies highlight as a key benefit to the strategy.<sup>6</sup> The logic is that, for the potential intervener, supporting local actors often costs less both in

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<sup>5</sup> In academic terms, proxy warfare involves a principal-agent relationship. The degree of latitude of action available to the proxy will vary based on a variety of factors, including the extent to which the agent (the proxy) is dependent on the principal (the sponsor) and the mechanisms for monitoring and sanctioning the agent that the principal puts in place. For more in-depth discussions of these relationships, see Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2011; Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2010; and Seyom Brown, "Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Erica Borghard, "Friends with Benefits? Power and Influence in Proxy Warfare," Ph.D. thesis, New York: Columbia University, 2014; Salehyan, 2010; and Daniel Byman, "Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective," *Lawfare*, May 21, 2018.

resources and lives than deploying forces, allowing the intervener to sidestep international or domestic criticism or costs. The line between direct and indirect intervention can become blurry, however. In some cases, indirect support may be insufficient to counter a threat, and third parties can become drawn into direct combat. Even in these cases, however, the bulk of the fighting is done by the local parties.

- **(In)visibility to outside audiences:** Sponsoring a proxy actor is less physically visible than direct military action and less public than most diplomacy or economic sanctions, which thrive on a public component. A state sponsor's support for its proxies can therefore be hidden from enemies or its own populace or at least be plausibly denied even if the sponsorship is detected by adversaries.<sup>7</sup> Some proxy relationships are deliberately broadcast or involuntarily outed, but state sponsors and their associated proxy actors still have the option to try to maintain the state's role shrouded in secrecy. Ambiguity about the state's role or culpability in the actions of its proxies can shield the state from international or domestic repercussions (such as conflict escalation), which it might experience if it chose a more public style of intervention.<sup>8</sup> A state committed to keeping the partnership secret is also limited to using only deniable ways of keeping the local partner in line, however.

These characteristics of proxy warfare help to explain both its attractiveness as an instrument of statecraft and its limitations. Because proxies cannot be fully controlled (and, indeed, they not infrequently turn against their one-time sponsors), proxy warfare is not a useful instrument for cases in which the sponsor wants either absolute or fine-grained control of a territory, population, or set of interactions. On the other hand, it can be a highly useful instrument for imposing costs on a competitor or adversary. It can also be used to effect regime change in the target state, although without any guarantees that the regime so created will remain beholden to the former sponsor (as the examples of Soviet-Chinese, Chinese-Vietnamese, and U.S.-

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<sup>7</sup> Schultz, 2010; Salehyan, 2010; Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Cunningham, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Afghan mujahedeen relations all attest). In these senses, it is a tool of coercion more akin to economic sanctions or blockades than to direct warfare.

This report examines foreign sponsor assistance to both states and violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) in violent conflicts, but the focus is on support to nonstate actors. Either type of proxy support can pose threats to the United States. When the United States gets drawn into a proxy war in opposition to a government supported by a foreign sponsor, such actions are typically carried out by relatively small numbers of special operations forces or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (or the two working together). When the United States gets drawn into a proxy war on behalf of an embattled government against a VNSA supported by a foreign sponsor, however, U.S. support can potentially involve substantial numbers of U.S. Army and other conventional forces. The latter is the principal concern of this report, and, thus, we focus on the threat posed by foreign state support to VNSAs.

## Looking Backward and Forward to Understand the Risks Posed by Proxy Wars

Before plunging into the details of our analysis, it is helpful to take a step back to consider how proxy wars have evolved and how they might continue to evolve in the future.

### Historical Trends in Proxy Warfare

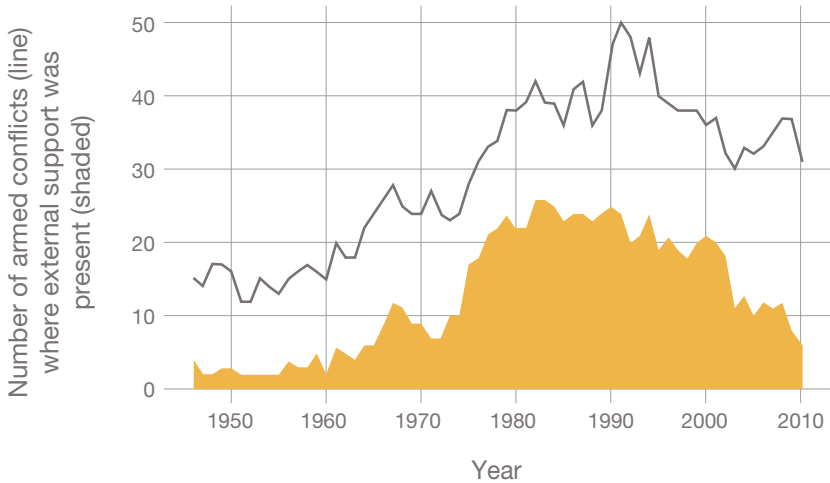
Proxy wars are not a new phenomenon. France used the American colonists as proxies in its struggle against Great Britain in the American war for independence, and Russia used Serbia in its competition with the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>9</sup> The prevalence of proxy warfare, however, varies over time. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, its use in the modern era peaked in the late Cold War and has declined substantially since.<sup>10</sup> Its prevalence in the

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A for a brief summary of additional data up through 2019. At the time of the research conducted for this report, data on more-recent interventions in civil wars used an incompatible, broader definition of support than does the quantita-

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**Number of Proxy Wars over Time**



SOURCES: RAND Arroyo Center synthesis of the following datasets: the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRI) dataset (Magnus Oberg, Therese Pettersson, and Stina Höglblad, "Organized Violence, 1989–2018 and Peace Agreements," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 2019; and Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2002), the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict (NSA) dataset (David Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, "Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 30, No. 5, 2013), and the Nonstate Armed Groups (NAGs) dataset (Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016); details provided in Appendix A.

late Cold War and early post–Cold War periods can be explained through both motive and opportunity. In the aftermath of decolonization, the number of highly fragile states at high risk of civil war proliferated rapidly, offering abundant opportunities for foreign powers to meddle in the conflicts of others. At the same time, the rival blocs of the Cold War era sought competitive advantage against each other while reducing the risk of a

tive analysis in Chapter 3. These more-recent data only account for the deployment of troops by external powers.

nuclear confrontation between the superpowers. Proxy warfare provided an appealing tool through which to pursue such competitive agendas.<sup>11</sup>

As will be discussed in Chapter 3, in the post–Cold War era, proxy wars changed not only in the number of instances but also in the nature of the countries involved. During the Cold War, proxy warfare was often a tool of major powers such as the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. In the post–Cold War era, proxy wars have often been used by much weaker, poorer states. The Second Congo War of 1998–2003, sometimes called “Africa’s World War,” was the deadliest of such cases, ultimately involving nine countries and resulting in the deaths of several million people.

In recent years, proxy warfare seems to have changed again. As the examples of Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Ukraine discussed at the outset of this chapter suggest, major powers, including Iran, Russia, the United States, and others, have again been players in these and other civil wars. As might be expected from their involvement, the resources available to both insurgents and governments, including advanced weaponry and military training, have similarly increased. From the perspective of U.S. decisionmakers and military planners, the key questions are whether such conflicts mark the beginning of a resurgence of proxy wars in a new era of strategic competition and, if so, what the defense implications are for the United States.

## Anticipating Future Proxy War Risks: A Scenario

Scenarios can help defense planners better envision future contingencies and the gaps in military preparedness that they reveal. The most useful scenarios are often not the most likely ones; decisionmakers and planners are

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<sup>11</sup> Note that there is some latency between the peak of decolonization and Cold War tensions on the one hand and the peak of proxy wars on the other. Decolonization in many cases did not lead immediately to civil or proxy wars; rather, the process created extremely weak states that were at high risk of such wars for decades afterward. There was a rapid increase in proxy wars during the Brezhnev era of the Soviet Union. The level of proxy wars then remained high for two decades, from approximately 1980 to 2000. Many of these proxy wars did not end at the moment the Cold War ended; rather, they took years afterward to slowly unwind. Because all civil wars that received external support at some point during the war are considered proxy wars in Table 1.1, these wars with their origins in the late Cold War period remain counted as proxy wars until the wars terminated—often years after the Cold War ended.

often already focused on the contingencies that seem most realistic, given current information. Instead, scenarios can often be most valuable when they focus attention on problems that seem less probable but would represent major challenges if they were to occur. Currently, most discussions of proxy war focus on countries in the Middle East or perhaps in the non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (non-NATO) parts of the former Soviet Union. But what if proxy wars became more common in other parts of the world and came to threaten vital U.S. interests?

To this end, imagine the following scenario: Numerous countries that feel threatened by Chinese economic preeminence and growing military capabilities join the United States in pursuing a policy of “decoupling” their economies from China. Some countries go further, welcoming a substantial U.S. military presence that they had previously sought to avoid. Facing foreign-policy and security reversals and denied its previous instruments of “soft power,” Beijing turns to more-aggressive measures to protect its vital interests.<sup>12</sup>

In this scenario, a future Philippines turns decisively toward the United States. Galvanized by increasingly assertive Chinese actions, pro-American elements within the military and political establishment sharply curtail market access to China and welcome closer military ties with the United States.<sup>13</sup> Especially after the United States’ exit from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, the prospect of greater U.S. military access in the Philippines poses a considerable threat to China, which could be within range of ground-based missiles deployed in the Philippines.<sup>14</sup> Lacking the economic leverage it previously possessed because of the Philippines’ policy of “decoupling,” Beijing responds to the threat posed by close military ties between the United States and the Philippines not with an overt, conven-

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<sup>12</sup> Although this scenario is purely speculative, others have also suggested that China might turn to more-aggressive action—including potentially proxy warfare—if the United States seeks to isolate it economically. See, for instance, Jeffrey D. Sachs, “Will America Create a Cold War with China?” *China Economic Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, “Tragedy of Small Power Politics: Duterte and the Shifting Sands of Philippine Foreign Policy,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> John Reed and Kathrin Hille, “Philippines Warns of China Threat After U.S. Nuclear Pact Exit,” *Financial Times*, February 20, 2019.

tional attack. Instead, it seeks to place pressure on Manila—and potentially even overthrow the government—by providing funding, arms, and training to insurgents within the Philippines. In fact, China in the 1970s had provided precisely such support to the New People’s Army (NPA) in the Philippines, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) only severed political ties with the NPA’s political wing, the Community Party of the Philippines, in 2011.<sup>15</sup> With a large infusion of Chinese support, the NPA begins to make military gains against the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Manila turns to the United States for help.

This specific scenario is unlikely, as are any number of similar scenarios involving other potential U.S. adversaries that might be imagined. However, it is not far-fetched to imagine that U.S. decisionmakers and military planners will be confronted by at least one such situation involving a vital U.S. interest at some point before 2035, the window that the U.S. Department of Defense is currently using for long-range defense planning efforts. How would the United States respond in such circumstances? Scarred by experiences with irregular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (or, going further back, with proxy warfare in Vietnam), would it refuse its partner’s entreaties? And if the United States provided weapons, training, and intelligence to its partner, but such assistance was not sufficient to turn the tide against a well-armed, well-trained insurgency, what then? If the United States chose to intervene more directly in support of the Philippine government, it could potentially involve a major commitment of military forces. Understanding the potential for such contingencies is the focus of this report.

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Jennings, “Philippine Communist Rebels Grow New Aid Sources as China Steps Away,” *Voice of America*, April 8, 2019.

## Research Objective, Approach, and Organization of the Report

This report seeks to identify the factors that might make scenarios like the one above more likely.<sup>16</sup> The remainder of this report is divided into two main parts.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the causes of external states' support of local proxies in a civil war. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on these causes and outlines the research design for the subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 summarizes the results of a statistical analysis of the determinants of state support to proxies. Although the analysis used analytic statistics, Chapter 3 is written for a general audience, with the technical details of the analysis reported in Appendix A.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide case studies of the three major U.S. adversaries that have been the primary users of proxy warfare over the past several decades: China, Russia (and the Soviet Union before it), and Iran. While new adversaries could always emerge, U.S. concerns over adversary use of proxy warfare in the years to come are likely to continue to involve these same actors. In each case, the analysis examines the factors underlying these countries' use of proxy warfare and the reasons why they sometimes turned away from using this instrument.<sup>17</sup> The case studies also examine how long it took these countries to develop a substantial proxy warfare capability.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This report does not attempt to provide definitive answers to the complex questions about what the United States should do in potential proxy wars of the future.

<sup>17</sup> These three cases represent only major powers; weaker states are intentionally excluded, and thus the qualitative insights in these chapters may not be applicable to instances of proxy warfare such as Rwanda's activities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Even some important major powers were excluded from analysis—most importantly, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, although lesser powers such as South Africa or Portugal might also have been included in our list. Despite these limitations, the three cases selected provide important analytic insights. Perhaps most obviously, this list includes all three of the countries that have most frequently and most effectively employed proxy warfare against the United States. The quantitative analysis in Chapter 3 uses a slightly different set of major powers than the qualitative analysis; specifically, the case studies include Iran, while the quantitative analysis does not.

<sup>18</sup> We define *proxy warfare capability* as the sponsor's doctrine, personnel, training, resources, and organizational capacity associated with the support of military proxies.

The primary objective of this report is to provide insights to the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Army concerning the threats posed by proxy wars and the capability requirements implied by these threats. Because both the Department of Defense as a whole and the Army primarily become involved in proxy wars to combat VNSAs (rather than employing such actors against sovereign states), the focus of this report is on why and how major powers provide support to these nonstate actors.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the qualitative analysis, our exclusive focus is on state support to nonstate militants. In the quantitative analysis, we also take note of when governments provide support to states and the reasons why they might do so, although our focus again remains on nonstate actors.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings from the quantitative analysis and case studies and draws lessons for the future, including policy recommendations for the U.S. government, particularly the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army.

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In modern U.S. doctrinal terms, we focus on the nonstate aspect of proxy warfare that corresponds to *unconventional warfare*, defined as the capability to “enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area” (see “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016,” in Public Law 114-92, Section 1097, U.S. Congress, November 25, 2015). We explore this capability at three levels: a rudimentary capability in which a sponsor can provide basic support to nearby states, an intermediate capability in which a sponsor can provide substantial assistance to proxies throughout the region in which the sponsor is located, and an advanced capability in which the sponsor can provide sophisticated training and advanced technology to proxies in regions far-removed from the sponsor (potentially globally). More-advanced versions of such capabilities require not only advanced technical knowledge (such as infiltration and exfiltration of agents, counterintelligence, tactical and operational military expertise, and so on) but also broad networks of covert relationships and logistics channels.

<sup>19</sup> Historically, when the United States has engaged in unconventional warfare (the support of nonstate actors against hostile governments), the CIA has most frequently been the lead U.S. entity. Unconventional warfare is also a core proficiency of U.S. special operations forces, and these forces can and often have played a role in such activities. Conventional U.S. military forces have only a very limited role in this mission set. For a discussion of U.S. military roles in unconventional warfare, see, for instance, Stephen Watts, Sean M. Zeigler, Kimberly Jackson, Caitlin McCulloch, Joe Cheravitch, and Marta Kepe, *Countering Russia: The Role of Special Operations Forces in Strategic Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A412-1, 2021.

# Overview of the Causes of Proxy Wars

There has been a resurgence of interest in recent years in proxy warfare, prompted in part by concerns such as state support to terrorist groups in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks; Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah's relative success against the Israeli Defense Forces; and Russia's support for the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic in Ukraine (marked by the conflict there beginning in 2014). The implications of proxy wars for U.S. defense planning are, however, still highly contested.

This chapter provides background on the first of the two major questions motivating this report. It reviews the literature on the reasons why states engage in proxy warfare in hopes of identifying the factors that will determine whether we might see an upsurge in the number of such conflicts in the coming 15 years. It then provides an overview of the research approach we used in subsequent chapters to understand broad trends in the use of proxy warfare and the specific factors motivating key states.

Our framework breaks down the various arguments for why states may engage in proxy warfare into **motivations** for intervening and **opportunities** to intervene through proxy tools.<sup>1</sup> *Motivations* are factors that inspire states to want to intervene or engage in proxy wars, whereas *opportunities* are factors that reduce the barriers to using a proxy strategy or make it easier or more advantageous for states to use proxy tools to achieve their ends.

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<sup>1</sup> Grauer and Tierney take a similar approach to explaining trends of state support for rebel groups over time, although they only highlight a select few hypotheses (Ryan Grauer and Dominic Tierney, "The Arsenal of Insurrection: Explaining Rising Support for Rebels," *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2018).

States can choose proxy strategies for reasons related to geopolitical interests, economic interests, domestic politics, ideology, or identity. We discuss how each of these categories can motivate states and present opportunities for states to engage through proxies. Table 2.1 provides a summary.

In summarizing these arguments, we draw both from existing research on why states intervene through proxy tools and from the relatively more robust debates on direct military intervention as applied to the unique context of proxy warfare.

## Geopolitical Interests

The first set of explanations emphasizes the geopolitical and security considerations that underpin decisions to support proxy actors. States can be motivated to intervene for reasons to do with power politics, coercion, alliances, or concerns about conflict spillover, whereas the nature of the local actors and their relationships to rival states and perceived risks of interstate escalation can create or remove barriers to using proxy strategies.

## Motivations

Many scholars and practitioners contend that states engage in proxy warfare to affect the global or regional balance of power, relative to a state rival or rivals.<sup>2</sup> Some states may turn to proxy relationships to chip away at an adversary's power in a region, to impose costs on an adversary, or to assuage a strong sense of insecurity by enhancing their influence abroad. There is no broad agreement, however, about exactly how power-politics affects the use of proxy warfare. Some research indicates that weak states facing a strong

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<sup>2</sup> San-Akca and Maoz, 2012; Michael G. Findley and Tze Kwang Teo, "Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4, 2006; Salehyan, 2011; Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 158, No. 2, 2013b; Schultz, 2010; Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 37; Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*, Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019, pp. 46–52; Alex Marshall, "From Civil War to Proxy War: Past History and Current Dilemmas," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016, p. 190; and Brown, 2016.

rival are more likely than strong states to use proxy strategies, ostensibly because it is a low-cost way to balance against a stronger rival state.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, some research has found that weaker states facing stronger rivals are less likely to use proxy support. They claim that this is because they fear devastating retaliation for that support, especially through losing control of their proxies.<sup>4</sup> Hegemonic states, in particular, may be more willing to intervene because they face no real pushback to opportunistic meddling, as Idean Salehyan argues,<sup>5</sup> although it is possible that this intervention may take the form of direct rather than proxy interventions, depending on the costs that the hegemonic state is willing to bear.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, if the intervener's rivalry is with the state in question, the intervener is more likely to sponsor local nonstate armed groups.<sup>7</sup>

In a dynamic that is related to, but distinct from, traditional theories of power politics, some states may be motivated to sponsor local armed groups

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<sup>3</sup> Belgin San-Akca, "Supporting Nonstate Armed Groups: A Resort to Illegality?" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2009; San-Akca and Maoz, 2012, p. 730; Jeremy M. Berkowitz, "Delegating Terror: Principal-Agent Based Decision Making in State Sponsorship of Terrorism," *International Interactions*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2018; and Michael G. Findley, James A. Piazza, and Joseph K. Young, "Games Rivals Play: Terrorism in International Rivalries," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2012, p. 237.

<sup>4</sup> San-Akca, 2009; Salehyan, 2010, p. 508.

<sup>5</sup> Salehyan, 2010, p. 508.

<sup>6</sup> In their discussions of the determinants of U.S. direct military interventions, Kavanagh et al., 2017, points to the logic that strong, hegemonic states are freer to pursue military interventions than those facing near-peer competitors. That logic could predict the opposite for *proxy* sponsorship: Because hegemonic states face little international pushback for interventions, they are more likely to *directly* intervene over sponsoring local actors. See Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Angela O'Mahony, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, John Speed Meyers, and Eugeniu Han, *The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1831-A, 2017, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Findley, Piazza, and Young, 2012, p. 831; Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016; and San-Akca, 2009.

to coerce concessions out of a rival state.<sup>8</sup> Supporting a local nonstate armed group, for example, could be used as a threat to deter an enemy or as a bargaining chip for the state sponsor in broader negotiations. Some policy commentators fear that Iran uses threats of inciting its proxies to deter the United States and other foreign nations from acting against it.<sup>9</sup> Using proxies as a tool of coercion has the potential to limit costs—both the direct costs of intervening and the potential for escalation. These advantages may be lost, however, if the proxies behave in ways antithetical to the sponsor's interests, which is a particular risk when the objective is a nuanced one, such as securing bargaining leverage against a more powerful state without pushing it into a direct military response.

States can feel their interests threatened not just by other states but also the presence of instability. Concerns about spillover can affect whether states decide to support actors within an ongoing conflict. A few scholars of military intervention argue that states intervene in some civil wars for fear that violence can spill over into neighboring areas, to which they assign some value.<sup>10</sup> Fear that extremism flourishing in the chaos of a civil war can

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<sup>8</sup> Navin A. Bapat, "Understanding State Sponsorship of Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2011; Findley, Piazza, and Young, 2012, p. 237; and Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Relations*, Chambersburg, Pa.: Apollo Books, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> C. Anthony Pfaff, "How to Counter Iran's Proxies," *MENASource*, June 18, 2019; Ariane Tabatabai and Becca Wasser, "Iran's Network of Fighters in the Middle East Aren't Always Loyal to Iran," *Washington Post*, May 21, 2019; and J. Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies: Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations," American Enterprise Institute, November 29, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew J. Enterline, "Killing Time: The World Politics of Civil War Duration, 1820–1992," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2000; Idean Salehyan, "The Externalities of Civil Strife: Refugees as a Source of International Conflict," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2008; Jacob D. Kathman, "Civil War Diffusion and Regional Motivations for Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 2011; and Alan and Gil Loescher Dowty, "Refugee Flows as Grounds for International Action," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1996. The fear of spillover has some empirical basis: Most scholars on the subject have found that civil wars increase the likelihood that neighboring countries devolve into civil wars, although why they do so is disputed. See Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Transnational Dimensions of Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2007; Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War," *Interna-*

incite terrorism back home can fall in this category. A potential intervener can choose to support a local actor that it believes can contain or stamp out this violence or terrorism before it spills into the intervener's territory, near its territory, or into the territory of its allies. On the other hand, a state may abstain from supporting a local actor (especially a nonstate armed group) if it believes that doing so would destabilize areas that it finds important to its security or economic interests.

While some states may be motivated to engage in proxy warfare because of adversaries or threats, others may be inspired by alliance considerations. Alliance motivations could come in various forms. In some contexts, proxy relationships begin because an external state has come to the defense of a long-standing local ally in need by supporting it with arms, advisers, funding, and more. Iranian and Russian support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, U.S. support for the Iraqi government following the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Saudi Arabia's support for the ousted Hadi regime in Yemen are some examples of this dynamic. In another alliance dynamic, a state may bandwagon with an ally that has already intervened to curry favor with that ally.<sup>11</sup> Russia's support for forces in Libya, for instance, allows it to enhance its military cooperation with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>12</sup> Other states may avoid supporting warring parties altogether because doing so would upset a regional ally with a stake in the conflict.

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*tional Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2006; and Håvard Hegre and Nicholas Sambanis, "Sensitivity Analysis of Empirical Results on Civil War Onset," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Findley and Teo hypothesized that the likelihood that a third-party state supports a warring party increases if an ally of that third-party state is already supporting that party. They found that states are indeed more likely to intervene on the side of the government when "an ally has already intervened on the same side" but that an ally's support for the opposition was not strong enough to overcome when a third-party state's own rivalry or alliance with the local government pressured the state to support the government (Findley and Teo, 2006, pp. 831, 835).

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019.

## Opportunities

The presence of a viable local ally could serve as an opportunity for a state to pursue its goals through a proxy strategy. A local armed actor that exhibits characteristics that serve the state's geopolitical goals, such as being strong enough to win, or at least threaten to win, the conflict, would make proxy strategies more attractive.<sup>13</sup> Opportunities to engage in proxy warfare may also appear more attractive when the risks that employing a proxy strategy will escalate into interstate war are low.<sup>14</sup> Certain conditions may make escalation risks from proxy strategies easier to manage, therefore reducing the barriers to using the option. An intervener may assess a lower risk of escalation if a rival state is not directly involved in the war. Similarly, states may see the absence of a rival as an opportunity to pursue their economic, domestic, or ideological goals (see the following sections in this chapter) through proxy intervention without the burden of possible escalation.

Even when a rival is directly involved in the war, a potential intervener may still be undeterred from proxy warfare if it assesses that its proxy strategy can sufficiently avoid direct confrontation with an enemy in the same theater, whether because the interventions are not actually at cross-purposes, the intervener can deny its involvement, or the intervener believes that the rival is unwilling or unable to escalate. For example, a 2019 RAND report claimed that Russia directly intervened in Syria despite U.S. involvement in the same theater in part because U.S. involvement was restricted to certain areas and targets and was not directed at Russia's ally, the Syrian regime. As a result, Russia assessed that its intervention had a low risk of direct confrontation with the United States.<sup>15</sup> Although that argument applies to a situation in which Russia intervened directly, the same logic can

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<sup>13</sup> Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011, p. 715.

<sup>14</sup> Many scholars argue that states are more likely to opt for the far lower footprint and plausibly deniable proxy option over direct intervention when directly intervening risks escalation with a rival state. But comparing proxy intervention only with direct military intervention ignores that a proxy strategy still carries a higher risk of escalation than economic or diplomatic interventions. For a sample of scholars who compare proxy strategies only with direct intervention and nonintervention, see Salehyan, 2010, p. 508; Borghard, 2014, p. 33; and Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, p. 19.

apply to an indirect strategy as well. Relatedly, work on proxy dynamics has long touted plausible deniability as a key benefit of proxy relationships. By hiding the true extent of its support for a local actor and the degree to which it sanctions that actor's activity, states can eschew potential retaliation while reaping the benefits of involvement. Policy discussion surrounding Russia's below-the-threshold, hybrid behavior often focuses on the benefits that Russia reaps from covert proxy relationships, for example.<sup>16</sup>

The risk of unintended escalation is not the only way in which working through proxies can ultimately have counterproductive security consequences for the sponsoring state. The proxy may redirect the sponsor's assistance to fighting (or repressing) other groups with whom the sponsor does not have an adversarial relationship, potentially creating new enemies for the sponsor. Indeed, the proxy may have incentives to prolong fighting against the sponsor's adversary to continue reaping resources to redirect to other fights.<sup>17</sup> Opportunities for proxy warfare, or at least proxy warfare that accomplishes a sponsor's long-term strategic objectives, may therefore be limited by the alignment of interests between sponsor and proxy.

## Economic Interests

How economic factors play into proxy warfare receives far less attention, relative to security, domestic, and ideological considerations, but these factors can present both drivers and opportunities for states to engage in this type of warfare.

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New is Russia's 'New Way of War'?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> For the latter argument on moral hazard, see, for instance, Andrew Boutton, "U.S. Foreign Aid, Interstate Rivalry, and Incentives for Counterterrorism Cooperation," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 51, No. 6, 2014. On the risk of blowback more generally, see, for instance, Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, 2nd ed., New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004; and Ely Ratner, "Reaping What You Sow: Democratic Transitions and Foreign Policy Realignment," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 3, June 2009.

## Motivations

States may be driven to support local armed actors to pursue economic gain. Regimes may seek opportunities abroad to bolster the domestic economy writ large or economically benefit some powerful leaders or friends. Under certain conditions, sponsoring a local force, whether state or nonstate, could contribute to the state sponsor's economic interests, such as by battling actors that seek to threaten the state's economic lifelines or guaranteeing the sponsor's access to valuable local resources or an important trading bloc.<sup>18</sup> Economic payoffs may not accrue to the sponsoring state as a whole but rather to narrow interests within the sponsor. Some have argued, for instance, that Russia's manipulation of the "frozen conflicts" in the former Soviet Union and its use of private security contractors farther afield are both motivated by economic gain for actors close to the Kremlin.<sup>19</sup>

## Opportunities

States may be more likely to support local armed actors within a civil war if those actors control (or can be motivated to control) valuable territory, assets, or natural resources or have the organizational capacity to sustain economic growth in an area.<sup>20</sup> These economic characteristics could directly affect the perceived viability of the local partner and whether it presents a credible opportunity for support. States may also be more likely to seek economic gain through proxies when they are not exposed to any economic fallout from violence and instability in the region of the proxy war, either

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<sup>18</sup> Mumford, 2013b; Mi Yung Yoon, "Explaining U.S. Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945–1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1997, pp. 582–583.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Charles King, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics*, Vol. 53, July 2001; and Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Rwanda and Uganda, for instance, appear to have backed rebels fighting President Mobutu Sese Seko for strategic reasons, but they remained in the country because of the rich economic opportunities provided by eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. See John F. Clark, "Explaining Ugandan Intervention in Congo: Evidence and Interpretations," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2, June 2001.

because that region is peripheral or because the sponsoring state has limited international economic exposure more generally.

Opportunities to engage in proxy warfare are also likely to be relatively more attractive when states are especially cost-sensitive. Analysts of proxy warfare often document how cheap supporting local actors is, especially relative to more resource-intensive military interventions.<sup>21</sup> States that see themselves as cash-strapped may be more likely to reach for the proxy tool when they are otherwise driven to consider an intervention.

## Domestic Politics

States could be propelled to consider a proxy intervention by domestic lobbies or concerns that a conflict threatens the security or legitimacy of their regimes. Domestic political factors may also enhance the attractiveness of opportunities for proxy intervention, relative to overt or direct interventions, because of their greater deniability and lower levels of public scrutiny.

## Motivations

A regime's political survival can be a powerful motivator and is often built on a constellation of constituencies with their own interests and on some basis of ruling legitimacy.

First, some politically minded states are driven to intervene in foreign civil wars to appease the domestic public, powerful entities within the government, or influential lobbies outside of the government.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes domestic constituencies favor intervening in a particular context, spurred by ethnoreligious connections to the conflict or ideological commitments, and a regime chooses to appease those actors through proxy support. States may particularly be motivated to reach for the proxy tool if its military or intelligence arms have a long-standing capability and push for using it as

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<sup>21</sup> Mumford, 2013b; San-Akca, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick M. Regan, "Choosing to Intervene: Outside Interventions in Internal Conflicts," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1998; San-Akca, 2009; and Henning Tamm, "The Origins of Transnational Alliances: Rulers, Rebels, and Political Survival in the Congo Wars," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2016.

a solution to foreign-policy problems or if they have long-standing ties to a particular proxy group (such as is the case with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and the Taliban in Afghanistan).

Intervention decisions could also depend on whether that decision would bolster or undermine regime security. Some regimes fear a demonstration effect.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, autocratic rulers often fear that ongoing civil wars or domestic unrest in other areas could inspire people within their own borders to challenge their rule, especially when the unrest is in neighboring countries (where spillover is likeliest), involves similar ethnoreligious groups pushing for separatism, or involves similar regime types that legitimate themselves in ways similar to the intervening state. For insecure rulers observing revolutions against nearby governments, then, inaction could be more dangerous than action.

## Opportunities

Opportunities for proxy support may be particularly attractive to states for domestic political reasons. Many scholars of military intervention have posited that war-weary populations can be a barrier to direct military interventions.<sup>24</sup> Proxy interventions may, in those circumstances, be an attractive alternative. Even when war weariness is not necessarily present, many scholars argue that states often specifically choose potentially deniable and lower-cost proxy tools to avoid domestic scrutiny or disapproval.<sup>25</sup> These advantages may not be limitless, however. For example, in 2017 and 2018,

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<sup>23</sup> Danneman and Ritter point out that autocratic states that fear their own populations will be inspired by neighboring rebellions, although their study focuses on the effect of neighboring civil wars on domestic repression. See Nathan Danneman and Emily Hencken Ritter, "Contagious Rebellion and Preemptive Repression," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 58, No. 2, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Kavanagh et al., 2017, pp. 56, 75; Yoon, 1997, p. 588; Mark J. Mullenbach and Gerard P. Matthews, "Deciding to Intervene: An Analysis of International and Domestic Influences on United States Interventions in Intrastate Disputes," *International Interactions*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2008; and Scott Sigmund Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 102, No. 1, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> San-Akca, 2016, p. 25; Borghard, 2014; Mumford, 2013b; Salehyan, 2010, p. 508.

protests in Iran were fueled, in part, by domestic dissatisfaction over Iran's foreign policy, especially the policy of continuing to fund its proxy networks abroad despite widespread domestic economic suffering.<sup>26</sup> Proxies may also engage in human rights abuses or other practices that undercut political support in the sponsoring states, as occurred during U.S. support in the 1980s for the government of El Salvador in its war against the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front.<sup>27</sup>

## Ideology and Identity

Some states may be more intrinsically motivated to intervene because of ideological or identity-based commitments. Ideologies might include commitments to particular economic or political systems, both domestically and internationally, while identity-based commitments could include shared ethnic or religious identities. Political ideologies and kinship bonds can be strong motivators to intervene on behalf of local actors, as well as helping to identify promising opportunities for groups to support.

## Motivations

Political ideology is often cited as a driver of proxy wars.<sup>28</sup> Historical examples abound of proxy relationships that at least publicly embrace regime-promotion or normative sentiments.

Political ideologies might push states to consider promoting specific types of regimes, democratic as well as nondemocratic, in their foreign policies.<sup>29</sup> Commitment to a particular political system could stem from

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<sup>26</sup> Lee Keath, "Iran's Working Class, Facing Dim Prospects, Fuels Unrest," AP News, January 6, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Clifford Krauss, "Senate Votes to Cut Salvador Aid in a Major Policy Defeat for Bush," *New York Times*, October 20, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> San-Akca, 2016, pp. 34–35.

<sup>29</sup> John M. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change 1510–2010*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010; Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996; Kathryn Ann Lindquist, "Facing Revolutionary Realities: Understanding High-

strategic, regime-preserving instincts or normative beliefs in that system's benefits.<sup>30</sup> Some states holding ideological commitments to their form of government could promote or preserve it by establishing their preferred political system through aligned local actors or defending it when it is challenged abroad. This view that proxy warfare is a means to actively promote a type of organizing regime was especially pronounced during the Cold War clash between communism and capitalism, but some in policy circles have also started to express fears that, with a rising China and an assertive Russia, interstate competition (and proxy wars that can be fueled by it) could divide along these lines.<sup>31</sup>

Some states ascribe to norms of self-determination or humanitarian intervention, while others emphasize norms of sovereignty. First, some states may be driven to support local armed actors for humanitarian reasons, such as, most recently, NATO's support for local Libyan armed groups in 2011. Regarding norms of sovereignty, Chinese official documents often refer to a commitment to "non-interference" in the domestic politics of other nations, dating back to China's five principles of peaceful coexistence established in the 1950s.<sup>32</sup> Russian officials have also repeatedly espoused their opposition to interference into the internal politics of sovereign countries.<sup>33</sup> There is disagreement among China- and Russia-watchers about the degree to which these public statements reflect true normative commitments or

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Intensity State Sponsorship of Non-State Actors," Ph.D. thesis, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago, 2017; Byman, 2005; and Daniel Byman and Sarah E. Kreps, "Agents of Destruction? Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Grauer and Tierney, 2018, pp. 263–295.

<sup>31</sup> Hal Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great-Power Conflict," *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 5, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Kerry Brown, "Is China's Non-Interference Policy Sustainable?" BBC News, September 17, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> "Russia's Lavrov Backs View on Primacy of Sovereignty in International Relations," *UN News*, September 22, 2017; and United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution Condemning Syria's Crackdown on Anti-Government Protestors, Owing to Veto by Russian Federation, China," news release, October 4, 2011.

are simply a way to insulate their own regimes from threats of externally imposed regime change.<sup>34</sup>

A separate but important driver for supporting local actors is identity, specifically politicized ethnic or religious identity. Scholars who examine state sponsorship of nonstate armed groups especially emphasize this argument, given the finding that ethnoreligious nonstate armed groups often receive (or believe they will receive) support from diasporas or regimes that share the same affiliations.<sup>35</sup> This hypothesis builds on scholarship examining the role of ethnic ties in determining when states militarily intervene.<sup>36</sup> Such factors may have been particularly important in recent years, with a rising proportion of civil wars involving militant Islam or jihadism.<sup>37</sup>

## Opportunities

Local actors that share the same ideological proclivities or ethnic or sectarian identities as the leaders of potential sponsor states may represent more-attractive opportunities for states to support.<sup>38</sup> For states contemplat-

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<sup>34</sup> Joshua Meservey, *The U.S. Should Call China's "Non-Interference" Policy in Africa What It Is—A Myth*, Heritage Foundation, July 6, 2018; Jacob Stokes, "Does China Really Respect Sovereignty?" *The Diplomat*, May 23, 2019; Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, *China's Strong Arm: Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad*, London: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015; and Joshua Eisenman and Eric Heginbotham, *China Steps Out: Beijing's Major Power Engagement with the Developing World*, London: Routledge, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Byman, 2005; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011; Salehyan, 2010; Idean Salehyan, *Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics*, Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011; Hughes, 2012; Rupen Cetinyan, "Ethnic Bargaining in the Shadow of Third-Party Intervention," *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 3, 2002; and Erin K. Jenne, Stephen M. Saideman, and Will Lowe, "Separatism as a Bargaining Posture: The Role of Leverage in Minority Radicalization," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 44, No. 5, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Steve Saideman, *The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy, and International Conflict*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001; and Mullenbach and Matthews, 2008, pp. 25–52.

<sup>37</sup> James D. Fearon, "Civil War and the Current International System," *Daedalus*, Vol. 146, No. 4, Fall 2017.

<sup>38</sup> San-Akca, 2016.

ing proxy warfare, existing populations of co-ethnics or co-religionists in other territory (especially if they are organized and armed already) present ready-made potential partners. Numerous studies about external support to rebel groups argue that preexisting connections between potential interveners and local armed groups, such as ethnoreligious commonalities, can enhance the opportunities to pursue a proxy strategy, even if the state is not fully motivated by ethnoreligious nationalism.<sup>39</sup> These opportunities might be enhanced by increased knowledge of the target states, language skills, broad networks among important actors, and commonalities of interest or worldview that make it less likely that the proxy will behave in ways antithetical to the sponsor's interests.<sup>40</sup>

## Summary of Factors and Research Design

Proxy warfare is a complex phenomenon. The existing literature does not suggest any one factor, or even related group of factors, that can explain when states provide military support to combatants in another country's civil war. It does, however, provide a rich basis through which we can better understand the likely conditions that fuel proxy wars. These factors associated with proxy warfare are summarized in Table 2.1. In the case studies detailed later in this report, we will assess the relative importance of these factors, or constellations of these factors, and their implications for future trends in proxy warfare in a new era of great-power competition.

In the following chapters, we analyze the causes of proxy wars in two steps. First, drawing on the factors identified in this chapter, we conduct a statistical analysis of all cases of proxy wars from 1946 to 2010. The purpose of this analysis is to identify broad trends in the use of proxy warfare and how motivations for its use may have changed between the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the quantita-

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<sup>39</sup> Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011, p. 509; Salehyan, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> For an exploration of these factors, see, for instance, Jason Lyall, "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 1, February 2010.

TABLE 2.1

**Motivations and Opportunities for Proxy Warfare**

|                        | Motivations                                                                                                                                                                  | Opportunities                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Geopolitical interests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving balance of power</li> <li>• Coercion</li> <li>• Spillover</li> <li>• Alliances</li> <li>• Undermining rivals</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of militarily viable proxy group</li> <li>• Competition with rival with lower escalation risk</li> </ul> |
| Economic interests     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National economic gain</li> <li>• Private economic gain (among politically influential private actors)</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost-sensitivity of intervening state</li> <li>• Economic viability of potential proxy partner</li> </ul>         |
| Domestic politics      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic lobbies and bureaucratic politics</li> <li>• Regime security</li> </ul>                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding public scrutiny, war weariness</li> </ul>                                                                |
| Ideology and identity  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regime promotion</li> <li>• Norms of sovereignty or self-determination</li> <li>• Humanitarianism</li> <li>• Nationalism</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideological match with local partner</li> <li>• Presence of co-ethnic or co-religious local partner</li> </ul>    |

tive research approach and findings, while Appendix A provides technical details of the analysis.

In the subsequent three chapters (Chapters 4–6), we analyze three major or regional powers' use of proxy warfare over time. The three powers, Russia, China, and Iran, represent three of the seven countries that have most frequently used this instrument of foreign policy, and they are also each of substantive value for our research questions that focus on the potential for a resurgence in proxy warfare among major or regional powers. Within each case, we assess why these countries used proxy warfare and why they stopped (in periods when they did not engage in such wars). By examining each of these countries over time, we can attempt to isolate the consequences of specific changes (such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran) even as other factors remain constant. In our concluding chapter, Chapter 7, we also compare the records of each of these powers. Comparison across cases can help to identify potential motivations for proxy warfare that are common across different types of states and which are specific to a particular type of state. Through this analysis, we attempt to understand whether these countries (and potentially others) might engage in more-aggressive use of proxy

warfare in the future. This qualitative analysis, however, is restricted solely to an examination of major powers; the motivations and future behavior of less powerful states may differ from those of the countries in these case studies.

For each sponsor of proxy warfare, we also examine how long the country required to develop proxy-warfare capabilities of varying levels of sophistication. Developing and managing surrogates, especially through covert channels, is not an easy task; history is full of examples of failed proxy relationships. By examining this question, we hope to assess how long it would take a country that has not engaged in proxy warfare in its recent past (such as China) to pose a major threat through the use of surrogates.

## Quantitative Assessment of Proxy War Trends and Drivers

In this chapter, we present a series of tests that explore the factors that determine state support for VNSAs. The analysis focuses on a number of themes from the literature on proxy support, including security and economic interests, domestic politics, and ideology. Across these themes, we group results into two broad categories: characteristics of the supporting state and factors that capture dynamics between the potential sponsor and other states. A third category, characteristics of the state or conflict in which the VNSA is operating, is also explored but in lesser detail, because this category has been the focus of substantial existing work, as discussed in Chapter 2. The goal of these tests is to identify historical patterns and changes over time in factors that are associated with state support for VNSAs.

The tests in this chapter engage with theories relating to geopolitical interests, economic interests, domestic politics, and ideology. Under geopolitical interests, we investigate how states choose to support proxies when their allies or rivals are experiencing civil conflict<sup>1</sup> and under what conditions states adopt proxies to counter the influence of their rivals abroad.<sup>2</sup> A variety of tests consider how states' aggregate military power factors into

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<sup>1</sup> Findley and Teo, 2006; Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019; Bapat, 2011; Findley, Piazza, and Young, 2012, p. 237; Hughes, 2012; McInnis, 2016; San-Akca and Maoz, 2012; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011, pp. 709–744; Mumford, 2013b; Schultz, 2010; Daniel Byman, 2005, p. 37; Groh, 2019, pp. 46–52; Marshall, 2016, p. 190; Brown, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Brendan Sozer, “Development of Proxy Relationships: A Case Study of the Lebanese Civil War,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2016; Findley and Teo, 2006, p. 834; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011; and Anderson, 2019.

their decisions to support proxies in both absolute and relative terms. Under economic interests, we examine how a state's economic integration with another country might influence its willingness to support a proxy in its conflicts.<sup>3</sup> We also look at what role oil wealth plays in proxy sponsorship. Under domestic politics and ideology, we account for how states' regime type and revolutionary ideology influence their willingness to engage in proxy conflict.<sup>4</sup> We also examine the role that the foreign policy similarity plays in states' decisions to engage in proxy support. We include tests of whether states are more likely to *balance* or *bandwagon*—that is, whether states tend to support proxies on the same side as states with similar or dissimilar foreign policy preferences.<sup>5</sup>

While the focus of this chapter is on proxy support for VNSAs, we also examine the determinants of external support for governments in civil conflicts. Understanding why states support other states is useful for understanding when states are *less* likely to support VNSAs. With few exceptions, when states become involved in a civil conflict, they are supporting only one side. The dynamics of wars with VNSA-only support, government-only support, or opposing proxy support are different in important ways.<sup>6</sup>

We first discuss the outcomes of interest and the data that we used to identify instances of VNSA support. Second, we discuss the factors we assessed in the analysis and their data sources. Third, we provide a simple presentation of the statistical strategy that we used to estimate the importance of different factors on patterns of VNSA support. Finally, we present an overview of the results from the statistical analysis, followed by a discussion of the substantive importance of different factors, as well as the limita-

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<sup>3</sup> Mumford, 2013b; Yoon, 1997, pp. 582–583.

<sup>4</sup> Danneman and Ritter, 2014; Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky Rumer, *Thirty Years of U.S. Policy Toward Russia: Can the Vicious Circle Be Broken?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 20, 2019, p. 22; Ted Piccone, “China’s Long Game on Human Rights at the United Nations,” Brookings Institution, September 2018; Kavanagh, Povlock, and Pettyjohn, 2017, pp. 56, 75; Yoon, 1997, p. 588; Mullenbach and Matthews, 2008, pp. 25–52; and Gartner, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Findley and Teo, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> For example, wars that experience opposing proxy support tend to last much longer (Anderson, 2019).

tions of the data and modeling approaches that undergird our findings. We include more details on the technical approach of the statistical analysis and the robustness of the findings in Appendix A.

## Data and Research Design

In this section, we provide an overview of the data we used to measure VNSA, or proxy, support; key factors influencing the outcomes; and a brief, nontechnical summary of the statistical model itself.

### Compiling the Dataset of Proxy Support in Civil Conflicts

The dataset of VNSA support relationships that we utilized reflects several choices that we made that define the scope of our assessments. First, we limited the VNSAs in which we were interested to those groups that were actively engaged in an intrastate conflict with the government of the state in which they were located. We therefore excluded nonstate actors that may oppose their government but are not actively engaged in a violent conflict with it. To that end, the dataset that we compiled covers instances of significant external support to actors involved in armed conflicts between a state and a VNSA from 1946 through 2010, based on the list of such conflicts compiled by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) at the time of our research.<sup>7</sup>

Based on this list of intrastate conflicts, we then identify the instances of significant external support to VNSAs. To compile this information, we used a number of existing datasets with information on the type, source, and dates of external support to actors in civil conflicts. After reviewing the

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<sup>7</sup> Although the UCDP dataset does list armed conflicts in more recent years, through 2018 as of this writing, the data sources covering external support are more limited temporally, which is why our quantitative analysis ends in 2011. See Stina Högladh, Therése Pettersson, and Lotta Themnér, “External Support in Armed Conflict 1975–2009. Presenting New Data,” paper presented at the 52nd Annual International Studies Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, March 16–19, 2011; and Gleditsch et al., 2002.

available data sources, the research team picked four datasets with the most comprehensive information on external support: the UCDP External Support Dataset;<sup>8</sup> the NAGs dataset;<sup>9</sup> the NSA dataset;<sup>10</sup> and the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD), version 19.1.<sup>11</sup>

The reasoning behind using multiple datasets was twofold. First, no dataset that was available at the time of this project had coverage for the entire period of 1946 through 2018. In fact, no dataset covered 2012 through 2018 in a complete manner.<sup>12</sup> Second, we encountered issues in reliability or completeness for some of the information gathered by some of the datasets. Utilizing multiple datasets that overlapped in their temporal coverage therefore allowed us to check these reliability and completeness issues to help improve our compiled dataset. We discuss each of these four datasets in greater detail in the technical appendix (Appendix A).

For the final dataset, we included all instances of proxy support in the UCDP External Support dataset. We treated the UCDP External Support dataset as authoritative in its period of coverage, 1975–2009, because it includes the most detailed information on the types of support that actors receive from their sponsors. We used ACD as the authoritative source for defining the set of conflicts and years that were included in our final dataset. We included additional observations of proxy support for 1946–2010 in two instances: (1) when two of the three other datasets identified an external support relationship in the same year or years and (2) in instances when the NAGs dataset assigned its highest confidence level. Merging the four data sources yielded a dataset with coverage from 1946 through 2010 with information on the state and VNSA involved in a conflict, the state supporting the VNSA or government, and the type(s) of external support.

The data contain instances of support by 136 unique countries, though over 60 percent of states in the data have intervened in only one or two con-

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<sup>8</sup> Högladh, Pettersson, and Themnér, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> San-Akca, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Oberg, Pettersson, and Högladh, 2019; Gleditsch et al., 2002.

<sup>12</sup> The ACD contained some information on these years but was incomplete.

flicts.<sup>13</sup> There were 76 unique instances of proxy support (at the sponsor-conflict level) during the Cold War years in the dataset and 112 instances after. Table 3.1 provides a list of the most frequent sponsors in the data. The table counts an instance of support for each unique conflict-side that a state supported—e.g., South African support for RENAMO would be one such instance.

This final dataset provided the outcome variables for our analyses. Different tests use slightly different specifications, but each is built on a binary outcome of a state supporting a proxy or not on a given side in a given conflict. We considered two sets of states as potential sponsors in civil conflicts: those that are nearby the conflict state and major powers. We discuss inclusion criteria in greater detail below.

## Data for Key Factor Variables

We consulted a number of different sources to provide data on factors that influence external support patterns in civil conflicts and states' decision to provide such support. We present these factors here by whether they center on the *conflict state*, on the *potential sponsor*, or on *dynamics between states*. We briefly describe these variables as well as their sources and why their inclusion is important in the analysis.

### Factors Related to Conflict States

- **High-intensity conflicts:** This is a binary variable, where the value is 0 while the cumulative deaths in a conflict are below 1,000, and the value is 1 in the year in which a conflict exceeds that threshold and each year thereafter. More-intense conflicts are likely to be targets for proxy support because of, for example, increased risks of contagion or other threats that a conflict may pose to neighboring or other interested parties. This variable is coded in the ACD data.
- **Oil rents:** This is defined as a conflict state's oil rents as a share of its overall gross domestic product (GDP). These data are from the World

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<sup>13</sup> Thirty-six states are in the data as having intervened in only one conflict, and 83 states intervened in one or two conflicts,

**TABLE 3.1**  
**Top Sponsors in External Support**  
**Data**

| Sponsor                      | Instances |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| United States                | 50        |
| Russia                       | 31        |
| Libya                        | 29        |
| France                       | 26        |
| China                        | 25        |
| Cuba                         | 19        |
| Iran                         | 13        |
| Israel                       | 13        |
| Sudan                        | 12        |
| United Kingdom               | 11        |
| Democratic Republic of Congo | 11        |
| India                        | 11        |
| Pakistan                     | 10        |
| German Democratic Republic   | 10        |
| Egypt                        | 10        |
| Saudi Arabia                 | 9         |
| Iraq                         | 8         |
| Chad                         | 8         |
| Syria                        | 8         |

Bank.<sup>14</sup> Some scholarship finds that states with large oil reserves are more likely to attract proxy support into their civil conflicts.<sup>15</sup>

- **Conflict state capabilities:** This variable captures the conflict state's share of global military capabilities. We used data from the Correlates of War National Military Capabilities dataset.<sup>16</sup> Proxy groups fighting a highly capable state are relatively less likely to achieve their goals. The most capable states are also more likely to have the ability to impose costs on potential sponsors in other, unrelated venues.

### Factors Related to Potential Sponsors

- **Regime type of sponsor:** We included a measure of potential sponsors' regime type using polity scores.<sup>17</sup> In some models, we also included a variable that indicates whether both the potential sponsor and state experiencing a conflict have the same regime type: joint autocracy or joint democracy. States with similar political systems may be more likely to support each other and less likely to support the VNSAs challenging them.
- **GDP per capita of sponsor:** We used GDP per capita as a measure of the level of economic development of potential sponsors. A state's level of economic development shapes its geopolitical interests and

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<sup>14</sup> See World Bank, "Data Catalog: Oil Rents (% of GDP)," webpage, undated, for these data.

<sup>15</sup> Vincenzo Bove, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Petros G. Sekeris, "'Oil Above Water' Economic Interdependence and Third-Party Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 7, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> The Composite Index of National Capability score is a measure with six components, each of which is measured as a percentage of the world's total population, urban population, iron and steel production, primary energy consumption, military expenditures, and military personnel. See David J. Singer, "Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816–1985," *International Interactions*, Vol. 14, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> States with a polity score greater than 5 are coded as democracies, while states with a score less than 0 are coded as autocracies. See Monty G. Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr, and Keith Jagers, *Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2013*, College Park, Md.: Center for Systemic Peace, 2014.

the threats and opportunities it perceives in adopting proxies in active conflicts.<sup>18</sup>

- **Ongoing civil conflict in sponsor:** States experiencing ongoing civil conflicts may be more likely to engage in proxy support. Rebels may use neighboring countries as bases from which to organize or conduct operations. This can simultaneously stoke conflict in host countries while leading states to engage in proxy support. We constructed an indicator for whether a contiguous state is experiencing civil conflict of any intensity in a given year using the ACD data.
- **Sponsor state capabilities:** We constructed this variable as above, using Composite Index of National Capability data. More-capable states should be more likely to engage in proxy warfare. More-powerful states have a greater capacity to fund and transfer military resources to proxy groups.
- **Major power sponsor:** This is an indicator for whether a potential sponsor is among the set of states identified as a major power by the Correlates of War project.<sup>19</sup> These states generally have both the capabilities to adopt proxies in more far-flung conflicts and broader foreign policy and geopolitical interests that serve to motivate distant proxy support.
- **Ratio of capabilities:** This is a measure of the ratio of capabilities between the conflict state and potential sponsor. As this ratio increases, states may see less value in sponsoring a proxy against a particularly powerful state.<sup>20</sup> This reduction in value could be out of fear of retaliation and/or because policy aims are unlikely to be achieved via a proxy that faces long odds of success. Alternatively, weaker states may see VNSA sponsorship as a means of weakening their stronger rivals.
- **Colonial history:** Former colonial powers often display a particular interest in the conflicts occurring in their former colonies. This inter-

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<sup>18</sup> We used the natural logarithm of GDP in the analysis. See J. Bolt and J. L. van Zanden, "The Maddison Project: Collaborative Research on Historical National Accounts," *Economic History Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> For the time period in the analysis, this set of states includes the United States, the UK, France, the Soviet Union/Russia, and China.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Salehyan, 2010, pp. 493–515.

est may manifest in supporting incumbent governments or sponsoring VNSAs, as France has in some of its former colonial territories in Africa. We included an indicator for whether a potential sponsor is a former colonizer of the state experiencing civil conflict.

- **Alliance with potential sponsor:** This variable indicates whether a potential sponsor has a military alliance with the conflict state.<sup>21</sup>
- **Rivalry with potential sponsor:** States frequently support VNSAs challenging their rivals. We included an indicator for states that are coded as “strategic rivals” of the conflict state.<sup>22</sup>
- **Postrevolutionary states:** We included an indicator for whether a state has experienced a revolution within the previous ten years.<sup>23</sup> Post-revolutionary states may seek to export their revolutionary ideology or attempt to expand their influence and shape the regime types of states around them. These states should be especially likely to support VNSAs abroad.

### Factors Related to Dynamics Between Potential Sponsor and Actors Beyond the Conflict State

- **Balance of power between rivals:** This measure captures the balance of military capabilities between states classified as rivals. In a subset of the analyses below, we examine whether the balance of capabilities between rival states influences their propensity to support opposite sides of civil conflicts in states that are proximate to both rivals, civil conflicts between rivals that are both nonmajor powers, or civil conflicts that are proximate to a major power’s rival. For example, the latter category would treat the United States as a potential intervener in

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<sup>21</sup> Data are from the Correlates of War Formal Alliances Dataset (v4.1), 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Data are from William R. Thompson, “Identifying Rivals and Rivalries in World Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2001. States are classified as strategic rivals when they view “each other as (a) competitors, (b) the source of actual or latent threats that pose some possibility of becoming militarized, and (c) enemies” (Thompson, 2001, p. 560).

<sup>23</sup> Data are from Jeff D. Colgan and Jessica L. P. Weeks, “Revolution, Personalist Dictatorships, and International Conflict,” *International Organization*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 2015.

civil conflicts nearby Iran, in addition to regional rivals in the Middle East. Rivals may be more likely to find opportunities for conflict when they have similar capabilities.

- **Regional hegemony ratio:** This variable is defined as the ratio of capabilities between the first and second most capable states located within the distance threshold of the conflict state. In regions where one state has outsized military capabilities relative to its nearest competitor, that state may be able to exercise its influence over proxy support in nearby conflicts.
- **Potential sponsor's international economic integration:** Potential sponsors that trade intensively with other states may have more-convergent preferences over conflict management than states with few economic links. Ongoing conflicts can pose opportunity costs for these states. Integrated states may also develop common preferences over nontrade issues as a result of trade cooperation. For these reasons, integrated states may refrain from adopting proxies in conflicts, or, when they do adopt proxies, they may be more likely to do so in coordination with one another. This variable is defined as a potential sponsor's total trade with all other states nearby the conflict state as a fraction of its GDP. We used Correlates of War dyadic trade data to construct this variable.<sup>24</sup> For each major power, we calculated their integration only with states near the state experiencing conflict and not with other major powers.

Table 3.2 presents the above factors in terms of the framework presented in Chapter 2. Many factors relate to motivations surrounding geopolitical interests. Several factors use measures of state capability. These measures assess how states' decisions to engage in proxy warfare are influenced by the ability to coerce, regional balances of power, or their power relative to their rivals. Allies' and rivals' security can be strongly influenced by the outcomes of each others' civil conflicts. Other factors reflect opportunities for intervention. With their broader set of foreign policy interests, major powers may find more opportunities for supporting proxies.

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<sup>24</sup> Katherine Barbieri and Omar M. G. Omar Keshk, "Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set Codebook," Version 4.0, 2016.

TABLE 3.2

**Key Factors and Motivations and Opportunities for Intervention**

|                        | Motivations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Opportunities                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Geopolitical interests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict-state capabilities</li> <li>• Sponsor-state capabilities</li> <li>• Ongoing civil conflict</li> <li>• Capabilities ratio</li> <li>• High-intensity conflicts</li> <li>• Alliance with conflict state</li> <li>• Rivalry with conflict state</li> <li>• Power balance between rivals</li> <li>• Regional hegemony ratio</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major power status</li> </ul>                                                                                                                            |
| Economic interests     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oil rents in conflict state</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential sponsor's GDP</li> <li>• Potential sponsor's international economic integration</li> <li>• Economic integration with conflict state</li> </ul> |
| Domestic politics      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regime type</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | —                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Ideology and identity  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Postrevolutionary potential sponsor</li> <li>• Former colonial ties</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | —                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

We accounted for oil rents as a potential economic motivator of proxy support. The other economic factors capture opportunities. Integration between potential sponsors and conflict states may facilitate proxy support on behalf of the government or raise the costs of supporting VNSAs. Economic integration among potential sponsors may have a similar influence on opportunities for support by influencing their preferences over the outcomes of regional conflicts or by shaping their ability to coordinate over their policies. Wealthier states may be less cost-sensitive and therefore may find a larger set of opportunities for proxy support.

For domestic political motivations of proxy support, the analysis accounts for different configurations of regime type among potential sponsors and conflict states. For ideological and identity motivations, the analysis accounts for postrevolutionary regimes and colonial ties.

## Statistical Strategy

The tests in this chapter take the unit of analysis as the potential sponsor-conflict-side-year.<sup>25</sup> For example, Jordan as a potential sponsor on behalf of Lebanese rebels in 1975 would identify a row in the dataset. For conflicts identified in the ACD dataset, we developed criteria for the set of states that are potential sponsors in a given conflict. Given those criteria, which we discuss in more detail below, we statistically modeled the factors that are associated with their decision to adopt a proxy on a given side in each year that the conflict is ongoing. The outcome variable can take three values: no support, support the government, or support a rebel group.<sup>26</sup>

We defined the set of potential sponsors in a given conflict according to two criteria. The first is proximity. All else equal, nearby states are more likely to take interest in a civil conflict. Concerns about conflict contagion, such as flows of refugees, arms, or illicit trade; regional strategic competition; or cultural similarities are only some of the reasons why nearby states are the most likely proxy sponsors. We therefore included all states within a maximum distance of 950 kilometers to the conflict state in the set of potential sponsors.<sup>27</sup> The second criterion is military capabilities. We included

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<sup>25</sup> *Side* refers to either the rebel group or the government. Some tests have a slightly different unit of analysis. We discuss those instances in the results section below. We also considered a sponsor-conflict-side approach that would have omitted annual observations. Such an approach would have had the benefit of weighting all sponsor-conflict-side observations equally, rather than making longer conflicts more influential on the results. However, on net, we decided that incorporating annual variation would be of greater value. There is reason to think that sponsor motives often change over the course of the conflict. For example, interveners may begin as highly biased and later withdraw support, as in cases of superpower interventions toward the end of the Cold War, or may switch sides—e.g., Syria in Lebanon. Furthermore, variables at both the sponsor and regional/global levels can change significantly over the course of longer conflicts, and some interventions happen only later on in such conflicts. Using sponsor-conflict-year allows us to account for that variation.

<sup>26</sup> Note that if a state supports multiple rebel groups in a given year, proxy support is only coded once. Because the dependent variable can take three distinct values for each row in the dataset, we employed multinomial logistic regression. See Appendix A for more details on the estimation technique.

<sup>27</sup> Nils B. Weidmann, Doreen Kuse, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “The Geography of the International System: The Cshapes Dataset,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2010.

the set of major powers as defined above as potential sponsors in all conflicts during the period of analysis.<sup>28</sup>

For tests with three discrete outcomes, we employed multinomial logistic regression. This method estimates the effect of different factors on the odds that a potential sponsor takes one of three mutually exclusive actions: engage in no support, support the government, or support a VNSA. For outcomes that are binary, such as whether a conflict experiences proxy support for both sides in a given year, we employed logistic regression. Because unobservable characteristics influence individual conflicts in the sample, we clustered standard errors at the conflict level.<sup>29</sup> In most of the models, we examined results separately for the Cold War and post-Cold War periods.<sup>30</sup> During the Cold War, the U.S.-Soviet competition structured the intervention behavior of states in a variety of ways pertinent to the analysis. Some of the reasons the Cold War and post-Cold War periods differ can be incorporated into the statistical analysis and thus controlled for, including changes in the balance of power between leading states and the differing degrees of regional hegemony that resulted. For other differences between these two periods, however, we lack adequate data to properly reflect these factors in our models, such as the decline in ideological motivation that provided ready-made affinities between potential proxies and sponsors. Given these

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<sup>28</sup> We did consider an alternative statistical strategy that would not have imposed this distance criteria. By imposing a requirement on distance, only lifted for major powers, a small number of cases of minor-power proxy support are excluded from our analysis, most notably Cuban and East German support to proxy actors in sub-Saharan Africa during the Cold War. While these cases are potentially interesting, eliminating the distance requirement to include them would have massively inflated the number of observations in our models with thousands of clearly irrelevant dyads (e.g., Bolivia-Laos). We assessed that, given the small number of omitted cases, the costs to our statistical analysis of inflating the sample with irrelevant days would have outweighed any potential benefits. For more information on this issue and the rationale for using a more targeted set of potential cases, see Douglas Lemke and William Reed, "The Relevance of Politically Relevant Dyads," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Some factors affect observations—in this case, conflict-years—as a group and not just individually. This approach helps account for factors that are not observed in the data but lead to correlations between different observations of the same conflict.

<sup>30</sup> Models that pool observations across time periods together do so because of data limitations.

limitations, assessing our results separately across the two periods seemed the most prudent option.

## Results

### Characteristics of Potential State Sponsors

The first set of results focuses on characteristics of potential state sponsors. The goal is to identify which kinds of states support VNSAs and under what conditions. Following the categories discussed above, we further break down factors by (1) characteristics of potential sponsors' regime type, (2) the power and wealth of potential sponsors, and (3) characteristics of the relationship between potential sponsors and governments experiencing conflict. As discussed above, we also display results for the determinants of support for governments.

Table 3.3 displays a graphical summary of the results from these tests.<sup>31</sup> Among characteristics of potential sponsors, ***ongoing conflict is associated with the proxy support*** for VNSAs across both periods. States experiencing conflict are also associated with more government support after the Cold war. This finding may be a result of conflict contagion, whereby ongoing conflict gives rise to other, nearby civil conflicts, generating opportunities for proxy support. The regime type of potential sponsors does not appear as

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<sup>31</sup> The cells in the table are shaded according to the level of statistical significance. The darkest shades indicate  $p$  values  $< 0.01$ , medium shades indicate  $p < 0.05$ , and the lightest shades indicate  $p < 0.10$ . Cells with a diagonal shading indicate that the result is sensitive to the choice of modeling approach. In one approach, we split the sample by time period. In the other approach, we pooled observations from both periods and included interaction terms for key variables. We only shaded variables for which we included interaction terms in the models that pooled other observations together. Splitting the sample and including a time-period interaction term are two different approaches to estimate whether the effect of a variable changes across time periods. If a variable was statistically significant in only one of the two approaches to modeling time-varying effects, we included diagonal shading. For variables that did not have interaction terms in the pooled model, we did not indicate different results in Table 3.3. The coefficients on variables without interaction terms in the pooled model are not comparable to those in the split-sample model because only in the latter case does the coefficient represent an estimate that is time-period specific.

TABLE 3.3

### Summary of Results for Analyses of Characteristics of Potential State Sponsors

| Factor                                             | Cold War     | Post–Cold War | Cold War           | Post–Cold War |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
|                                                    | VNSA Support |               | Government Support |               |
| Sponsor characteristics                            |              |               |                    |               |
| Democratic potential sponsor                       | —            | —             | —                  | —             |
| Autocratic potential sponsor                       | —            | —             | —                  | Less likely   |
| Sponsor ongoing conflict                           | More likely  | More likely   | Less likely        | More likely   |
| Power and wealth measures                          |              |               |                    |               |
| Potential sponsor GDP per capita                   | —            | Less likely   | More likely        | Less likely   |
| Potential sponsor capabilities                     | More likely  | Less likely   | More likely        | More likely   |
| Relationship with conflict state                   |              |               |                    |               |
| Economic integration                               | —            | —             | —                  | —             |
| Conflict state: potential sponsor capability ratio | Less likely  | More likely   | More likely        | Less likely   |
| Colonial history with conflict state               | More likely  | —             | More likely        | More likely   |
| Alliance with conflict state                       | —            | —             | More likely        | More likely   |
| Rivalry with conflict state                        | More likely  | More likely   | —                  | —             |

NOTE: Darker shades indicate a more statistically significant relationship. The darkest shades indicate p values < 0.01, medium shades indicate p < 0.05, and the lightest shades indicate p < 0.10. Cells with — indicate no statistically significant relationship. Cells with diagonal stripes indicate that statistical significance is sensitive to the choice of modeling approach. We calculated variance inflation factors for each model to examine the degree of multicollinearity. None of the key factors in the table approach high (~ 10) scores on this factor, which would indicate potential issues with multicollinearity. See the technical appendix for the full set of results, including for control variables.

a significant factor, with the possible exception of autocratic states being less likely to engage in government support after the Cold War.

Results for potential sponsor capabilities suggest that *more powerful states were most likely to support both governments and VNSAs during the Cold War*. After the Cold War, state capability is significantly associated with support for governments and negatively associated with VNSA support, though there is more uncertainty around these results.<sup>32</sup> *Wealthier states were more likely to support governments during the Cold War, while in recent years less-wealthy states have been significantly more likely to support both VNSAs and governments*. Accordingly, wealthier states are less likely to engage in proxy support across the board after the Cold War. The result is more uncertain for the negative association between wealth and government support in the post-Cold War period, however. This result is reflected in the sharp decrease of U.S. support for VNSAs and in Iran's sharp increase in this support.<sup>33</sup> Other wealthy states, such as the UK and France, also saw a drop-off in their support for VNSAs. Former colonial powers were prone to adopt proxies in conflicts during the Cold War, on either side, but after the Cold War these states were significantly more likely to support only governments.

The next set of factors concerns dynamics between potential sponsors and the state experiencing civil conflict. *States with more military capabilities than potential state sponsors of their rebel groups were significantly less likely to see external support provided to those groups during the Cold War*. There is some evidence that this pattern reverses thereafter, with weaker states supporting rebel groups in stronger states, though the result is dependent upon modeling approach.<sup>34</sup> This post-Cold War pattern appears to be largely driven by weaker states, such as Pakistan supporting groups in India. The results with respect to government support are less certain. There is some evidence that stronger governments facing internal

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<sup>32</sup> We flagged uncertain results in our discussion where the result is dependent on modeling choice. See the footnote above on the multiple approaches to modeling differences across time periods.

<sup>33</sup> Note that results for GDP per capita are robust to the inclusion of an indicator for Iranian support.

<sup>34</sup> This is consistent with findings in San-Akca and Maoz, 2012.

conflict were more likely to receive support from weaker states during the Cold War and less likely thereafter.

As might be expected, *state allies were more likely to support one another both during and after the Cold War*. As would also be expected, *states were consistently more likely to support their rivals' internal challenges across both periods*. Common examples of this latter dynamic in the dataset include Arab states supporting VNSAs challenging Israel, Pakistan sponsoring groups in India, and different African states in the Great Lakes region cultivating ties with rebel groups in neighboring rivals.

The results in Table 3.3 do not suggest that variation along the autocratic-democratic dimension is significantly associated with patterns of VNSA support. *Revolutionary regimes do, however, display a strong tendency to engage in VNSA support*.<sup>35</sup> When these states engage in proxy conflict, they are over twice as likely to support VNSAs than governments.<sup>36</sup> Figure 3.1 displays how this behavior changes over time. Postrevolutionary states are significantly more likely to support VNSAs than governments, both in general and relative to nonrevolutionary states. Some of the states in post-revolutionary periods with the highest predicted likelihood of engaging in VNSA support include Sudan (22 actual instances of VNSA support), Iran (11), Pakistan (8), and Libya (2).

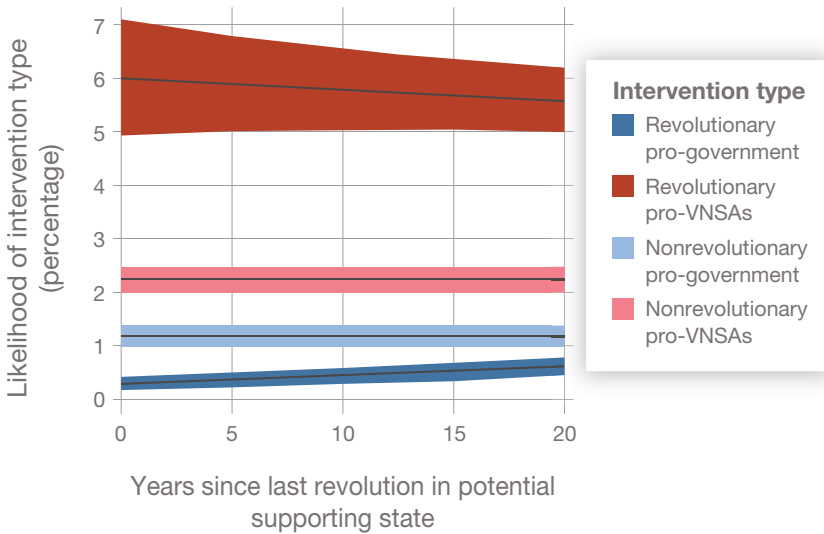
Figure 3.1 indicates that the propensity to support VNSAs over governments shrinks very slightly over time and that postrevolutionary states begin to “normalize” their proxy support behavior, though only the mild uptick in support for governments is statistically significant at conventional levels. The figure displays predictions from a model of which side a state supports in a civil conflict. The model accounts for decisions to provide no support, to support the government, or to support the VNSA challenging the government. The figure displays the percentage of cases in which the model predicts either government or VNSA support. The model’s predictions are made with some uncertainty, which is represented by the shaded areas in the figure.

<sup>35</sup> We did not find that postrevolutionary states were more likely to engage in any type of proxy support than non-postrevolutionary states were.

<sup>36</sup> See Figure A.1 in the technical appendix.

FIGURE 3.1

### Change in Postrevolutionary Proxy Support over Time



NOTE: The shaded areas represent 95-percent confidence intervals. Predictions for nonrevolutionary states come from a model that includes an indicator for whether a state is in a nonrevolutionary period. We estimated a separate model with the sample restricted to postrevolutionary states to derive predictions for years since the last revolution. See Appendix A for complete details.

The general trend in VNSA support seems to be downward, but this association is not statistically significant. The figure also displays the likelihood of proxy support for VNSAs and governments by *non*-postrevolutionary regimes to give a sense of the magnitude of the association of revolutions on proxy support. Postrevolutionary regimes appear more likely to support VNSAs than non-postrevolutionary states and less likely to support governments. As there is no revolution from which to measure the relationships, however, we cannot comment on any trend over time in nonrevolutionary states.

### Dynamics Between Potential State Sponsors

The previous section discussed characteristics of sponsors and how they help us understand which states seek out proxies in other states' civil con-

flicts. This section broadens the focus to dynamics *between* potential sponsors and their relations with other (third-party) states and other characteristics of a state's region that might make proxy support in intrastate conflicts more or less likely. States do not make proxy support decisions in a vacuum; they anticipate the reactions of other interested parties and inform their decisions based on proxy support that has already taken place. For example, it is difficult to understand trends in support for rebels in the recent civil war in Libya without accounting for the overlapping and competing interests of regional powers.

The results in this section fall under three categories: differences in capabilities between rivals and their proxy support decisions, how foreign policy differences between states influence choices to engage in balancing or bandwagoning, and how economic integration among potential sponsors influences their willingness to support governments or rebel groups.

Table 3.4 displays results for models that examine how capability differences between rival states influence proxy support. These models use a different outcome variable than those in the previous section. Here, the outcome is whether rival states support opposing sides in a given conflict in a given year. The purpose of these tests is to identify conditions when a civil conflict is most likely to draw foreign support on both sides. These conflicts tend to be the most intractable.<sup>37</sup> We employed logistic regression to analyze conflict years in which two states categorized as rivals support opposing sides. Rivals are included as potential sponsors in a conflict according to the same inclusion criteria discussed above: (1) Both rivals must be within the distance threshold of 950 km in relation to the state experiencing a conflict, or (2) a major power is included as a potential sponsor if it is engaged in a rivalry with a state nearby the conflict state.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 2006; and Anderson, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> While the use of this threshold excludes some notable instances of distant interventions by minor powers, like Cuba's interventions in Africa during the Cold War, this distance restriction is necessary to home in on characteristics of states that form the most likely set of potential supporters in a given conflict. For example, if we were to use a distance threshold of 10,000 km (on the order of Cuba's distance from Angola), the measure that we constructed of rivalries between states coded as being nearby the conflict state would incorporate Cuba's rivalries with Latin American states.

TABLE 3.4

**Summary of Results for Analyses of Dynamics Between Potential Sponsors**

| Factor                                    | Cold War         | Post–Cold War |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------|
|                                           | Opposing Support |               |
| Rival capability measures                 |                  |               |
| Balance of power between rivals           | Less likely      | —             |
| Balance of power between rivals (squared) | More likely      | —             |
| Regional hegemony ratio                   | More likely      | Less likely   |
| Major power status                        | More likely      | Less likely   |
| Potential sponsor capabilities            | Less likely      | More likely   |

NOTE: Darker shades indicate a more statistically significant relationship. Cells with — indicate no statistically significant relationship. See the technical appendix for the full set of results, including for control variables. Cells with diagonal stripes indicate that results are not robust to additional analysis. See Table A.4 in the appendix for details.

The *balance of power between rivals* variable displays a significant association with opposing proxy interventions during the Cold War, but this result is sensitive to how we construct the models, specifically how to account for the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Some research suggests that states closer in power levels tend to come into conflict with one another more often, but this does not appear to be the case with respect to conflict via proxies.<sup>39</sup> *Regional hegemony ratio* is associated with a greater incidence of rival support for opposing sides during the Cold War. This variable is defined as the ratio of capabilities between the first and second most capable states within the distance threshold. This measure is constructed separately for each country and each year to account for changes in neighboring state capabilities across time. Higher values of this variable indicate the presence of a nearby state with a stronger military advantage over other regional powers. For instance, during the Cold War, Cuba, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and the United States adopted proxies in El Salvador and Guatemala where the United States was a predominant regional power. Similarly, the United

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Reed, 2003, pp. 633–641.

States and the USSR engaged in a proxy war in Afghanistan, in the Soviet Union's backyard.

More generally, the United States and Soviet Union may have been less sensitive to the concerns of regional powers when choosing to adopt proxies across the globe given their superpower status. They also pursued proxies in each other's immediate region. When superpowers engaged in proxy support in regions with a high degree of hegemony, they may have done so *in spite of* or *because of* this hegemony: *in spite of*, in the sense that intervening in a hegemon's backyard may be a costly enterprise, or *because of*, in the sense that supporting a proxy nearby the rival superpower holds some potential to impose considerable costs on the adversary.

This is in contrast to the post-Cold War sample. The rivalry with the greatest incidence of proxy support to opposing parties is Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose competition has played out in a region that lacks a comparable nearby hegemon. This illustrates how, after the Cold War, proxy fights between rivals have been more likely to occur in regions without a clear regional hegemon than was the case during the Cold War, where regions with a regional hegemon were most likely to be the site of proxy support.

Since the end of the Cold War, competitive proxy support has become largely the province of nonmajor powers and is more likely to occur where there is greater contestation over the regional balance of power. ***Major power status is positively and significantly associated with competitive rival support during the Cold War, while the opposite holds in the following period.*** Major powers were more likely to become involved in competitive proxy support with their rivals during the Cold War and less likely thereafter. This is consistent with the nature of the intense rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War; the global nature of the competition served to motivate distant interventions by the superpowers and other major powers.

In contrast to the results for major power status, the variable for potential sponsor capabilities suggests that ***militarily stronger states are more likely to become involved in competitive proxy support with their rivals after the Cold War.*** While the strongest states frequently supported opposing sides (for example, China and the Soviet Union did so in 29 conflict-years in the dataset), there were many lesser powers that engaged in competitive proxy support during the Cold War, such as Libya and Egypt (12 such instances).

While the United States and the Soviet Union were the most prominent practitioners of competitive support, many weaker states engaged in competitive support during the Cold War.

After the Cold War, competitive support by middle powers has become more prominent. Iran and Saudi Arabia illustrate this dynamic, having supported opposite sides in 15 different conflict-years in the data. This result is also in part due to the increasing share of military capabilities held by states other than the United States and Soviet Union; recall that the military capability measures are the *share* of global capabilities held by a given state. While the United States has maintained a high level of global power, the collapse of the Soviet Union has, overall, led to a wider distribution of such power in the post-Cold War era.

Table 3.5 displays results from models that account for economic integration between potential sponsors and their propensity to support either governments or VNSAs. We built separate models for major and nonmajor power potential sponsors. Recall that the set of potential sponsors in all models include major powers and nearby states. By construction, major powers not based in the region will tend to conduct less of their trade with the set of states nearby the conflict in question given that states tend to trade more intensively with their immediate neighbors.<sup>40</sup> Major powers thus have lower scores on the economic integration variable than do nearby states.

The results indicate that ***nonmajor power states in more-integrated regions are less likely to engage in proxy support in general in the post-Cold War period.*** There are no significant associations between the integration measures and proxy support for major powers in either period or for nearby powers during the Cold War. The proxy-support-reducing association for nonmajor powers after the Cold War is more significant and pronounced with respect to VNSA support. Figure 3.2 displays the likelihood of support types across the range of the integration measure. The figure suggests that economic integration among nonmajor power states is associated with the reduction in the amount of proxy support in civil conflicts generally but that this association is strongest for rebel support. Economic ties between regional stakeholders may raise the opportunity costs of exac-

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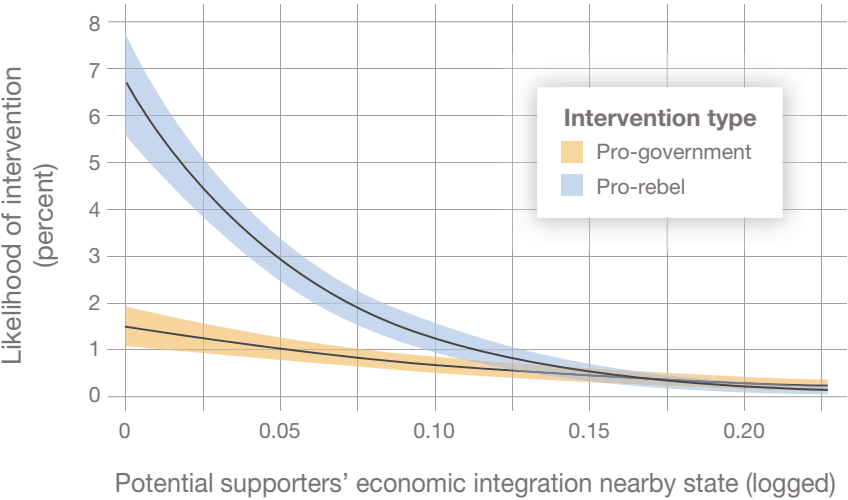
<sup>40</sup> Edward E. Leamer and James Levinsohn, "International Trade Theory: The Evidence," *Handbook of International Economics*, Vol. 3, 1995.

**TABLE 3.5**  
**Summary of Results of Analyses of Economic Integration Between Potential Sponsors**

| Factor                                  | Cold War     | Post–Cold War | Cold War           | Post–Cold War |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
|                                         | VNSA Support |               | Government Support |               |
| Major powers                            |              |               |                    |               |
| Economic integration with nearby states | —            | —             | —                  | —             |
| Nonmajor powers                         |              |               |                    |               |
| Economic integration with nearby states | —            | Less likely   | —                  | Less likely   |

NOTE: Darker shades indicate a more statistically significant relationship. Cells with — indicate no statistically significant relationship. See the technical appendix, specifically Tables A.5 and A.6, for the full set of results, including for control variables.

**FIGURE 3.2**  
**Relationship Between Neighboring State Economic Interests and Proxy Support**



NOTE: Shaded regions represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

erbing conflicts by engaging in proxy support. Given that governments are almost always the more powerful party in a civil conflict, propping up rebel groups is likely to perpetuate hostilities and further disrupt regional economic exchange.

## Conclusion

This chapter presented statistical analysis of the determinants of proxy support in civil conflicts. We compiled information on instances of proxy support from several comprehensive datasets for the years 1946 through 2010. Building on the extensive literature on external support in internal armed conflicts, we identified a number of hypotheses present in existing scholarship that had not yet been systematically tested. We grouped these hypotheses into a number of categories: conflict-state factors, potential sponsor factors, and dynamics between potential state sponsors. The geopolitical context in which states decide to adopt proxies is an important part of our analysis. In addition to the contextual factors for which we accounted, we analyzed how the determinants of state support for proxies changed during and after the Cold War.

The primary findings related to VNSA support, summarized in Table 3.6, suggest that VNSA support looks different in recent years from the proxy wars of the Cold War era. Less-wealthy states were more likely to support VNSAs in the post-Cold War period, though there is tentative evidence that less-wealthy states were more likely to support both government and VNSAs in general after the Cold War. Potential sponsors with greater military capabilities may have been less likely to engage in VNSA support in the post-Cold War period. More-capable states are strongly associated with government support in Cold War conflicts, though this result is less certain in recent years.

Proxy support for VNSAs may become more likely when the conflict state is more powerful than potential sponsors, though this result is largely driven by support for groups in India. Rivalry, however, is robustly associated with support for VNSAs. Pakistan's support for various groups in India suggests that rivalry is a strong motivator in spite of, or potentially because

TABLE 3.6

**Summary of Results from Quantitative Analyses**

| Proxy Support to VNSAs More Likely with/by:                                            | Proxy Support to VNSAs Less Likely with/by:                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| More-capable states (Cold War)                                                         | Nonmajor powers economically integrated with neighbors (post–Cold War) |
| Less-wealthy states (post–Cold War)                                                    |                                                                        |
| Rivalry with state                                                                     |                                                                        |
| States experiencing conflict                                                           |                                                                        |
| States with revolutionary regimes                                                      |                                                                        |
| Regions that lack a hegemonic power                                                    |                                                                        |
| States with relatively weaker capabilities than potential target state (post–Cold War) |                                                                        |

of, a power balance unfavorable to the supporting state. Postrevolutionary states are particularly prone to sponsor VNSAs.

Certain dynamics between potential sponsors are closely associated with proxy wars. A subset of our analyses addressed the conditions under which rivals intervene on opposing sides of civil wars. The analysis suggests that such proxy wars are now more likely to materialize in regions where there is not a clear hegemonic power, as is the case in the Middle East. Major powers are less likely to become involved in such wars as compared to the Cold War period. The results also suggest that civil conflicts in regions with closer economic integration are less likely to see proxy support across the board. The analysis ends in 2010, so additional research is required to account for any shifts in these patterns over the last decade. U.S. and Russian support for opposing sides in Syria or the war in Ukraine may be harbingers of a reversal of some of the trends that this chapter identifies.



# Russia's Use of Proxy Warfare

## Introduction

Since the 1917 October Revolution, both the Soviet government and its Russian successor have supported foreign governments and VNSAs as proxies. Moscow's approach to proxy warfare, however, has evolved considerably over the past century. The country therefore offers numerous opportunities to explore how different constellations of factors influenced the decision to use proxy warfare as a tool of strategic competition or not. The discontinuities in government in Moscow also provide some insight into how long it takes to develop a substantial proxy warfare capability.

Starting in the 1920s, the USSR developed an initial proxy warfare capability, but it often bungled this capability in practice. Initial successes in China and Spain degenerated into debacles because of strategic missteps. After World War II and especially after the death of Stalin, the Soviet Union expanded its use of proxy warfare. During the Khrushchev era, the USSR developed the ability to support proxies on a global scale and provide them with state-of-the-art military capabilities. The emergence of independently minded Communist governments, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Castro's Cuba, increasingly led the Soviet Union to support VNSAs to maintain leadership of the world Communist movement and to win such favors as permission to set up remote military bases.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Piero Gleijeses, "Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975–1988," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2006, pp. 98–146; Jeremy Friedman, "Soviet Policy in the Developing World and the Chinese Challenge in the 1960s," *Cold War History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2010.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia rapidly developed an ability to support the breakaway movements in Georgia and Moldova that settled into what became known as the *frozen conflicts*.<sup>2</sup> Yeltsin's government leveraged these to retain a military presence in potentially recalcitrant former Soviet republics. After the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, Putin's Russia became much more aggressive about leveraging VNSAs to pressure neighboring governments and discourage Western partnerships with them, most dramatically in the War in Donbas beginning in 2014. That conflict and the subsequent Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war highlighted an additional phenomenon: the use of private military contractors (PMCs) either as proxies or as a means of supporting proxies.<sup>3</sup> Much about these groups remains mysterious, as PMCs are illegal under Russian law, but Russian mercenaries have been seen in Libya and Syria as well as in the Central African Republic (CAR), Venezuela, and other countries far from Russia.

Although the current Russian government is very different from the Bolshevik regime, there are some recurring themes in the rationales and means by which both supported proxies. In general, Moscow has employed proxies as a tool for securing and retaining geostrategic advantage. Unlike Maoist China during the 1960s, even at the height of Soviet leaders' revolutionary ardor, they hesitated to support proxies solely for reasons of ideological affinity.<sup>4</sup> Desperate for Western technology and capital, Moscow often limited support for Communist parties and national liberation movements abroad lest they offend foreign governments. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow's support to proxies has also evinced a preoccupation with geostrategic advantage, albeit with a heavy emphasis on ensuring Russian predominance in the former Soviet space as opposed to exporting Communist ideology.

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<sup>2</sup> B. George Hewitt, *Discordant Neighbours: A Reassessment of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian Conflicts*, Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Marten, 2019, pp. 181–204.

<sup>4</sup> On Chinese support to proxies, see Chapter 6 of this report.

A second recurring theme is the often reactive and ad hoc nature of the Kremlin's support to proxies. Even in the heyday of the Comintern, an international organization expressly devoted to the cultivation of proxies, other organizations often planned and implemented intervention in foreign civil wars.<sup>5</sup> In the USSR and post-Soviet Russia alike, various leaders and institutions have advocated incompatible positions on supporting proxies, sometimes leading to self-contradictory policies.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the definition of *success* applied by institutions or even individuals was variable and sometimes evolved considerably over time, which challenged Moscow's ability to derive long-term strategic gains from proxy warfare.

Both the Soviet Union and the current Russian government have historically preferred to devote most of the resources they invest in proxies to national governments or aspiring governments in preference to insurgent groups or other nonstate actors. But particularly during the Soviet period, the Kremlin made modest investments in numerous nonstate proxies. While these probably received a total investment far less than that sent to state clients, numerically these "speculative investments" constituted the majority of Soviet proxies. Individuals such as Ho Chi Min and Broz Tito started out as recipients of this modest aid and rose to become national leaders themselves.

The Chinese and Yugoslav examples highlight a final theme in Moscow's experience with proxy warfare: Moscow's short-term gains from proxy successes have frequently turned into costly strategic vulnerabilities in the longer term. Soviet and Russian clients (those that have or are receiving support) should not be conflated with puppets: On more than one occasion, recipients of aid have used it to attack Moscow's interests and personnel.<sup>7</sup> It

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Kowalsky, "The Soviet Union and the International Brigades, 1936–1939," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Alexei Arbatov, "Russian Security Interests and Dilemmas: An Agenda for the Future," in Alexei Arbatov, Abram Chayes, Antonia Handler Chayes, and Lara Olson, eds., *Managing Conflict in the Former Soviet Union: Russian and American Perspectives*, Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997, pp. 411–458.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, by the Chinese Nationalists during the Chinese Civil War, and the Somalis during the conflict over Ogaden in the 1970s. CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "Sub-Saharan Africa: A Growing Soviet Military Presence," January 1985.

remains to be seen whether this pattern will repeat itself with Russia's current proxy interventions.

## A Brief Chronology of Soviet/Russian Use of Proxy Warfare

### Comintern Era, 1919 to Mid-1940s

In the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, Bolshevik leaders disagreed about whether they should place their hopes in an “internationalist” strategy aiming to spark world revolution or attempt to consolidate their rule at home first. The former view found concrete expression in the Third International or Comintern, founded in 1919.<sup>8</sup> In theory, this organization was supposed to coordinate and plan all Soviet support to proxies, particularly foreign communist parties. For a variety of personal and pragmatic reasons, however, Stalin's regime only half-heartedly supported the Comintern. Stalin rejected the internationalism championed by his rivals such as Leon Trotsky in favor of building “socialism in one country,” and attempts to secure foreign technology and investment necessitated that Soviet foreign policy avoid offending Bourgeois powers, such as Great Britain. Moreover, the dubious record of the Comintern inspired little confidence in its ability to sow revolution. Instead, Stalin pragmatically exploited the Comintern as a tool for actualizing his geostrategy, which aimed to develop the USSR into a modern military power in anticipation of another World War.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese and Spanish civil wars afforded opportunities to support proxies against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. While concrete successes in these conflicts showed the USSR had a not-inconsiderable proxy warfare capability (especially in terms of materiel transfers), this capability was not exploited to maximum effect, in part due to Stalin's concerns about relationships with other powers, such as Britain and France. Stalin's “pragmatic” geostrategy saw its ultimate realization in the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which the

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<sup>8</sup> James W. Hulse, *The Forming of the Communist International*, Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1964.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Volume I: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928*, New York: Penguin, 2014, p. 550.

dictator believed would provide both time and strategic depth, improving Moscow's prospects in a future war with Germany.

Against the backdrop of the Russian civil war, representatives from 34 Communist and allied parties met in Moscow and founded the Third International (better known as the Communist International or Comintern) in March 1919.<sup>10</sup> The Comintern openly swore that its goal was to spread Communism to every corner of the world and bring about world revolution by whatever means necessary, legal or extralegal. With benefit of hindsight, the Communist International was a failure, at least judged by its declared goals. In some respects, this outcome is unsurprising, because, for an ostensibly conspiratorial organization, the Comintern was far too explicit about its methods and goals. The organization, equipping, and instigation of armed uprisings and civil wars counted among these activities. In a few countries, most notably China, the Comintern attained some transient successes.<sup>11</sup> Post-1991 archival revelations, however, show that many senior Soviet leaders regarded the Comintern with contempt and that many of them were dubious of its internationalist objectives. For reasons both ideological and otherwise, Soviet elites disliked and distrusted the Comintern, which was astonishingly ill-run even in comparison with other nascent Soviet bureaucracies and was suspected to be a hotbed of foreign spies.<sup>12</sup> Compared with their immediate concern over eliminating domestic enemies, fostering Communism abroad was a secondary and subsidiary goal, and one to which relatively minor resources were applied. When the time came to spread revolution, critical tasks were usually entrusted to the more competent military and civilian special services, even when the Comintern formally had the lead role. By the time of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), Stalin's view of the Comintern appears to have been instrumental and cynical: a useful means for attracting and managing usable human and institutional

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<sup>10</sup> Hulse, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce A. Elleman, "Soviet Diplomacy and the First United Front in China," *Modern China*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Kotkin, 2014, pp. 442–443.

assets among co-ideologists abroad, but not as an organization that could be entrusted with anything important.<sup>13</sup>

The Comintern's disastrous record in China exemplifies the contradictions in its efforts to support proxies in foreign civil wars. In the mid-1920s, China seemed like the Comintern's big success story, as well as proof that the USSR could provision material support to neighboring countries for political effect. Although its machinations to foment revolution in countries like Estonia and Germany had failed, in China the Comintern managed to cultivate the tiny CCP into a meaningful political force with tens of thousands of members. But expecting greater influence from working with the much more numerous Goumindong (Nationalists), Moscow authorities via the Comintern insisted that the CCP partner with the Nationalists with the aim of eventually subverting them.<sup>14</sup> Rather than play along with these plans, Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalists elected to turn on their former allies, resulting in the 1927 Shanghai massacre. Trying to preserve the alliance with the Nationalists, the Comintern ordered Communists in Shanghai not to fight, even while Chiang Kai-Shek's forces were slaughtering them. Chinese Communists never forgot this incident, which led to the outbreak of the Chinese civil war a few months later.<sup>15</sup> The Comintern still played a significant role in the USSR's relations with the Chinese Communists, who desperately needed Soviet arms and supplies to continue the fight. But Stalin expected the Chinese Communists to prosecute their desperate struggle for survival in accordance with Soviet geopolitical needs, most significantly by insisting on a truce with the Nationalists to counter Japan in 1937.<sup>16</sup> When they finally triumphed over the Nationalists in 1949, Mao Tse-tung and other Chinese Communist leaders had good reason to believe that the USSR had not only refrained from supporting their cause as it could have, but also that

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<sup>13</sup> Kowalsky, 2006; Stephane Courtois and Jean-Louis Panne, "The Shadow of the NKVD in Spain," in Stephane Courtois and Mark Kramer, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 333–352.

<sup>14</sup> Elleman, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Kotkin, 2014, pp. 629–630.

<sup>16</sup> Michael M. Sheng, "Mao, Stalin, and the Formation of the Anti-Japanese United Front: 1935–37," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 129, 1992.

the incompetent machinations of the Comintern had actually harmed them in many cases.

Soviet involvement in the Spanish Civil War proved that the USSR could provide sizable and sophisticated support to actors outside its immediate region, even if the Comintern's record in that conflict was, if anything, even less flattering than that in China. Fascists and some bourgeois liberals perceived a sinister Stalinist plot to Bolshevize Iberia in the USSR's support to the Spanish Republic, but when a window of opportunity appeared to attempt a Communist takeover, the Soviet dictator let it pass—in part because of the danger of alienating Britain and France when Moscow might need them to counter fascist expansionism.<sup>17</sup> Stalin seems to have had other, more idiosyncratic, reasons for intervening in Spain, in part to combat the rival ideology of fascism and gain combat experience with Soviet military technology, but also the perception that Spain might somehow turn into a political base for his hated rival Leon Trotsky. Officially, the Comintern coordinated “fraternal” support to the Spanish Republic, recruiting foreign volunteers for the famous “International Brigades.”<sup>18</sup> In practice, however, the Comintern acted primarily as a useful source of legitimacy and human cannon fodder, with serious responsibilities entrusted to the Narodny Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs; NKVD) and military intelligence instead.<sup>19</sup> The minuscule NKVD detail sent to Spain proved highly effective at infiltrating and destroying POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista [the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification]), an anti-Stalinist Communist Party that Stalin considered “Trotskyist.” The Soviet intervention managed to export Stalinist terror in miniature to Spain.<sup>20</sup> Despite subsequent romanticized portrayals of them and instances of genuine heroism, the military record of the Comintern's International Brigades against the fascists proved uneven, and the various

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Volume II: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941*, New York: Penguin, 2017, p. 406.

<sup>18</sup> Kowalsky, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> V. I. Mikhailenko, “New Facts About Soviet Military Assistance in Spain [Novye fakty o sovetskoj voennoj pomoshchi v Ispanii],” *Ural'skii vestnik mezhdunarodnykh issledovaniï*, No. 6, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, London: Harvill Secker, 1938.

left-wing factions engaged in deadly struggles with each other even as Hitler and Mussolini lavished support on Franco.<sup>21</sup> While at one point in the conflict Communist forces were strong enough to take over the antifascist movement, after the ostensible “Trotskyite” threat had been vanquished, Stalin lost interest in Spain.<sup>22</sup>

While its attempts to foment and direct foreign proxy wars generally ended in failure or worse, the Comintern produced some long-term successes for Communism with its comparatively minor investments in the rising generation of foreign revolutionary leaders. Leftist revolutionaries such as Ho Chi Minh, Deng Xiaoping, and Josip Broz Tito all spent time in the Soviet Union as students at such Comintern schools as Moscow Sun Yat-sen University, the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West, and the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. But even these successes were tempered by the number of similarly prominent anti-Communist leaders who had also received Soviet tutelage, most prominently Chiang Kai-Shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo but also Ku Cheng-kang.

## Cominform Era, Mid-1940s to Mid-1950s

Despite catastrophic defeats at the beginning of the Nazi invasion, the outcome of World War II actualized Stalin’s vision of world war as the engine of additional revolutions. Particularly after Communists consolidated their rule in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the Soviet Union now led a community of “fraternal socialist countries,” which were represented by the Comintern’s spiritual successor organization, the Cominform.<sup>23</sup> Several of these new regimes, most importantly Tito’s Yugoslavia, pressured Moscow to support Communist insurrections. Skeptical because of conflicting imperatives to uphold agreements with wartime allies, Stalin bought into these demands only half-heartedly, withholding large-scale support from the Chinese Communists and only authorizing indirect support via the East

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<sup>21</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War*, New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Kotkin, 2017, p. 431.

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2009, p. 73.

European satellites for the Greek Communists.<sup>24</sup> Stalin alienated Tito and sowed distrust on the part of Chinese Communist leaders that would blossom into the later Sino-Soviet split.<sup>25</sup> But in other cases such as the 1946 Iran Crisis, Stalin cultivated local proxies to put pressure on foreign governments for desired military and economic concessions.<sup>26</sup> Stalin's approach to geostrategy survived into the nuclear age, but it continued to backfire in practice. Moscow supported Kim Il-sung's regime in North Korea as a proxy, but the Western reaction to the 1950 invasion of the south created the kind of confrontation with the United States that Stalin had aimed to avoid. Once again, Soviet capabilities to support proxies in material terms did not translate into unambiguous victories for the USSR's interests.

The Communists attained their greatest success in Central Europe, the 1948 seizure of power in Czechoslovakia, in part via credible threats of proxy warfare. Unlike Hungary and the rest of the future Warsaw Pact, the USSR had withdrawn its forces from Czechoslovakia before the end of 1945 as part of an agreement with the United States. As a consequence, the Communist takeover could not rely on the direct threat of Soviet military force. After a series of increasingly disappointing election results, the Czechoslovak Communist Party attempted to use its role in the country's democratically elected government to seize control over the country's security services and police apparatus. This sparked a government crisis in early 1948 that the Communists, with implicit Soviet support, leveraged into a successful coup.<sup>27</sup> The Czech Communists set up armed Action Committees and trade union militias that went forth to paralyze those parts of the Czechoslovak government not already under their control. President Edvard Beneš faced both the threat of a civil war with these domestic Communists and the

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<sup>24</sup> Donggil Kim, "Stalin and the Chinese Civil War," *Cold War History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2010; Albert Resis, "The Churchill-Stalin Secret 'Percentages' Agreement on the Balkans, Moscow, October 1944," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 2, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Dieter Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China 1945–1950: The Arduous Road to the Alliance*, London: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> N. M. Mamedova, *Iran and the Second World War: Collected Articles [Iran i vtoraiia mirovaia voina: sbornik statei]*, Moscow: RAN In-t vostokovedeniia, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Myant, "New Research on February 1948 in Czechoslovakia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 10, 2008.

ominous possibility of direct Soviet military intervention on their behalf.<sup>28</sup> Beneš elected to capitulate and allow the Communists to consolidate power rather than test whether Stalin would drive his country into civil war.<sup>29</sup> Moscow attained the benefits of a proxy war without the costs: Czechoslovakia remained Communist until the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

In other cases, the USSR attempted a similar strategy of threatening other nations with the prospect of proxy war and/or invasion in the hope of receiving concessions but retreated rather than making good on these threats. The 1946 Iran Crisis provides a clear example. The Soviet Union took the opportunity afforded by its wartime occupation of Iran to cultivate two short-lived proxy states on that nation's territory, the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and the Azerbaijan People's Government. The Red Army remained in Iran after the deadline that the Allies had agreed upon for withdrawal, and the Soviets demanded concessions while signaling the possibility of a large-scale intervention. But under diplomatic pressure from the United States, Stalin decided to back off, abandoning his local proxies in the process. Without Soviet support, the two new separatist states rapidly collapsed, and Tehran reasserted its control over their territory.<sup>30</sup>

While the Truman administration saw Soviet influence behind every Communist insurgency, in actuality Stalin was downright stingy toward many of them, whether due to geostrategic considerations or concerns about possible ideological reliability. He withheld support from the Communists in the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) for both reasons. In his infamous October 1944 “percentages agreement” with Winston Churchill, Stalin acknowledged Greece as part of Britain’s “sphere of influence” in exchange for Soviet domination of Bulgaria and Romania.<sup>31</sup> While traditional historiography de-emphasized the importance of Soviet aid to the Greek Communists, recent studies reveal a pattern repeated throughout the postwar era: regional Communist governments driving events further than Moscow wanted to

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<sup>28</sup> Igor Lukes, “The 1948 Coup d’État in Prague Through the Eyes of the American Embassy,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Lukes, 2011; Myant, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Mamedova, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> Resis, 1978, pp. 368–387.

go. Yugoslavia and Albania, as well as the other nascent satellites, desired robust support to the Greek Communists, in part because they feared that the failure of the Greek insurgency might imperil their own regimes. Stalin, by contrast, appears to have always been half-hearted on the issue, approving support to the Greeks after some prodding. But when the Soviet dictator became fed up with Tito's overly independent foreign policy, it placed the Greek Communists in an untenable position: Substantially dependent upon Tito for aid, they still felt compelled to side with Moscow lest they be tarred as ideologically untouchable Titoists. The Tito-Stalin split also led Tito to try to accommodate Western interests, not least of which by curtailing his support for the Greek Communists.<sup>32</sup>

### Adventurist Era, Mid-1950s to Late 1960s

Despite his repudiation of Stalinism in the 1956 "Secret Speech," Nikita Khrushchev retained many important aspects of his predecessor's geostrategy, most importantly its core assumption that maintaining the military security of the Soviet Union was the most important way to ensure the ultimate triumph of Communism. Like Stalin, Khrushchev believed that alliances of convenience with non-Communists could serve these ends, but he emphasized support to "wars of national liberation" pursued by VNSAs.<sup>33</sup> While such nation-state security partners as Nasser's Egypt and Castro's Cuba received the bulk of the resources in absolute terms, the USSR also provided modest support to a much larger number of VNSAs.<sup>34</sup> A risk-taker compared with both Stalin and Brezhnev, Khrushchev invested in the USSR's growing force-projection capability, then used it to attempt several

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<sup>32</sup> John O. Iatrides, "Revolution or Self-Defense? Communist Goals, Strategy, and Tactics in the Greek Civil War," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2005, p. 33; Nikos Marantzidis, "The Greek Civil War (1944–1949) and the International Communist System," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2013; A. A. Kalinin, "The Greek Conflict in the Context of the Establishment of the Bipolar System, 1944–53 [Grecheskii konflikt v kontekste stanovleniia bipoliarnoi sistemy (1945–53 gg.)]," 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Orville A. Anderson, "Summary of Khrushchev's Speech January 6, 1961," *Air Power Historian*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1963, pp. 109–110.

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Shubin, "Unsung Heroes: The Soviet Military and the Liberation of Southern Africa," *Cold War History*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2007, pp. 251–262.

“adventurist” interventions, most dramatically in Cuba in 1962.<sup>35</sup> Increasingly challenged by other Communists for leadership of the world revolutionary movement, Khrushchev supported liberation movements both for pragmatic reasons (such as securing overseas bases) and reputational ones. Despite reversals such as that in Congo, Khrushchev achieved major successes with this policy as well, such as the de facto failure of the Baghdad Pact and securing Cuba as a Communist foothold in the Western hemisphere. His policies also contained the seeds of imperial overreach, however, that helped undermine Soviet strength in subsequent decades.<sup>36</sup>

When the Politburo removed Nikita Khrushchev from power in 1964, one of the charges levied against him was that he had committed “adventurism” in his foreign policy.<sup>37</sup> While not as erratic as sometimes perceived, compared with other Soviet leaders, including Stalin, Khrushchev displayed a much greater tolerance for risk. His greatest foreign policy gamble, deploying nuclear missiles to Cuba, is generally regarded as the most dangerous moment of the nuclear age. Khrushchev’s inclination to involve the USSR in foreign conflicts extended to more-mundane contexts, such as support to foreign proxies. Khrushchev’s choice of these proxies may appear surprising, as many of them were not Communists and declared that they had no intention of adopting the Soviet Union’s Bolshevik ideology.

Even in the early years of the Comintern, Soviet leaders had a complicated relationship with non-Communist radical nationalists from what would later be dubbed the “Third World.” Lenin declared that imperialism was “the highest stage of capitalism,” with the implication that the breakdown of colonialism in places such as India and China might prove the harbinger of world revolution. While paying some lip service to this thinking on occasion, Stalin generally allowed geopolitical maneuvering toward established great powers to take precedence over supporting national liberation movements. Khrushchev took the opposite view: He believed that supporting non-Communists in “wars of national liberation” was both good

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<sup>35</sup> Sergo Mikoyan, *The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis: Castro, Mikoyan, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Missiles of November*, Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Zubok, 2009, pp. 130–131.

<sup>37</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2003, pp. 354, 487.

for Soviet geopolitical interests and also consistent with Communist ideology.<sup>38</sup> Like so many of Khrushchev's other policies, his cultivation of proxies scored some spectacular initial successes only to backfire in the long run.

Khrushchev's opportunistic approach to cultivating radical nationalist leaders as proxies also appeared in the 1960 Congo Crisis. Western suspicions to the contrary, Patrice Lumumba, the prime minister of the newly independent country, was not a Communist but rather a pan-Africanist who supported a neutralist position in the Cold War. When a Belgian-backed secessionist movement broke out in the resource-rich Katanga province, Lumumba appealed to the United States and United Nations for assistance, only to be rebuffed. Lacking other options, he turned to the Soviet Union, which promptly dispatched aid and advisers. This step convinced many Westerners that Lumumba was really a Soviet asset but proved inadequate to prop up his government. Lumumba's rivals arrested him, expelled the Soviet advisers, and executed him in early 1961.<sup>39</sup> Promising relationships with Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Guinea's Sékou Touré lasted longer but also fizzled out after a few years.<sup>40</sup>

Khrushchev also cultivated other institutions to build bridges with the developing world, such as People's Friendship University in Moscow. This tendency also extended to new mechanisms for cultivating and training foreign proxies to supplant those of the defunct Comintern. Study of these remains in its relative infancy, but memoir and interview accounts suggest recruits were located by regional liberation movements and sent to the USSR for military and ideological instruction. These could be characterized as minor, "speculative" investments on the part of the Soviet government. Compared with military aid to Egypt and Cuba, they probably represented minuscule amounts of resources in absolute terms but a very large fraction of the recipients' overall weapons and other supplies.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Anderson, 1963.

<sup>39</sup> Alessandro Iandolo, "Imbalance of Power: The Soviet Union and the Congo Crisis, 1960–1961," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Zubok, 2009; Muehlenbeck, 2008, pp. 69–95.

<sup>41</sup> Jocelyn Alexander, and JoAnn McGregor, "African Soldiers in the USSR: Oral Histories of ZAPU Intelligence Cadres' Soviet Training, 1964–1979," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2017; Shubin, 2007.

## Interventionist Era, Late 1960s to 1991

The final decades of Soviet power saw the apex of its power-projection capabilities and, relatedly, the high-water mark for the USSR's support to proxies.<sup>42</sup> In part this was because Moscow now commanded greater absolute resources and force-projection capability than in prior decades, but it also resulted from greater, more-diverse pressures to support proxy interventions.<sup>43</sup> In addition to the long-standing goals of improving the USSR's geostrategic position, rivalry with the PRC and pressure from Communist partner countries such as Cuba and Vietnam also impelled the Soviet Union to support proxies.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, decolonization presented additional opportunities for Leftist insurrections, particularly in Africa.<sup>45</sup> As before, however, support to nation-state proxies represented a much greater investment than that to VNSAs. Much Soviet support to the latter appears to have been driven by Cuban zeal for Third World revolutionary movements and a determination to stay at the forefront of the Communist world.<sup>46</sup> The ill-conceived Soviet intervention in Afghanistan proved a disastrous misstep, attracting widespread condemnation and devolving into a quagmire.<sup>47</sup> Soviet capability to support proxies was very extensive, yet, for reasons of either poor strategy or poor luck, this did not work out to the advantage of the USSR. The interventions in both Angola and particularly Afghanistan soured Western opinion and undermined the hard-won gains of détente.

While Leonid Brezhnev and his successors mostly refrained from forging new partnerships with non-Communists akin to Khrushchev's with the Arab Nationalists, they continued those they had inherited from him. As

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<sup>42</sup> Bruce D. Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts: Soviet Arms and Diplomacy in Local Wars, 1945–1980*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

<sup>43</sup> Gleijeses, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Candace Sobers, "Independence, Intervention, and Internationalism: Angola and the International System, 1974–1975," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2019; David Castaño, "'A Practical Test in the Détente': International Support for the Socialist Party in the Portuguese Revolution (1974–1975)," *Cold War History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Gleijeses, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Gen. Alexander Lyakhovsky, *The Tragedy and Valor of the Afghani*, Moscow: GPI "Iskon," 1995.

a consequence, the USSR's involvement in Egypt continued until Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet advisers, and its presence in Syria has continued until the present day. In addition to indirect and direct involvement in the Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars and especially the 1970 War of Attrition, continued Soviet support to Egypt and Syria led to some Soviet involvement with proxies in the region, such as in the latter stages of the civil war in North Yemen.<sup>48</sup> Curiously enough, the sole Middle Eastern country to adopt Marxism-Leninism, South Yemen, seems to have done so largely on local initiative. The Soviets had a lingering stake in North Yemen from their involvement in the civil war there and failed to commit to the South for several years, but the USSR did support South Yemen in its 1972 border war with the North.<sup>49</sup>

Communist victory in Vietnam led to a belief among many within the socialist bloc that conditions were favorable for the expansion of their ideology in the developing world. The U.S. failure to intervene to prevent the fall of Saigon showed that Washington had apparently lost its appetite to block Communist expansion by military means, and Vietnam showed that a Marxist-Leninist regime could triumph despite the determined effort of a superpower to prevent it. Fidel Castro, in particular, was eager to build on these developments to spread like-minded revolutionary regimes. But North Vietnamese victory also eliminated one of the few remaining points of agreement between Moscow and Beijing. Increasingly, the Third World became a battleground between Soviet and Maoist revolutionary regimes, in addition to Communism and capitalism.<sup>50</sup>

These dynamics all played out in the Angolan Civil War (1975–2002), which started after the new Portuguese government established by the Carnation Revolution transferred authority in Angola to three local independence movements.<sup>51</sup> Relations between these swiftly broke down, and

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<sup>48</sup> CIA, "The Soviet Military Presence in Egypt," February 1975; Jesse Ferris, "Soviet Support for Egypt's Intervention in Yemen, 1962–1963," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Fall 2008.

<sup>49</sup> F. Gregory Gause, *Saudi-Yemeni Relations: Domestic Structures and Foreign Influence*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

<sup>50</sup> Friedman, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Sobers, 2019.

they declared two rival governments. One of these, the People's Republic of Angola, was controlled by the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), which was supported by the USSR and its allies. Its two rivals, União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA; National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) and the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (National Liberation Front of Angola), were ideologically ambiguous: Both had received significant support from the PRC during the colonial period, and UNITA had originally been Maoist but rebranded itself as an anticommunist organization in the mid-1970s. Apartheid South Africa intervened on behalf of UNITA and the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola, while, in turn, Cuba sent thousands of troops with large-scale Soviet assistance to support the MPLA, including logistics support to the Cubans, massive transfers of materiel to the MPLA itself, and the deployment of thousands of Soviet advisers. With this assistance, the MPLA managed to drive the South Africans out of Angola, in part thanks to opposition in Congress to U.S. involvement there.<sup>52</sup>

Similar dynamics played out just a few years later in Ethiopia, where Cuba provided the bulk of foreign forces involved in the Ogaden War, but with enormous flows of materiel and more than a thousand advisers from the Soviet Union itself.

While it became fashionable in this era to call the Cubans "the Gurkhas of the Soviet empire," the analogy is not apt.<sup>53</sup> Archival documents from the former socialist countries reveal that Havana took a primary role motivating and implementing the intervention policy in Angola and in several other proxy wars in which the Kremlin would otherwise have had only a token involvement, if that.<sup>54</sup> As a consequence, it is somewhat difficult to ascertain exactly who was the proxy in the relationship; the tail was sometimes wagging the dog.

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<sup>52</sup> Gleijeses, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Senator D. Patrick Moynihan introduced this phrase in the mid-1970s. He later elaborated that "it was a brilliant move. . . . The RAND Corporation at the peak of its performance could not have invented a Third World weapons system the equal of the Cuban army" (Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious Than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World*, New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1994, p. 157).

<sup>54</sup> Gleijeses, 2006.

The scale and authenticity of Soviet support to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in their struggle against the Contras is even harder to ascertain. While there were thousands of Soviet advisers in Angola, the number in Nicaragua was tiny, possibly only a few dozen, with the foreign adviser presence almost totally dominated by the Cubans.<sup>55</sup> The USSR provided various kinds of military equipment, but Cubans trained the Sandinistas in how to use it. Once again, the primary impetus and direction for the intervention seems to have come from Havana rather than Moscow.

### Frozen Conflicts Era, 1991–2008

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the unsettled state of Russian defense and foreign policy precluded the emergence of a coherent stance toward potential foreign proxies for several years. With the collapse of Communism, ideological goals for proxy support disappeared. Instead, Russia stumbled into a different kind of proxy relationship within the former Soviet space. Different factions in the nascent independent Russian government pursued different, often incompatible goals in different ways. Russian influence over former Soviet military units in other parts of the former USSR granted Moscow *de facto* kingmaker status, but Russian leaders disagreed about how best to use this ability to selectively support and/or shield breakaway movements in several former Soviet republics. Local military commanders sometimes acted on their own initiative, further confusing matters. Often these commanders and their troops had close relations with the surrounding population and acted either in self-defense or to forestall what they perceived as an unacceptable outcome.<sup>56</sup>

Russian-brokered peace agreements turned these into “frozen conflicts” that gave the Russians license to maintain a military presence in Abkhazia,

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<sup>55</sup> CIA, “Soviet Presence and Influence, 1982,” April 22, 1982.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, by preventing the absorption of majority-Russian Transnistria into Moldova and thence, it was feared at the time, into an expanded Romania (Edward Ozhiganov, “The Republic of Moldova: Transdnier and the 14th Army,” in Alexei Arbatov, Abram Chayes, Antonia Handler Chayes, and Lara Olson, eds., *Managing Conflict in the Former Soviet Union: Russian and American Perspectives*, Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997, pp. 145–209).

South Ossetia, and Transnistria.<sup>57</sup> Liberals and institutions eager for better relations with the West (such as the Foreign Ministry) fretted that supporting these breakaway movements might backfire. Involvement in these conflicts outside of Russia's borders distracted attention and resources from desperately needed internal reforms and complicated attempts to secure economic aid from Western governments. Moreover, supporting separatists in the "near abroad" set an unfavorable precedent for breakaway movements within the Russian Federation, as well as fueling chaos in neighboring states that stoked cross-border crime. But Eurasianists and the Ministry of Defense saw these breakaway movements as a vital tool for Russian security and establishing a post-Soviet regional order.<sup>58</sup> Supporting the separatists helped Moscow pressure Georgia to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and established the precedent that Russia would be the adjudicator of disputes between former Soviet republics. The civil war in Tajikistan, meanwhile, impelled some more conventional proxy interventions.<sup>59</sup> Russia intervened directly on behalf of the Tajik government, but it also supported some VNSAs, such as the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, when this seemed conducive to its interests. While the Russian military was a dim shadow of its former Soviet self, it still enjoyed vast overmatch relative to other former Soviet republics or regional VNSAs.

After the dissolution of the USSR, the Belozheva Accords established the CIS between Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. The leaders of these three states initially planned on having joint armed forces, and they appointed an interim supreme military commander for the CIS.<sup>60</sup> But within a few

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<sup>57</sup> Marius Vahl and Michael Emerson, "Moldova and the Transnistrian Conflict," *JEMIE*, Vol. 1, 2004, p. 7; Hewitt, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Arbatov, 1997, pp. 413–426.

<sup>59</sup> Rashidovna Alieva Rafoatkxon, "Establishment and Development of International Relations Between Tajikistan and the Russian Federation (End of 20th–Beginning of 21st Centuries) [Stanovlenie i razvitie mezhgosudarstvennykh otnoshenii Respublika Tadjikistana i Rossiiskoi Federatsii (konets XX—nachalo XXI vv.)]," undated.

<sup>60</sup> CIS, "Reshenie Soveta glav gosudarstv Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv o naznachanii Glavkomandiushchego Ob"edinennymi Vooruzhennymi Silami Sodruzhestva [Resolution of the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States on the Naming of the Commander of the Unified Armed Forces of the Commonwealth]," undated.

months they began establishing independent armed forces without officially repudiating the joint arrangement. Furthermore, many former Soviet military units were located outside the CIS, not just in other former Soviet republics but even in such places as Germany. The unclear chain of command posed pressing problems, because conflicts were already underway in several of these areas. Local commanders often looked to Moscow for guidance, but they sometimes improvised on the spot, and lax discipline, along with widespread defections, made for erratic policy toward separatists. In the process, a proxy war policy emerged largely by accident, but it eventually came to serve the interests of Russia, and Boris Yeltsin in particular.

By 1993, Yeltsin had a clearer vision for Russia's role in the post-Soviet regional order. Russia saw itself as the leader of the post-Soviet era, including a role as the essential and undisputed kingmaker in disputes between, and within, other former Soviet republics. The keys to this arrangement were two Russian-dominated organizations, the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).<sup>61</sup> Officially, Russia portrayed itself as a neutral and impartial mediator respectful of the sovereignty of all the other members.<sup>62</sup> The reality that Moscow controlled military forces throughout most of the former USSR gave it leverage to dictate settlements to and demand concessions from these ostensible peers, and the frozen conflicts gave Yeltsin the opportunity to establish this precedent. But Yeltsin also sweetened the deal by providing incentives such as transfers of military hardware to the newly independent governments.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, disputes between different institutional constituencies about the frozen conflicts continued, even if these were less contentious than during the chaos of 1992–1993.

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<sup>61</sup> CSTO, "From the Treaty to the Organization: Collective Security Treaty Organization 2002–2019 [Ot Dogovora k Organizatsii]," webpage, undated.

<sup>62</sup> In cases such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia actually played the role of an indispensable neutral arbiter, in part because not taking a side has served Moscow's interests very well.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Blank, "Challenging the New World Order: The Arms Transfer Policies of the Russian Republic," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1993; Soren Rinder Bollerup and Christian Dons Christensen, *Nationalism in Eastern Europe. Causes and Consequences of the National Revivals and Conflicts in the Late-Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, Basingtoke, UK: Macmillan, 1997, Chapter 14.

The separatist insurgencies in which Russia intervened during 1992–1993 differed greatly from one another. In Transnistria, a separatist enclave dominated by ethnic Russians attempted to secede from newly independent Moldova, in part due to anxieties about possible unification with Romania. The Russian military blocked the Moldovan attempt to establish control over the territory and retained its base there.<sup>64</sup> Militarily, the Moldavians were in a hopeless position because of the presence of the Russian 14th Army, and Yeltsin was largely able to dictate the terms of the ceasefire in July 1992. This agreement established a formally neutral Joint Control Commission but also granted Russia the right to retain military forces in Transnistria.<sup>65</sup> While the Russian troop presence fell considerably by the end of the 1990s, this frozen conflict has remained frozen ever since.

Conditions in Georgia proved more challenging. This Caucasian nation was the only former Soviet republic outside the three Baltic republics that declined to join the CIS and CSTO. It also faced a dizzying array of internal unrest, including two separatist movements and two rival governments in Tbilisi.<sup>66</sup> South Ossetia broke out in revolt before the collapse of the USSR, but fighting there became much more intense in the spring of 1992. Eduard Shevardnadze, who was preoccupied with his struggle with his ousted rival Zviad Gamasakhurdia for control of Georgia, accepted a Russian-negotiated ceasefire in June 1992 that established a Joint Control Commission and an associated Joint Peacekeeping Force with Russian, South Ossetian, and Georgian participation.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, Russia still possessed several military bases in Georgia, most significantly in the breakaway region of Abkhazia. As in Transnistria, the Russians played both sides, professing neutrality while sometimes abetting or acting on behalf of the Abkhazian separatists. The conflation of the struggle over Abkhazia with the Shevardnadze-

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<sup>64</sup> Bollerup and Christensen, 1997.

<sup>65</sup> Vahl, 2004, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Hewitt, 2013.

<sup>67</sup> International Crisis Group, “Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia,” *Europe Report N°159*, November 26, 2004.

Gamasakhurdia rivalry further increased Russian leverage.<sup>68</sup> This maintained pressure on Shevardnadze to join the CIS and acknowledge the Russian-dominated regional order. In 1995, the Georgian president agreed to lease military bases on his territory to Russia for the next 25 years.<sup>69</sup>

Unlike the conflicts in Transnistria and Georgia, the civil war in Tajikistan was directly related to immediate threats to Russia itself. This bitter conflict was the most destructive of the post-1991 wars in the former Soviet Union, laying waste to Tajikistan and displacing a large fraction of its population. The United Tajik Opposition that opposed the post-Soviet government in that country comprised both democratic reformists and Islamists, some of whom were directly connected with the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. The prospect of an Islamist regime in Tajikistan alarmed not just Moscow but also the governments of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, all of whom were fearful of Islamist influence in their region. Moscow also had to contend with Islamist support to insurgencies in the North Caucasus as well as narcotics smuggling into its territory. Russia retained the 201st Military Base in Dushanbe, which was reinforced with personnel from Russia and fought with government forces to retake the capital at the end of 1992.<sup>70</sup> To impede the flow of insurgents and supplies across the Afghan-Tajik border, Russia also sent border troops to Tajikistan. Aiming to reduce the ability of the Tajik insurgents to use Afghanistan as a base of operations, Russia started to support proxies inside Afghanistan, namely the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (better known as the Northern Alliance).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Alexandros Petersen, "The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A Forgotten Conflict," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2008.

<sup>69</sup> Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: the Case of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 84.

<sup>70</sup> Rafoatkhon, undated.

<sup>71</sup> James Risen, "Russians Are Back in Afghanistan, Aiding Rebels," *New York Times*, July 27, 1998.

## Reassertion Era, 2008 to Early 2022

After the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia in 2003–2004, Vladimir Putin’s Russia took a more assertive approach to governments in its “near abroad.” In 2008, Russia intervened on behalf of its South Ossetian proxies, establishing the precedent that a frozen conflict could turn into a pretext for Russian intervention.<sup>72</sup> The conflict in Donbas that followed the Russian annexation of Crimea demonstrated an ability to cultivate clandestine proxies. The Donetsk and Luhansk separatists were suspected by many to be Russian agents, and, in any case, better-than-expected Ukrainian military performance against the separatists sparked a significant intervention by regular Russian military forces posing as volunteers.<sup>73</sup> The Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war demonstrated vastly improved abilities for force projection and, with them, greater capability to support proxies. This included symbolic demonstrations of support, such as hosting Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar on Russia’s aircraft carrier en route to Syria, as well as supporting air campaigns in the Middle East.<sup>74</sup> Along with greater ability, Putin’s Russia apparently sees reputational and practical advantages to its more-proactive support to proxies. Simply returning to the power-projection game advertises Moscow’s resurgence as a force to be reckoned with, while proxy support can also buy goodwill that translates into political, military, or economic benefits for Russia. A phenomenon that has grown in prominence in recent years is the use of Russian PMCs.<sup>75</sup> While formally illegal, these groups are clearly tolerated and, in some cases, subsidized by the Russian state. Although they seem to acquit themselves badly when entrusted with difficult military tasks, mercenaries offer a number of potential advantages. First, their activities are largely self-financing, since the PMCs typically profit off of business opportunities in the countries in which they are

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<sup>72</sup> Michael Kofman, “The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War,” *War on the Rocks*, August 17, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, and Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1498-A, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Marten, 2019.

employed. Second, they reduce the potential for domestic political blow-back from Russian adventurism, because their activities are not officially acknowledged and any overseas deaths are not publicized. Finally, as the confrontation between one such PMC and U.S. forces in eastern Syria suggest, the use of PMCs reduces the likelihood of conflict escalation. In all of these ways, PMCs provide Moscow with many of the same advantages of working solely through local proxies. Because of the close relations between these PMCs and the “power ministries” in Moscow and the higher level of military training of such personnel relative to the countries in which they operate, they are likely more controllable and more effective than working entirely through non-Russian proxies. PMCs may thus represent an important addition to Russia’s strategic toolkit, even if the bulk of the manpower in conflicts such as Syria or Libya continues to be provided by local actors.

While nominally fought on behalf of the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, it is debatable whether the 2008 Russo-Georgian War should be regarded as a proxy conflict per se. Saakashvili attempted to take the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, attacking the Russian peacekeeping force there in the process. The conflict that followed was mostly, but not exclusively, an interstate war between Russia and Georgia.<sup>76</sup> While Russian forces displayed some embarrassing shortcomings, they still routed Saakashvili’s army within a few days and made it clear that they could take Tbilisi if they wished. But the conflict was very important in its implications for Russian proxy involvement elsewhere. It established the precedent that Russia would intervene directly on behalf of its proxies if intervention appeared advantageous, even at the risk of alienating Western powers and other former Soviet states. In this context, Russian proxy engagement appeared much more ominous and politically potent than before.

The increasing opacity of Russian security decisionmaking makes it difficult to ascertain the motives for Moscow’s recent proxy interventions or the criteria by which Kremlin leaders consider them successes or failures. Aggressive as their policy may appear, Russian officials seem to regard it as a proportional reaction to hostile Western powers. This was the theme of Valery Gerasimov’s notorious 2013 speech characterizing what

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<sup>76</sup> Ruslan Pukhov, *The Tanks of August*, Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2010.

would become known as the Gerasimov doctrine.<sup>77</sup> Gerasimov sought not to describe Russian doctrine but rather to explain Western actions in the Arab Spring. The relative importance of measures short of war in international conflict, including support to proxies, according to Gerasimov, was increasing—and Russia needed to adapt.<sup>78</sup>

In the Donbas conflict (2014 to early 2022), Moscow demonstrated a willingness to cultivate or even invent proxies when it appeared advantageous. The separatist movements in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria antedated the dissolution of the USSR, but the spontaneous emergence of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic in the aftermath of the Russian seizure of Crimea was a sudden development. The abortive uprising in Odessa also suggested external attempts to foment unrest in Ukraine. Many in Ukraine and the West suspected that all of these developments were inventions of the Russian security services rather than organic uprisings.<sup>79</sup> Reports on the separatists suggested a large admixture of adventurers from other parts of the former USSR with an unclear relationship to the active Russian military and security services.<sup>80</sup> Starting a civil war in Ukraine distracted the new government in Kyiv and created a point of leverage the Kremlin could exploit to attempt to extract desired concessions, such as the federalization of Ukraine.

This gambit soon went seriously awry, however. The Ukrainian military proved more adept than anticipated against the irregular forces fielded by the separatists, placing the Russians in the position of either abandoning them to their fate or undertaking a substantial intervention on their behalf. Putin chose the latter, with thousands of Russian troops entering the conflict as ostensible volunteers while Moscow tried to maintain a veneer of plausi-

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<sup>77</sup> The coiner of this phrase later apologized for creating it and declared that “the ‘Gerasimov doctrine’ was never meant to mean anything, and it doesn’t. It’s time to move past it” (Mark Galeotti, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2018).

<sup>78</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in Prognostication [Tsennost’ nauki v predvedenii],” *Voenno-promyshlennyyi kur’er*, February 26, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> S. Shuster, “Exclusive: Meet the Pro-Russian Separatists of Eastern Ukraine,” *Time*, April 23, 2014.

<sup>80</sup> Kofman et al., 2017.

ble deniability.<sup>81</sup> The shootdown of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 by a SA-11 air-to-surface missile located in rebel-held territory on July 17, 2014, further alienated foreign public opinion, foreclosing the possibility that Russia could escape international condemnation and sanctions for its involvement in eastern Ukraine. The Ukraine conflict took a dramatic turn in February 2022, when a large-scale, overt Russian invasion turned the conflict into a more traditional interstate war, albeit one in which the United States and its allies have provided extensive support to Ukraine. While this large-scale conflict is still ongoing at the time of writing (summer 2022), the analysis herein focuses exclusively on the 2014–early 2022 portion of the Donbas conflict preceding Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The ongoing civil war in Libya may prove to be a pioneering example of future Russian proxy interventions beyond the “near abroad.” Unlike Syria, with which Moscow had long-standing historical investment, including a military presence, post-Qaddafi Libya is comparatively unfamiliar territory for Putin's Russia. While Russia clearly covets the opportunities afforded by this resource-rich, strategically located country, different interest groups disagree about how it should attempt to secure them. Russian support to Khalifa Haftar, Commander of the Libyan National Army, is by far the most visible. The Russian military is rumored to have provided assistance to Haftar, possibly in cooperation with the Egyptians, and the general was honored with a visit to the Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* during its visit to the Mediterranean to support the intervention in Syria. But while the Russian military favors Haftar, other parts of the Russian government would prefer to work with the rival United Nations–recognized Tripoli government, and Russia has provided some support to them as well. The Russian Foreign Ministry is reported to favor a negotiated settlement between participants in the conflict, while some powerful individual Russians would prefer to side with the Tripoli government. While definite information is lacking, it is probable that these interest groups have different objectives: for instance, the Foreign Ministry likely aspires to maximize Russian diplomatic influence with Mediterranean countries such as Italy and France, while the military places greater importance on the possibility

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<sup>81</sup> Kofman, et al., 2017; Igor Sutyagin, “Russian Forces in Ukraine.” *RUSI Briefing Paper*, No. 9, 2015.

of gaining a foothold in Africa, and others covet lucrative resource concessions.<sup>82</sup> Playing the various sides against each other could be an effective hedging strategy for both local and international influence. The Tripoli government claimed in late 2019 that 600–800 Russian mercenaries like those spotted in Syria were engaged in combat against them.<sup>83</sup>

Russian mercenaries have also been spotted in other countries, such as Sudan, Venezuela, Mozambique, and the CAR. Press reports usually associate these with Wagner Group, but even if the individuals in these countries formerly worked for Wagner, they may have other employers at present. In Sudan and the CAR, the mercenaries provided military training for local forces as well as security for Russian investments. In the CAR, the military training is provided under the aegis of a United Nations resolution to combat Islamist militants, and the mercenaries supposedly guard President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Much of what Russian PMCs do in developing nations seems to involve securing current or potential investments for either the Russian government or individual stakeholders. The much-discussed Russian mercenary deployment to Venezuela, for instance, is reported to have simply guarded Rosneft buildings; in the CAR, they guard mines operated by a firm linked to Evgeny Prigozhin.<sup>84</sup>

## Analysis: Why and How the USSR/Russia Supported Proxies

### Why Moscow Supported Proxies

Geopolitical and economic factors initially limited the Soviet pursuit of proxy warfare, largely overcoming potential ideological motivations to do so. While Lenin and other Bolsheviks hoped in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution that their example would spark imitators in

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<sup>82</sup> Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, pp. 14–15.

<sup>83</sup> Maggie Michael, “Libyan Officials Collect Evidence of Russian Fighters in War,” Associated Press, December 5, 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Tim Lister, Sebastian Shukla, and Clarissa Ward, “Putin’s Private Army,” CNN, August 2018.

other, more-developed countries and bring about world revolution, within a few years it became apparent that their pioneering socialist state would have to coexist with more-advanced Bourgeois powers. Moreover, the Allied intervention on behalf of the Whites in the Russian Civil War proved that Leninism's capitalist adversaries might attempt to snuff it out by military means. Lenin's successors, most importantly Joseph Stalin, concluded that ensuring the survival of the Soviet regime was the most important means for furthering the cause of Communism. Moreover, the Russian revolutionary experience convinced Stalin that "war was the mother of revolutions" and that great-power wars, which Marxist-Leninist ideology deemed inevitable, would therefore be the catalyst of the next round of revolutions. Soviet geostrategy, and the role of proxies in it, built logically atop this core assumption.<sup>85</sup> The USSR needed military power to deter or defeat attacks by advanced foreign militaries, but acquiring the relevant capital necessitated partnering with hostile foreign governments. At the same time, Soviet leaders had by no means abandoned the ultimate goal of world revolution; they simply acknowledged the reality that this remained a goal for the indefinite future and took what they considered pragmatic steps to work toward it.

While ideology helped frame Moscow's perceptions of threats emanating from capitalist countries and its long-term geopolitical objectives, in the shorter term Moscow frequently subordinated any desire to "export" Communist revolution to its perceived geostrategic needs. In fact, Moscow's self-appointed role as leader of the international Communist movement was often in tension with its pragmatic and sometimes imperialist geostrategy.<sup>86</sup> To demonstrate its support for socialist revolutions, the USSR needed to support revolutionaries, but this support often alienated Western governments that Moscow needed to avoid offending for its overall geostrategy.<sup>87</sup> Inconsistent Soviet behavior toward potential and actual proxies therefore made sense from the standpoint of Bolshevik leaders. While the USSR provided some support to foreign revolutionaries and other VNSAs via insti-

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<sup>85</sup> Kotkin, 2014, p. 550.

<sup>86</sup> Zubok, 2009.

<sup>87</sup> Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy 1917–1991*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992.

tutions such as the Comintern, most of its foreign support was provided to governments.

While it shares the USSR's preference to devote the bulk of investment to state proxies rather than VNSAs, post-Soviet Russia tends to use different kinds of proxies for different kinds of purposes. Without the burden of Marxist-Leninist ideology, post-1991 policy toward proxies has been both more pragmatic and more flexible. Even so, there was tension between a desire for Russia to act like "a normal country" in order to integrate into the post-Cold War international order and its geopolitical motivations to maintain its dominance over the former Soviet republics in its "near abroad."<sup>88</sup> Russian proxies in Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia provided a useful means of balancing these two objectives prior to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Moscow portrayed itself as the neutral, responsible mediator in regional disputes, while also exploiting the frozen conflicts to maintain leverage over other former Soviet republics. Perceived Western indifference to Russian security needs and the emergence of more explicitly anti-Russian governments in the color revolutions impelled a reconsideration of this policy. By 2008, the Russian government had apparently decided that it was more important to be taken seriously by the West than to try to maintain Western favor by adhering to its rules. The later seizure of Crimea, clandestine intervention in eastern Ukraine, and involvement in the Middle East (and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Africa and in Venezuela) have made this strategic choice even more stark.

Moscow's motivations have shifted over time, as has the balance that Moscow has drawn between competing priorities. Historically, however, geopolitical objectives have played the strongest role in motivating Russian and Soviet use of proxies. Ideological factors have certainly played a role as well, but normally a supporting one, nudging Moscow toward action when the geostrategic risks appear low and inflating Russian decisionmakers' perceptions of foreign threats. In contrast, economic factors, in particular the need to retain access to foreign capital and technology, have historically tended to act as restraints on Moscow's use of proxy warfare. While

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<sup>88</sup> Sharyl Cross, "Russia and NATO Toward the Twenty-First Century: Conflicts and Peacekeeping in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2002.

not the focus of this study, Russia's widespread use of PMCs and its aggression in Ukraine in 2022 may suggest a shift in Moscow's calculus about the economic consequences of proxy warfare in recent years so that economic factors have comparatively limited influence on decisions that Moscow regards as affecting vital national interests. However, such conclusions are preliminary and require further study. Meanwhile, domestic political factors historically appear to have played a relatively minor role in Russian and Soviet decisions to engage in proxy warfare (although they may have played a larger role in the actual execution of these wars). Perhaps nowhere was this more apparent than in Stalin's marginalization of the organization initially established to support VNSAs, the Comintern.

Ironically, although geopolitical factors appeared to be the primary motives behind Moscow's use of proxy warfare, it is far from clear that such conflicts actually advanced Moscow's geopolitical objectives. The Soviet Union's most important short-term successes, the use of proxies to create Communist governments in China and Yugoslavia, ultimately led to setbacks as both of these countries resisted Moscow's claims to leadership within the Communist world. Similarly, while post-Soviet Russia has used proxies to short-term success in Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere, its foreign adventurism has helped to diplomatically and strategically isolate Russia.

## Building the Capacity to Support Proxies

Historically, the Soviet Union and Russia have been able to develop a nominal proxy support capability in the space of a few years, with the ability to support proxies in broader regions and globally requiring years or decades more to establish. During the 1920s, Soviet assistance to the CCP helped cultivate that organization into a significant player in the country's politics. From its founding with just 50 members in mid-1921, the CCP grew in power and influence to the point that Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalists felt the need by 1927 to wage a war to destroy it.<sup>89</sup> Even though the Chinese Communists felt (accurately) that Moscow often did not have their best interests at heart and much of the USSR's advice to the CCP proved strategically questionable, the CCP's survival and eventual triumph in the Chinese Civil War proved

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<sup>89</sup> Kotkin, 2014, pp. 629–630.

that the USSR could nurture powerful VNSAs and instrumentalize them in pursuit of its perceived security interests.<sup>90</sup> That said, the record of Soviet support to VNSAs was marred by many failures, not just from the standpoint of those proxies but also of the Soviet patrons.

As part of its more assertive foreign policy during the decade prior to its 2022 war in Ukraine, Moscow had developed and used a proxy war capability that was able to sustain conflicts within the former Soviet Union on a substantial scale as well as project power well outside the borders of the former USSR. The Donbas conflict beginning in 2014 continued on a larger scale and for a much longer period than those conflicts in Transnistria and South Ossetia in the early 1990s. In addition to its support to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, Russian forces have begun to make their appearance in countries such as Libya. This power-projection capability had probably atrophied prior to the recapitalization of the Russian military in the early 2010s. Compared with its indifferent (if successful) performance in Georgia in 2008, the campaign in Syria proved that Russia can conduct a successful military intervention far from its borders.<sup>91</sup> The long-term effects of the 2022 Ukraine conflict on this capability, however, remain to be seen.

Meanwhile, the emergence of PMCs provides Moscow with a cost-effective tool for supporting proxies at limited risk and cost. PMC organizations required only a few years to emerge as a usable instrument for Russian decisionmakers. First sighted in 2013, within a few years they were playing a significant role in Russia's proxy wars in Ukraine in Syria. While embarrassing incidents demonstrated the risks of entrusting risky or complicated missions to potentially unreliable PMCs, in the last few years they have been employed farther abroad in less-challenging roles, such as providing training and security in Africa.

## Conclusion

Over the course of the past century, the Soviet Union and Russia cultivated, and then demonstrated, significant capabilities to sponsor foreign prox-

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<sup>90</sup> Kim, 2017, pp. 84–114.

<sup>91</sup> Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

ies. This ability was generally used in support of geopolitical interests, but often in an ad hoc manner and to contradictory effect. Short-term successes themselves often planted the seeds of longer-term problems. Ideological factors did play a role, particularly in the opportunities they presented to provide support to receptive communist or leftist groups in the developing world. Economic factors appear to primarily have served historically to restrain proxy warfare by the Soviet Union, because, particularly under Stalin, the risks of disrupting trade and investment with the West were only rarely considered worth the potential gains from supporting proxy warfare.

Contemporary Russian proxy support prior to the outbreak of large-scale conflict in Ukraine in 2022 demonstrated some parallels to that of the Soviet Union, but its means and methods differed considerably. The network of ideologically aligned Communist parties and related organizations that undergirded Soviet proxy interventions lacks a present-day counterpart. But post-Soviet Russia's lack of ideological commitment also provides flexibility, and Moscow has shown itself able to use proxy warfare to pursue its geopolitical interests by exploiting tools that the Soviet Union would not, such as PMCs. Russian successes in the Middle East show that Russia can be a force to be reckoned with even when it is far from its traditional sphere of influence. Yet, it remains to be seen how Russia's large-scale conflict with Ukraine beginning in 2022 will both illustrate and impact Russian capabilities in this regard over the long term.



# China's Use of Proxy Warfare

## Introduction

The CCP began supporting communist rebel groups even before winning its own civil war, and from the 1950s through the 1980s it supported Maoist and other insurgents across the globe. While most of this activity was centered in East Asia, groups in Africa and Latin America also received training and some material support from Beijing throughout this period. The CCP was a socialist revolutionary party, and supporting other revolutionary parties was both a duty and an opportunity to push forward a movement that would, in turn, support the CCP. China's international security interests also affected the CCP's decisions regarding aid to rebels, especially after the late 1970s. By the 1990s, the CCP leadership came to believe that a world war involving China was unlikely and that the best way to secure China's future was through economic development and integration with the West, not world revolution to topple Beijing's enemies. In this chapter, we will examine the factors that drove the CCP to support insurgents, the factors that led it to stop, and the ways in which it provided such support.<sup>1</sup> We also examine how long it took China to become proficient in proxy warfare, especially when the proxies were distant from China.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that one of China's most extensive use of proxies, its support of North Korea before its direct intervention in that war, is considered primarily an interstate war and thus is outside of the scope of this report.

## A Brief Chronology of Chinese Use of Proxy Warfare

### How and Why China Decided to Support Violent Nonstate Actors, 1940s–1950s

The CCP began as a VNSA that enjoyed foreign support, and CCP support for other VNSAs began before the founding of the PRC.<sup>2</sup> In 1946, the Guomindang military pushed the first regiment of the Chinese communist's Southern Guangdong People's Force into Vietnam, where it remained until 1949. While sheltering in Vietnam, the first regiment helped train Vietminh army officers and cadres and recruited a 1,000-person self-defense force from among the overseas Chinese living in Vietnam that was later absorbed into the Vietminh army.<sup>3</sup> These actions were mostly taken at the initiative of local officials, as the central leadership of the CCP remained focused on defeating the Guomindang government until 1949.<sup>4</sup>

As it became increasingly clear that the CCP would defeat the Guomindang and rule China, the CCP central leadership began to turn more attention to supporting other Communist parties in Asia. This effort grew in part out of ideological and normative concerns. As a socialist party that had recently succeeded in throwing off the yokes of colonialism and capitalism, the CCP felt a moral imperative to help other communist parties to do so.<sup>5</sup> Such action helped validate China in its self-proclaimed identity as the center of world revolution and a source of winning strategies for socialists in colonial Asia.<sup>6</sup> In Southeast Asia, this newfound moral imperative for the

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Sheng, "The Triumph of Internationalism: CCP-Moscow Relations Before 1949," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, January 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, pp. 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> Qiang, 2000, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, "Leadership Transfer in the Asian Revolution: Mao Zedong and the Asian Cominform," *Cold War History*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2014, pp. 197–201.

<sup>6</sup> Qiang, 2000, p. 22.

CCP to fulfill its duties as an internationalist socialist party was reinforced by China's traditionally paternalist attitude toward states in this region.<sup>7</sup>

Supporting communist insurgencies across Asia also helped the CCP to preserve its regime in China. In the early 1950s, Mao Zedong and the CCP believed that world war between the capitalists and communists was inevitable and that the Chinese revolution and broader East Asian revolution were mutually reinforcing phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Any government that came to power in a China-sponsored revolution would likely be friendly toward Beijing, an especially important consideration in regions such as Southeast Asia that represented possible avenues of invasion into China itself.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that while both ideology and China's national interest (as seen through the lens of Communist theories of class struggle and international relations) pushed Beijing to support socialist insurgents in most states, China's moral duty as a member of the socialist camp sometimes went against its national interest, usually resulting in reduced support for local Maoists. In Myanmar, the U Nu government maintained strict neutrality, and the CCP refrained from providing major military assistance to the Burmese communists for fear that doing so would push U Nu to accept aid and perhaps even troops from the West, endangering China.<sup>10</sup>

Prior to its victory over the Guomindang, there were relatively few delegates from Asian communist parties in China, and the CCP had only sporadic contact with them.<sup>11</sup> After the civil war, representatives began to pour into China from Communist parties across the region seeking training and material support. This wave of foreign delegates overwhelmed the CCP's United Front department (the CCP organization responsible for relations with groups allied to the CCP both within China and abroad), and in 1951 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China formed a new

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<sup>7</sup> Stanislaw Mysicka, "Chinese Support for Communist Insurgencies in Southeast Asia During the Cold War," *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2015, pp. 212–213; Qiang, 2000, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Mysicka, 2015, p. 213; Qiang, 2000, pp. 20–21.

<sup>9</sup> Qiang, 2000, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Bertil Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Shen and Xia, 2014, pp. 202–204.

organization to handle relations with foreign communist parties, the International Liaison Department.<sup>12</sup> This department was responsible for hosting foreign delegations, which themselves became conduits to pass information, funds, supplies, and people between China and their respective national communist parties.<sup>13</sup> To educate the growing number of students from across Asia who came to China to study, the CCP set up the Institute of Marxism-Leninism under the International Liaison Department to offer two- to three-year courses for high-level foreign cadres, who could then, in theory, return to their home countries and form the backbone of the communist movement there.<sup>14</sup>

While the CCP provided education and some material support to communist insurgencies across Asia, Vietnam took the lion's share of military aid.<sup>15</sup> In 1950, Vietnam requested officers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to lead its regiments and battalions, and the PLA responded by creating the Chinese Military Advisory Group, which helped train and advise Vietnam's first generation of commanders.<sup>16</sup> It also helped facilitate the delivery of thousands of tons of supplies, enough to arm and equip nine infantry divisions, one infantry regiment, two artillery regiments, and numerous other local forces.<sup>17</sup> These forces (especially the artillery) would prove instrumental in the Vietminh's fight and ultimate victory over the French.

In building these institutions, the PLA was able to draw on its own deep experience in guerrilla warfare. By the early 1950s, the CCP and PLA had spent far more time as a highly successful insurgent military and clandes-

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<sup>12</sup> Yafeng Xia, "Wang Jiaxiang: New China's First Ambassador and the First Director of the International Liaison Department of the CCP," *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2009, pp. 144–145; Shen and Xia, 2014, pp. 204–205.

<sup>13</sup> Shen and Xia, 2014, pp. 207–208.

<sup>14</sup> Shen and Xia, 2014, pp. 205–206; Xia, 2009, pp. 144–145.

<sup>15</sup> Note that the substantial aid given to Vietnam still paled in comparison to the massive aid given to North Korea, but Korea's partition and Soviet aid had turned the Korean Worker's Party into more of a formal government than an armed insurgent group.

<sup>16</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 19–20.

<sup>17</sup> Shen and Xia, 2014, p. 210; Qiang, 2000, p. 20.

tine political apparatus than either had as a national military or governing party. They did not need to build expertise in toppling governments; the personnel of the CCP and PLA were already among the best-qualified people in the world to provide strategic and tactical guidance to insurgents and to determine what sorts of aid they needed. Before the establishment of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, members of foreign communist parties coming to China to learn how the CCP had been so successful were simply enrolled in existing CCP and PLA schools.<sup>18</sup> The Chinese military advisory group was able to be set up quickly in part because the PLA had a large pool of veteran soldiers, engineers, and officers who had the guerilla and conventional warfare skills needed by the Vietnamese.<sup>19</sup> At the height of Chinese involvement, thousands of Chinese personnel were present in Vietnam, primarily serving as advisers but also playing a number of direct roles, including as antiaircraft and artillery gunners, doctors, and logistics experts.<sup>20</sup>

## Pulling Back in the Mid- to Late 1950s

Following the Korean war, China was eager for greater stability in their relations with the West to allow it to focus on building its domestic economy, at least in the short term.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, publicly pushing for diplomacy over violence and respect for each nation's right to conduct its own internal affairs was seen as an effective lever to divide a belligerent Washington and its war-weary allies.<sup>22</sup> At the 1954 Geneva conference to end the Korean and

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<sup>18</sup> Shen and Xia, 2014, p. 206.

<sup>19</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 19–20; Shen and Xia, 2014, p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> The companion report to this one, Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Military Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-3, 2023, provides a detailed description of China's role.

<sup>21</sup> Chen Jian, "China and the Bandung Conference: Changing Perceptions and Representations," in See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order*, Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> Shu Guang Zhang, "Constructing 'Peaceful Coexistence': China's Diplomacy Toward the Geneva and Bandung Conferences, 1954–55," *Cold War History*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2007, pp. 512–513.

first Indochina wars, China publicly insisted that all nations should act in accordance with the “five principles of peaceful coexistence,” which forbade aggression, proscribed interference in the internal affairs of other nations, and insisted that all disputes should be handled diplomatically.<sup>23</sup> In order to secure a successful conference, Beijing also repeatedly urged the Vietnamese to moderate their demands, even pressuring them to accept the division of their country as a temporary expedient in order to prevent further American involvement in Southeast Asia.<sup>24</sup> The CCP also continued to refrain from providing much support to the Communist Party of Burma despite that party’s wholehearted acceptance of Maoism, for fear that any such support would lead the Burmese government to seek Western support or, worse, Western troops.<sup>25</sup>

At the 1955 Bandung Asian-African Conference, Zhou again insisted that all nations should follow the five principles of peaceful coexistence and claimed that China did not seek to be America’s enemy and that it hoped for a diplomatic resolution to any conflicts between Beijing and Washington.<sup>26</sup> While the Chinese delegation stopped short of offering guarantees that it would never support revolutionaries in other countries, it did assert that the CCP would not attempt to export China’s revolution and that only a country’s own people could decide whether and how to accept Communism.<sup>27</sup>

## Deepening Extremism and Militarization in the 1960s

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw a return to more-bellacose policies in Beijing, with the shelling of Jinmen in 1958 and border war with India in 1962.<sup>28</sup> Domestically, Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s to cement his own power and to ensure that China’s revolution was not

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<sup>23</sup> Zhang, 2007, p. 515.

<sup>24</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 54, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Lintner, 1990, pp. 19–20.

<sup>26</sup> Chen, 2008, pp. 134–135.

<sup>27</sup> Zhang, 2007, pp. 525–526.

<sup>28</sup> Chen, 2008, pp. 136–137.

eroded by pragmatic, capitalist reforms.<sup>29</sup> Pragmatic foreign and domestic policymakers were replaced by ideologues whose decisions were governed more by Maoism than by reality on the ground, and Mao himself encouraged international conflict short of war in order to further radicalize and militarize domestic society.<sup>30</sup> By the early 1960s, China had already begun supporting a burgeoning portfolio of radical VNSAs, largely in Africa. In his 1965 tract *Long Live the Victory of People's War*, Lin Biao made it clear that China felt that its future security lay in promoting global revolution against its enemies. In it, Lin compared the developing nations to the “countryside” and claimed that by supporting revolution throughout developing nations, China could encircle the developed nations (which he compared to the “cities”) just as the PLA had infiltrated and controlled the Chinese countryside during the civil war, surrounding, choking off, and eventually marching on the cities.<sup>31</sup> As the Sino-Soviet split worsened throughout the 1960s, competition with the Soviet Union also drove Chinese support for insurgents, both to gain advantage over Moscow in the strategically important developing nations and to further validate China's own self-image as the true global center of revolutionary politics.<sup>32</sup>

As the cultural revolution intensified, the International Liaison Department was subject to a major purge of its leadership, which was seen as too willing to compromise with imperialists and overly hesitant to support insurgent groups. It was controlled briefly by the PLA and then put under the control of radical Maoists, and it worked closely with the PLA to provide

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<sup>29</sup> Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Cambridge History of China: The People's Republic, Part 2: Revolutions Within the Chinese Revolution, 1966–1982*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 79–81.

<sup>30</sup> Chen Jian, “China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964–69,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 142, June 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Herbert S. Yee, “The Three World Theory and Post-Mao China's Global Strategy,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Spring 1983, p. 244; George T. Yu, “Africa in Chinese Foreign Policy,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 8, August 1988, p. 850; David Scott, *China Stands Up: The PRC and the International System*, New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 52–53.

<sup>32</sup> Yu, 1988, p. 851; Qiang, 2000, p. 22.

military assistance.<sup>33</sup> In the mid- to late 1960s and into the 1970s, the PLA's role in supporting insurgent groups around the world became more prominent. Perhaps the greatest example of this shift was Beijing's changed policy toward Myanmar in the late 1960s. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Beijing had prioritized state-to-state relations with Rangoon as long as the government there maintained its policy of strict neutrality, even going so far as to secure permission from the government to launch offensives into northern Myanmar to root out Guomintang remnant forces that continued to raid Chinese territory after the civil war.<sup>34</sup> In 1962, however, the neutralist government of U Nu was ousted in a coup by general Ne Win, who the Chinese feared would be more friendly to the West.<sup>35</sup> Later, in 1967, anti-Chinese riots broke out in Rangoon, further alienating the CCP.<sup>36</sup> In 1968, Beijing sent an army of thousands of Chinese Kachin and Shan "volunteers" into Northern Burma. This force, which was armed with machine guns, 120 mm mortars, and 12.7 mm anti-aircraft guns, quickly overran government outposts along the border and cleared out a safe "base area," which the CCP turned over to the Communist Party of Burma along with the troops.<sup>37</sup> While the ethnicity of most of the Chinese nationals in this force helped screen the fact that it was in effect an extension of the PLA, it ended up fighting armed Kachin and Shan groups for territory within Myanmar soon after the invasion.<sup>38</sup> In addition to spearheading the invasion of Myanmar

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<sup>33</sup> Roderick Macarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006, pp. 97, 296; Chenyi Wang, "The Chinese Communist Party's Relationship with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s: An Ideological Victory and a Strategic Failure," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper* 88, Wilson Center, December 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Kenton Clymer, "The United States and the Guomintang (KMT) Forces in Burma, 1949–1954: A Diplomatic Disaster," *Chinese Historical Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, May 2014, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Note that he, in fact, more or less maintained Myanmar's neutrality as his predecessor had done and actually became quite useful to the Chinese in the late 1970s, but none of this was apparent in the late 1960s, and the CCP leadership viewed him with significant suspicion. See Lintner, 1990, pp. 20–21.

<sup>36</sup> Lintner, 1990, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Lintner, 1990, pp. 25–26.

<sup>38</sup> Lintner, 1990, pp. 25–26.

in support of insurgents there, the PLA also took the lead in providing support to the Communist Party of Thailand, which launched a rebellion in 1965 and was provided with arms and military advisers.<sup>39</sup>

While the aid given to insurgents in Thailand and especially Myanmar was substantial, it paled in comparison with the massive aid lavished on Vietnam. Admittedly, much of this was in the form of thousands of engineers and air defense troops who supported Hanoi by building, repairing, and defending a network of roads into North Vietnam through which China and the other communist countries were able to supply the Vietnamese communists.<sup>40</sup> This both freed up more North Vietnamese soldiers to infiltrate the South and ensured that both North Vietnam and its insurgents in the South had a steady access to all the supplies they needed from the Communist bloc.<sup>41</sup> Many of these supplies were also used by the North Vietnamese to support insurgents in Laos and Cambodia.<sup>42</sup> In addition to this direct material support, North Vietnam remained a sanctuary from which Hanoi could support insurgents in the South largely because of the threat that the PLA would send a massive combat force to defend them if American regular ground forces ever attempted an invasion.<sup>43</sup>

While China provided some aid and education to African rebel groups in the 1950s, the 1960s saw a flowering of CCP support to African insurgents.<sup>44</sup> As noted above, this was largely driven by China's need to compete with the Soviet Union to lead the strategically crucial developing nations revolutionary movement. Whenever possible, the CCP sought to support groups that took its side in its continuing ideological conflict with the Soviet

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<sup>39</sup> Mysicka, 2015, p. 218; M. Ladd Thomas, "Communist Insurgency in Thailand: Factors Contributing to Its Decline," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 1986, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 133–136.

<sup>41</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 133–136; 150.

<sup>42</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 135–137.

<sup>43</sup> Qiang, 2000, p. 134.

<sup>44</sup> Ian Taylor, *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise*, New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 92–94.

Union, or at least refrained from overtly taking Moscow's side.<sup>45</sup> China was also driven by more-prosaic motives, seeking the support of newly independent African nations in the United Nations for Beijing to replace Taipei as the official government of China.<sup>46</sup>

In late 1963, Zhou Enlai set off on a whirlwind trip to ten countries across Africa, promising Chinese support to all anticolonial revolutionary movements on the continent.<sup>47</sup> By 1966, Beijing had committed \$428 million in aid to Africa's revolutionary states and insurgent movements.<sup>48</sup> The PLA also set up training camps in Ghana in 1964 and in Tanzania in 1969 to equip insurgents and train them in Maoist guerilla tactics.<sup>49</sup> In general, the CCP preferred training small groups of rebel leaders at these camps or in China and then sending them back to their home countries to educate other insurgents.<sup>50</sup>

While the domestic revolutionary fervor of the Cultural Revolution drove China to support an increasingly broad panoply of leftist insurgencies across the globe, its radicalism and chaos also in some ways impaired China's ability to provide support. In Africa, the Chinese ambassador to every country except Egypt was recalled by the 1970s as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was radicalized, and Chinese extremism irritated many of the continent's moderates and some of its leftists.<sup>51</sup> Vietnam resented China's insistence that it reject the Soviet Union and openly take China's side in the growing ideological conflict between the two countries, and the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution both sapped China's ability to provide aid and led Chinese "red guard" extremists to interfere with the transshipment of aid through China.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Taylor, 2006, pp. 95,

<sup>46</sup> Yu, 1988, p. 851.

<sup>47</sup> Yu, 1988, pp. 851–853.

<sup>48</sup> Yu, 1988, pp. 851–853.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, 2006, pp. 30–32, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor, 2006, pp. 30–32.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, 2006, p. 32; Yu, 1988, p. 853.

<sup>52</sup> Qiang, 2000, p. 150.

## Operating Within New Geostrategic Constraints in the 1970s and Early 1980s

During the late 1960s and 1970s, global geostrategic shifts and China's response to them had a significant impact on China's support for VNSAs around the world, and especially in Southeast Asia. This was followed by even more-profound ideological changes in the ways the CCP leadership assessed its own security and warfighting strategies in the late 1970s and 1980. As will be discussed in the next section, by the 1990s, these shifts led to an almost complete abandonment of support for foreign insurgent groups.

Moscow and Beijing had been discreetly arguing over ideological orthodoxy since the 1950s.<sup>53</sup> By 1963, these disagreements had broken out into the open.<sup>54</sup> The Soviet Union's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and 1969 border war with China demonstrated that, by the early 1970s, Moscow was not only an ideological opponent but also a possible existential threat to the CCP.<sup>55</sup> Also worrying was the fact that after finally defeating and absorbing South Vietnam, Hanoi began to aggressively pursue territorial disputes with China and grow closer to Moscow.<sup>56</sup> By 1979, China and Vietnam had fought a border war involving hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and Hanoi was threatening to turn all of Southeast Asia into a Soviet bastion to threaten China's southern border.<sup>57</sup> As much as Mao may have hoped to surround and choke his enemies by infiltrating and controlling the global developing nations, China's vast network of fervent revolutionaries was clearly unable to help the CCP blunt a Soviet armored assault on Beijing or

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<sup>53</sup> Harold P. Ford, "Calling the Sino-Soviet Split," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 42, No. 5, Winter 1998–1999, pp. 57–59.

<sup>54</sup> Ford, 1998–1999, p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, 2006, p. 96.

<sup>56</sup> Kosal Path, "China's Economic Sanctions Against Vietnam, 1975–1978," *China Quarterly*, No. 212, December 2012; Eric Hyer, *The Pragmatic Dragon: China's Grand Strategy and Boundary Settlements*, Toronto, Canada: UBC Press, 2015, pp. 203–205.

<sup>57</sup> Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War*, New York: Routledge, 1992, republished 2015, p. 156.

defeat the Vietnamese on the battlefield, and over the course of the 1970s, the direct threats against China were increasingly unignorable.<sup>58</sup>

The CCP's answer to these threats was a "horizontal line strategy" via which China would seek the support of the hated West in order to contain and deter the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup> This led Beijing to become a strategic partner of Washington and to focus its international support more on foreign governments and well-developed insurgent groups likely to succeed (as opposed to those that were most ideologically pure) in the 1970s.<sup>60</sup> It should be noted that China's renewed focus on building anti-Moscow coalitions did not mean an immediate end to supporting rebels. China continued to send support to African insurgents (some of whom were also supported by Moscow) and was eager to support armed groups that fought the Russians and their Vietnamese allies, even if they espoused ideologies opposed to Maoism, such as Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Cambodian royalists.

The CCP's need for strong allies instead of fervent disciples in the 1970s often led it to build its relations with governments and cut loose the Maoist insurgent groups who wished to topple them. This was especially pronounced in Southeast Asia, where the CCP began to prioritize building an international coalition to confront Vietnam and its puppet governments in Laos and Cambodia after Hanoi became a closer ally of Moscow.<sup>61</sup> In 1977, Burmese leader Ne Win showed his potential usefulness to Beijing by being one of the first heads of state to visit Phnom Penh and helped confer international legitimacy on the China-allied (and anti-Vietnamese) government there. Soon after, in 1978, China recalled its "volunteer" troops fighting for the Communist Party of Burma and refused to allow the party to make

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<sup>58</sup> Mysicka, 2015, pp. 211–212; Scott, 2007, p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Scott, 2007, p. 69; Joseph Yu-Shek Cheng and Franklin Wankun Zhang, "Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies Under Mao and Deng: A Systematic and Comparative Analysis," *Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1999.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, 2006, pp. 95–96; William E. Ratliff, "Communist China and Latin America, 1949–1972," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 10, October 1972, p. 851.

<sup>61</sup> Mysicka, 2015, p. 215. Note that China did not stop providing moral support and possibly some small, token financial support.

use of Chinese territory as a base area.<sup>62</sup> In Thailand, China cut off almost all financial and military support for the communist insurgency in the late 1970s and early 1980s in order to strengthen relations with the Thai government and strengthen Bangkok's ability to withstand Vietnamese aggression.<sup>63</sup> The Thai insurgency was in large part sacrificed so that China could support another insurgent group, the Khmer Rouge, which was driven into the jungle by the 1979 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. The Cambodian insurgents could only be supported through Thailand, and so good relations with Thailand were essential if China were to enable these proxies to tie down and bleed Vietnamese forces.<sup>64</sup> As further evidence that, by the late 1970s, China's support for insurgents was driven more by the strategic need to confront Moscow and its allies than by a desire to support a Maoist world revolution, China began supporting noncommunist, royalist insurgents in Cambodia as well as its longtime Maoist Khmer Rouge allies. By 1982, the CCP had announced that it would no longer support communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia (presumably with the exception of the Cambodian guerrillas).<sup>65</sup>

## A Fundamental Shift in Worldview and the End of Chinese Support for VNSAs in the 1980s and 1990s

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the CCP began to undergo profound shifts in worldview that fundamentally altered how China's leaders saw the world and the ways in which China could secure its place in it. While China faced many imminent threats from Moscow and its allies in the 1970s, as the 1980s wore on and it became clear that the Soviet Union was ailing,

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<sup>62</sup> Lintner, 1990, p. 30. Note that China did not completely abandon the Communist Party of Burma and continued to use border trade to keep the movement minimally viable but cut almost all military aid. Note as well that one reason for cutting them off was political as well as strategic—the Communist Party of Burma had been a strong supporter of the cultural revolution and the extremist Gang of Four. By the late 1970s, the gang had been arrested, and their longtime enemy Deng Xiaoping was China's pre-eminent leader.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas, 1986, p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas, 1986, pp. 19–20.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas, 1986, p. 20.

Deng Xiaoping increasingly came to reject the Maoist assertion that world war was inevitable and to argue that China was in fact unlikely to face a major invasion for the foreseeable future.<sup>66</sup> The PLA was more likely to face limited, local wars in the future, and its poor performance in the 1979 war against Vietnam embarrassingly showed that the large, guerilla warfare–focused people’s army that Mao envisioned would need to become a leaner, more-mobile force equipped with advanced weaponry that could only come from the West.<sup>67</sup> Maintaining good relations with Washington and its allies thus became an even greater strategic imperative, and maintaining guerilla warfare capabilities became less important.

Perhaps even more importantly, under Deng the CCP began to emphasize economic development over world revolution.<sup>68</sup> This required pragmatic policy, good relations with foreign governments, and a stable international environment, all of which reduced Beijing’s will to support insurgencies. As the overall strategic imperative shifted from encouraging global class-based revolution to developing China’s domestic economy, the CCP began to hoard its limited resources, to invest in its economy, and to become much less willing to spend on foreign aid to insurgent groups. While China still gave out foreign aid, this was mostly focused on governments, and the CCP began to emphasize mutual benefit, trade, and economically productive investment over unilateral aid to nonstate groups.<sup>69</sup> As the Cold War ended in the late 1980s and early 1990s, direct threats to China were further reduced, and China’s support to VNSAs all but disappeared. The one group to which China definitely continued to give significant military hardware in the 2000s, the Burmese United Wa State Army, was in some ways the exception that proved the rule, as Chinese arms transfers seemed designed not to enable this group to overthrow the Burmese government but instead

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<sup>66</sup> Michael E. Marti, *China and the Legacy of Deng Xiaoping: From Communist Revolution to Capitalist Evolution*, Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2001, pp. 134–135.

<sup>67</sup> Yee, 1983, pp. 243–246.

<sup>68</sup> Winberg Chai, “The Ideological Paradigm Shifts of China’s World Views: From Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to the Pragmatism-Multilateralism of the Deng-Jiang-Hu Era,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2003, pp. 167–168; Yu, 1988, p. 857; Scott, 2007, pp. 69, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Yu, 1988, pp. 844–858; Ratliff, 1972, pp. 853–858.

to dissuade the government from trying to crush the group and engaging in major military operations and causing economic disruption near China's border.<sup>70</sup> The CCP had chosen to prioritize global stability and trade over global revolution.

## Analysis: Why and How China Supported Proxies

### Why China Supported Proxies

Until the reign of Deng Xiaoping, China was driven to support communist insurgents in East Asia and across the world both by normative, ideological concerns and by traditional geopolitical or international security concerns. Normatively, the CCP saw itself as a revolutionary, internationalist socialist party with a duty to aid those trying to throw off the yokes of imperialism and capitalism. In geopolitical terms, supporting revolutionary socialist movements was a means of weakening rivals, pushing them out of important regions, and building a coalition of friendly regimes.

In general, these two factors are difficult to differentiate, because China's revolutionary ideology had a strong impact on the way it viewed its own security. Some of China's actions, such as supporting African insurgencies, seemed to be motivated largely by ideology because they had a negligible impact on China's own security. However, if we take Lin Biao's global "people's war" strategy seriously, then spreading Maoist revolution throughout developing nations was itself a geopolitical objective that would ultimately help Beijing defeat Moscow. In China's case, ideology not only provided normative drivers to liberate the oppressed peoples of the world, but it also

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<sup>70</sup> Alessandro Rippa and Martin Saxer, "Mong La: Business as Usual in the China-Myanmar Borderlands," *East Asian History and Culture Review*, No. 19, June 2016, pp. 249–250; "United Wa State Army," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, May 16, 2019. Note that there have been some rumors of sporadic Chinese support to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, an insurgent group in India. If true, this support is relatively minor, certainly not enough to seriously threaten the Indian government, and may be a quid pro quo provided by the PLA in exchange for intelligence on the location and strength of Indian army units near the border. It is also possible that at least some instances of arms sales to the Indian insurgents are deals with corrupt officials with little or no sanction from Beijing. See Lyle Morris, "Is China Backing Indian Insurgents?" *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2011.

inculcated a worldview in which that very liberation was critical to China's long-term security.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, in cases such as China's support for Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s or support for the Cambodian Khmer Rouge in the 1980s, these normative and ideologically based security concerns were wedded to more-traditional geostrategic concerns, such as excluding rivals from a nearby region or weakening an adversary.

China's support for proxies was also influenced by more-traditional geostrategic and international security concerns unrelated to ideology. In the 1950s, the CCP refused to provide significant support to Burmese Maoists for fear that they would force the Burmese government to seek Western assistance.<sup>72</sup> China's aid to proxies in Vietnam was far greater than that given to any other socialist party, largely because of the strategic importance to China of having a friendly regime on its southern border free of Western troops.<sup>73</sup> At the 1954 Geneva Conference, the CCP pressured the Vietnamese to allow the "imperialist" forces to continue to occupy the southern half of the country for the same reason: to prevent an American intervention and keep American troops far from its borders.<sup>74</sup>

As the Soviet Union went from an ideological opponent to an existential threat in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the imperative for the CCP to build relations with states that could provide it some protection against Moscow became much stronger and ideological motivations concomitantly weaker. China began to abandon global revolutionary movements that got in the way of building strong relations with Washington and regional states wary of the Soviet Union and its partners. Beijing also prioritized supporting VNSAs who could directly weaken Soviet-allied countries (such as Vietnam), even if they rejected Maoist ideology. By 1982, China had more or less abandoned every Maoist group in Southeast Asia in order to build an anti-Vietnamese alliance with the governments that those groups sought to overthrow. The one major exception was the Khmer Rouge, which the CCP used to tie down

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<sup>71</sup> Mysicka, 2015, p. 213; Qiang, 2000, pp. 20–21.

<sup>72</sup> Lintner, 1990, pp. 19–20.

<sup>73</sup> Qiang, 2000, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 54, 60; Lintner, 1990, pp. 19–20.

and weaken Vietnamese forces in Cambodia.<sup>75</sup> Not only did China abandon ideologically desirable insurgency movements, but in Cambodia it also supported royalist groups fighting the Vietnamese, suggesting that its rivalry with Hanoi and Moscow was the real driver behind its behavior.<sup>76</sup> While Beijing continued to provide minimal support and encouragement to some Maoist movements around the world, its focus was clearly on those groups that could directly weaken Russia and its allies.

After the end of the Cold War, China no longer faced any major international threats.<sup>77</sup> Maoist, revolutionary ideology was replaced with pragmatic developmentalism, emphasizing stability and economic progress over revolution at home and abroad.<sup>78</sup> China therefore both lacked a geopolitical incentive and possessed a strong economic disincentive to pursue widespread proxy warfare. Inasmuch as post-Deng China espoused any ideology in its international relations, it seems to have been a radical definition of state sovereignty and rejection of armed interference, though it should be noted that in the past China has frequently acted against its own ideology when there was a compelling national interest at stake.<sup>79</sup> Revolutionary Maoism had ceased to drive China's foreign policy, and there were few international threats Beijing faced that would justify support to VNSAs.

## Building the Capacity to Support Proxies

As demonstrated by the PLA's support to Vietnamese insurgents in the 1940s, the CCP already had most of the expertise it needed to advise and

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<sup>75</sup> Thomas, 1986, p. 20.

<sup>76</sup> Note that China continued to provide moral and possibly very limited financial support to some Maoist groups even within states it sought to cultivate as allies, but this support was minimal, and the Communist Parties of Burma and Thailand collapsed soon after Chinese aid ceased.

<sup>77</sup> Marti, 2001, pp. 134–135.

<sup>78</sup> Chai, 2003, pp. 167–168; Yu, 1988, p. 857; Scott, 2007, pp. 69, 78.

<sup>79</sup> Chengqiu Wu, "Sovereignty, Human Rights, and Responsibility: Changes in China's Response to International Humanitarian Crises," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 15, 2010, pp. 94–95.

supply an insurgency when it first conquered China in 1949.<sup>80</sup> It expanded its capacity to support a wider network of Communist movements by creating the International Liaison Department, which managed the coordination, housing, education, and supply of delegates for other Asian Communist insurgencies and used these delegations as conduits to provide funding and training. CCP leaders coordinated closely with the PLA (which was itself a party organization) to create military aid missions, especially to Vietnam. It should be noted that building these organizations does not seem to have taken more than a few years, and China was already providing aid to insurgents while they were being stood up. Nor does there seem to have been much hesitation involved over whether to support other leftist revolutionary groups, though the Chinese civil war consumed most of the CCP top leadership's attention until 1949.

After the Cultural Revolution radicalized China's domestic politics in the 1960s, the Liaison Department was considered insufficiently revolutionary, its leadership was purged, and it eventually came under the management of the PLA.<sup>81</sup> During this time, China's aid to foreign insurgents seems to have become markedly more militarized, though it is difficult to determine how much of this was because the PLA was now more directly involved, or if it was simply a result of the more militant and radical stance taken by China as a result of the Cultural Revolution. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the CCP gave massive military aid to Communist rebels in Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand and built training camps in Africa to teach and supply rebels there. This sometimes involved the creation of military advisory or aid groups, which usually seemed to have been made of PLA personnel along with some political cadres from other CCP groups.<sup>82</sup> Most notably, the CCP built a turnkey army of thousands of Chinese citizens of Kachin or Shan descent, then used this force to conquer a swath of Burmese territory and essentially turned over both the army and the territory to the Communist Party of Burma.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 11–12.

<sup>81</sup> Macarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006, pp. 97, 296.

<sup>82</sup> Qiang, 2000, pp. 19–20.

<sup>83</sup> Lintner, 1990, pp. 25–26.

As noted above, China underwent profound ideological changes in the 1980s, following the rise of Deng Xiaoping. These were accompanied by sweeping military reforms that sought to move the PLA away from the massive, manpower-heavy, low-tech guerrilla force envisioned by Mao to become a leaner, faster, high-tech strike force.<sup>84</sup> While these reforms have done much to improve the PLA's ability to fight and win limited wars with high-tech adversaries, they may have significantly eroded its expertise in insurgent operations. Furthermore, many of the groups that the CCP supported during the Cold War have disappeared or been sidelined, thinning China's network of possible VNSA proxies, though those that remain could form the nucleus of a network of China-supported insurgents in some countries. Finally, since the Deng Xiaoping era, China has repeatedly emphasized the importance of state sovereignty as an ideological defense against human rights-related intervention, and while China has in the past proven willing to ignore its ideological commitments when there was a compelling national interest at stake, supporting VNSAs in another country in open disregard for that country's sovereignty would weaken that defense.<sup>85</sup> For all of these reasons, it would likely be significantly more difficult now than it was in the 1950s for Beijing to build up networks of VNSA proxies, as well as an effective ability to extensively train or supply them.

## Conclusion

For the first several decades of the PRC's existence, seemingly pragmatic security interests and ideological fervor were intertwined, both fueling Chinese support to nonstate proxy forces. As China's rivalry with the Soviet Union heated up, however, and its former proxies in Vietnam turned against Beijing, China largely abandoned this tool, often supporting governments and non-Communist forces against revolutionary movements if doing so improved its positions against the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

Given the CCP's emphasis on economic development since the late 1970s and Xi Jinping's more-recent insistence that China's rights as a great power

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<sup>84</sup> Yee, 1983, pp. 243–246.

<sup>85</sup> Wu, 2010, pp. 94–95.

must be respected, it seems likely that China's future decisions on whether to support VNSAs, which organizations to support, and what support to provide will be driven by international and economic factors. Furthermore, Beijing now has access to many other, less disruptive economic, political, and military tools to achieve the outcomes it desires. While the CCP is increasingly willing to proactively challenge and remold the international order, even if it were again to support VNSAs, such activities would not likely be as central to Chinese security policy or as widespread as they were during the Cold War.

# Iran's Use of Proxy Warfare

## Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran has developed a military doctrine privileging hybrid warfare and gray zone operations to help tilt the regional balance of power in its favor and overcome its lack of conventional capabilities. To this end, Iran's way of war is designed to leverage asymmetric capabilities to deter, defend against, harass, contain, and combat conventionally superior adversaries. Chief among Tehran's tools is its network of nonstate allies and partners, which the Islamic Republic uses to compete with regional rivals and international adversaries. The majority of Iranian interventions into foreign conflicts since the advent of the Islamic Republic in 1979 have been proxy wars, and, with the exception of a handful of direct military interventions, Iran has largely refrained from deploying its own troops in combat beyond its borders.<sup>1</sup>

Iran's proxy capabilities have been built over several decades, in part predating the Islamic Republic, and in three key phases. First, during the 1950s–1979 time frame, Iran, then known as the Imperial State of Iran, laid out the foundations of its proxy strategy. The efforts were more ad hoc during this period, in stark contrast with the post-1979 phases, which were marked by much more consolidated efforts to build a network. Second, starting in 1979 and until roughly 2013–2014, Iran built a comprehensive network of nonstate allies and partners throughout the Middle East and South Asia, traditionally considered as key to Iranian security. During this

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<sup>1</sup> See Ariane M. Tabatabai, Nathan Chandler, Bryan Frederick, and Jennifer Kavanaugh, *Iran's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-2, 2021.

phase, Tehran largely worked directly with local groups, which it helped cultivate. Finally, two distinct but reinforcing events, the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen, ushered in a new phase of Iranian proxy capabilities and warfare. The Islamic Republic was now increasingly relying on a "training the trainer" model, working via Lebanese Hezbollah to train, advise, equip, and assist various militias supporting the Assad regime in Syria and the Houthi rebels' efforts in Yemen. Similarly, in Syria, Iran was stepping away from its traditional model whereby it cultivated local groups, instead recruiting and deploying fighters from different countries (chiefly Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Iraq and Lebanon) in Syria. The conflict is also notable as it has led Iran to deploy its own forces in combat alongside proxies, rather than solely in an "advise and assist" capacity, as it typically does.

Unfortunately, in contrast with the previous case studies, there is limited information available from open sources about internal debates within Iran over the use of proxy warfare.<sup>2</sup> In fact, despite often having some open debates about key aspects of Iran's national security strategy and policies, the regime and its power centers have by and large refrained from discussing its proxy strategy and capabilities in the open. To some degree, this has changed in the most recent phase of Iran's proxy development, starting with the beginning of the Syrian civil war and, later, the advent of the conflict in Yemen. Iran has become more forthcoming in its support for nonstate actors and has increased the breadth and depth of its support for proxies. However, our knowledge of the internal discussions pertaining to whether Iran should support proxies, which proxies deserve help, and how much aid should be provided remains limited. Like the other case studies, this chapter explores Iran's motives for proxy warfare and the time it took Tehran to develop these capabilities, but our claims about Iranian motives are bounded by the data available.

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<sup>2</sup> See Ariane M. Tabatabai, *Iran's National Security Debates: Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-344-RC, 2019.

## A Brief History of Iranian Use of Proxy Warfare

### Proxy Warfare in the Shah's Iran, 1950s–1979

Although Iran fully integrated proxy warfare into its military doctrine after the revolution, the roots of the expansive network of Iranian proxies, known as the Iran Threat Network (ITN), goes back to the pre-revolution era.<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (better known as the Shah), who served as the last monarch ruling the country prior to the monarchy's collapse in 1979, was a modernizing strongman who hoped to transform his country into a military powerhouse. The Shah sought to expand and modernize the Iranian military. He did so thanks to considerable U.S. assistance, including training and weapons and equipment sales. However, the Shah, like the Islamic Republic after him, was mostly reluctant to directly intervene abroad militarily. The scholarship on Iran's prerevolution military doctrine is mostly silent on the reasons why this may have been the case. Several plausible explanations can nonetheless be suggested. First, in terms of geo-strategic considerations, Iran was aligned with the West during the Cold War, but the Shah was reluctant to provoke a direct conflict with its immediate neighbor, the Soviet Union. Second, although the Shah's military was impressive on paper, its actual fighting effectiveness lagged well behind its theoretical capabilities.<sup>4</sup> As a result, instead of direct military interventions, the Shah chose to deploy Iranian troops in combat on one occasion only in the Dhofar rebellion in Oman (1963–1976). Instead, the Shah's government largely became involved in foreign conflicts by leveraging a number of nascent and existing relationships with nonstate actors, which would come

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<sup>3</sup> Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 85–86; Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 47–48; Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer Li, *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-781-AF, 2009, p. 81; Adam Tarock, "The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1999, p. 804.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009, pp. 204–206.

at a much lower cost in terms of blood and treasure for the country than overt and direct military interventions placing Iranians in combat.

In Iraq and in Lebanon, the Shah leveraged co-identity groups (whose ethnic and sectarian ties to Iran he could utilize) to promote Iranian soft power and project it abroad. Both countries were of significance for Iran by virtue of geostrategic characteristics and the presence of co-identity populations. As a neighbor with shared porous borders, Iraq was (and remains) key to Iran's own security, and the two countries share both co-sectarian ties and co-ethnic ones. Both are Shia-majority countries in a region otherwise largely dominated by Sunnis, and Kurds constitute a significant minority in both states. Lebanon may not appear as closely tied to Iran because the two nations are separated by two states (Iraq and Syria). However, historically, Lebanon has also been important for Iran. On a geostrategic level, Lebanon provided Iran with access to the Mediterranean. And, for Iran, building a proxy relationship in Lebanon was relatively easy. The presence of deep, historically rooted ties between the two nations' Shia populations (including significant exchange between their respective religious establishments and the populations) provided Tehran with an opportunity to cultivate nonstate partners there.

The Shah's intelligence organization, Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar (SAVAK), was in charge of covert operations designed to cultivate and support proxies. In Afghanistan, Oman, and Yemen, Tehran supported anticommunist forces during the 1960s and 70s. Iran's proxy policy included both soft and hard power components, such as funding, influence in media and religious (particularly, Shia) circles, and attempts at installing or restoring governments friendly to Iran.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, this support was largely limited to simple material and political support, and it remains unclear whether it would have intensified had the Shah remained in power, progressing to the provision of more-advanced military capabilities to groups in the region or more broadly. What is clear, however, is that the Shah's government had a surprisingly similar justification for and narrative on the need for proxy relationships as the later, postrevolutionary

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<sup>5</sup> Arash Reisinezhad, *The Shah of Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Lebanese Shia*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 134; Abbas William Samii, "The Shah's Lebanon Policy: The Role of SAVAK," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 1997,

regime. As the head of the SAVAK's Middle East branch, Major Mojtaba Pashai, explained, "We should combat and arrest the danger (of Nasserism) on the beaches of the Mediterranean so we do not have to shed blood on Iranian soil."<sup>6</sup> Decades later, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose worldview was in stark opposition to that of the Shah, would utter similar words to justify his country's involvement in Syria and Iraq and support for proxies there.

## Revolutionary Iran's Use of Proxy Warfare, 1979–2013

By the time the Islamic Revolution deposed the Shah, Iran had cultivated close proxy relationships and built influence in many major countries throughout South Asia and the Middle East, including Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon. The revolutionaries opposing the Shah were notoriously divided, but they shared some core beliefs, chiefly that the Shah had to go and U.S. influence in the country had to be countered and eliminated. Many were also united in the view that their ideology transcended national borders, although they differed in their ideological persuasion. The Islamists (like the Communists of various stripes) saw their ideology as a transnational unifying factor among different peoples in the region, and their leadership vowed to export the revolution beyond the country's borders. Initially, the revolutionaries developed relationships with nonstate actors across the region (and elsewhere) as part of their resistance effort. Like other contemporary movements, they were preparing to resist and eventually oust what they saw as illegitimate regimes put in place by foreign powers.

When the regime began to take root in Iran and until the Iran-Iraq War, its leadership appeared largely motivated by ideology: Weakening and overthrowing ungodly regimes was an end in itself. Although experts debate the extent to which revolutionary ideology continued to play a predominant role in Iranian decisionmaking over the subsequent decades, this initial aspiration and driver of Iranian behavior clearly shaped the perceptions of Iran's neighbors, ultimately turning into a self-reinforcing dynamic. The Iran-Iraq War was partly initiated due to this very dynamic, albeit not without other historical, political, and geostrategic issues playing a significant

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<sup>6</sup> Samii, 1997, pp. 66–91.

role in motivating Saddam Hussein to invade Iran. For Saddam, whose distrust and disdain of Iranians was matched only by his distrust and disdain of Americans and the “international Jewish conspiracy,” Khomeini’s calls for a Shia revival were to be taken at face value.<sup>7</sup> Hence, he sought to check the revolutionary regime whose ideology and narrative he viewed as a key challenge to his reign, relying as he did on a Sunni powerbase in a Shia-majority country.

The Iran-Iraq War was both a driver behind and an opportunity for Iran’s expansion of its proxy capabilities. As it faced its adversary on the battlefield, Iran recognized its conventional shortcomings, having just purged its military and lost its key backers and suppliers as a result of the hostage crisis and the severance of U.S.-Iran relations as the war began to break out. Hence, Tehran began to leverage other tools at its disposal, notably the militia groups loyal to Khomeini that would ultimately be united under the newly formed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>8</sup> During the first decade after the Revolution, the IRGC was consumed with the Iran-Iraq War in which it made its name through a more fervent version of war-of-attrition tactics: the employment of human wave attacks against Iraqi forces.<sup>9</sup>

Offices within the IRGC, notably the Office of Liberation Movements (OLM), which was the forerunner to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Quds Force (IRGC-QF), handled unconventional warfare in which Iran was supporting proxy groups abroad.<sup>10</sup> Given the geopolitical stakes and overall focus on the Iran-Iraq War, this included managing ties to Kurds and Shias in Iraq. Tehran provided the Kurds and Shias with basic support, including funding and weapons. But Iran also began to play a more active

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<sup>7</sup> Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 33–34; Jerrold M. Post, “Saddam Hussein of Iraq: A Political Psychology Profile,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, June 1991, pp. 279–289.

<sup>8</sup> Afshon Ostovar, “Soldiers of the Revolution: A Brief History of Iran’s IRGC,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 7, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Ostovar, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power—Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019, p. 57.

role with regard to Shias in Iraq, helping organize them by empowering Iraqi Shias to create groups that would be able to resist and counter Saddam. A significant example of Iran cultivating like-minded groups among Iraqi Shia was its support to Badr, which operated as the military arm of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Among the forms of support provided by Iran to Badr and SCIRI were sanctuary, military training, financial aid, arms, and political support.<sup>11</sup> In part because of that support, Badr was among the most formidable opposition groups to Saddam Hussein's rule and eventually emerged, along with SCIRI's successor political organization, as a leading player in post-2003 Iraq.

Meanwhile, the early 1980s also saw the escalation of the conflict in Lebanon, which also provided Iran with the opportunity to further assert itself in Lebanon and ultimately in Israel. Prior to these events, Iranian revolutionaries had already been traveling to Lebanon to train in guerilla warfare, allowing the revolutionaries to forge ties with Lebanese Shias. By the early to mid-1980s, Iran was once again building on the groundwork laid out by the Shah to develop proxy capabilities. In particular, it played a key role in helping form what would turn into its most successful and critical nonstate ally, Lebanese Hezbollah.

Lebanon has long been considered a significant player in Iran's foreign policy. The two nations have historically had close social, religious, and political ties. The two countries' Shia populations have a long history of exchange and intermarriage. Thus, Iran could easily cultivate ties with non-state Shia groups in that country. There are also geopolitical reasons why Tehran built a presence in Lebanon. First, for decades (including prior to the revolution), Lebanon's geostrategic position by the Mediterranean was seen as a benefit to Iran. Second, following the revolution and Iran's fallout with Israel, Lebanon was deemed a critical theater of operation against Israel, which would enable Tehran to expand its strategic depth and deter Israel from its own backyard while also harassing it more easily.

During the Shah's reign, Iran's relationship with Israel was largely characterized by quiet cooperation. However, as the Shah wished to avoid dam-

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<sup>11</sup> Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, and Becca Wasser, *The Iran Threat Network (ITN): Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4231-A, 2021.

aging relationships with Arab nations in the region and domestic observant Muslims who opposed normalization with Israel, he tried to keep this relationship as quiet as possible. The founder of the Islamic Republic and its first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had long taken issue with the Shah's cooperation with Israel, which Khomeini deemed as an illegitimate power occupying Muslim lands. A key tenet of Khomeini's revolutionary ideology and, later, foreign policy would lie in his "struggle" against Israel. Although many of the Islamic Republic's founding ideological ideas and values may have moderated over time, the opposition to Israel would remain an integral part of the regime's outlook.<sup>12</sup> The initial tensions between the two countries in the wake of the revolution were reinforced over time in a classic security dilemma, in which both nations would take actions to protect themselves that the other would perceive as a threat to its own national security. Tehran would support such nonstate actors as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad to deter and harass Israel, thus fueling Jerusalem's perceptions of the Iranian threat.

After a full decade of experience managing Iran's proxy relationships, the IRGC established the IRGC-QF to oversee the portfolio in 1990. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, the IRGC-QF has become "Iran's primary means for conducting unconventional operations abroad, with connections of varying degrees to state and nonstate actors globally."<sup>13</sup> Estimated by DIA as currently comprising 5,000 forces, the IRGC-QF is a small elite organization within the overall IRGC, which boasts nearly 200,000 personnel, excluding the largely domestic-focused Basij. It was also in the 1990s that Iran promoted the general who would become inextricably linked with the IRGC-GF's history, Qassem Soleimani, who took command of the force in 1998 and held that title until he was killed in a U.S. drone strike in early 2020.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> David Menashri, "Khomeini's Vision: Nationalism or World Order?" in David Menashri, *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Ali Soufan, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, No. 10, November 2018.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 served as a test for Iran's proxy strategy. As mentioned previously, Iran had started to train, advise, and assist nonstate actors in Iraq under the Shah. When the Islamic Republic came to power, relationships with the Kurds and Shias continued as Iran and Iraq fought a devastating eight-year war. During that time, Iranian forces supported Iraqi Kurds and helped organize Shias in the pursuit of their common objective: defeating Saddam Hussein. When the Iran-Iraq war ended, the relationships continued with a different objective: containing Baghdad. When the United States removed the common adversary in 2003, Iran's Shia partners returned to Iraq. Some (e.g., Badr) largely adopted a governing strategy aimed at reinforcing Shia power, while others (e.g., Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah) eventually emerged and adopted a new target: the United States. Meanwhile, the Kurds largely fell in line with the United States while maintaining their ties to Iran. In the mid- to late 2000s, Iran's Shia proxies were targeting U.S. forces in Iraq to raise the cost of America's forward presence in the region.<sup>15</sup> Following U.S. withdrawal, Iran remained heavily engaged, seeking to maintain its influence in Iraq and prevent any developments detrimental to Iranian interests.

Later, with the rise of ISIS in 2014, Iran once again leveraged its proxy capabilities to conduct counter-ISIS operations in Iraq. The end of the territorial caliphate ushered in a renewed era of competition between the United States and Iran in Iraq, leading Tehran to use its proxies, chiefly Kataib Hezbollah, to harass and counter the United States.<sup>16</sup> By the time that tensions began to mount between Washington and Tehran following the May 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran's proxy capabilities were once again mostly focused on raising the cost of U.S. forward presence in Iraq and forcing it to leave the theater altogether.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alex Horton, "Soleimani's Legacy: The Gruesome, Advanced IEDs That Haunted U.S. Troops in Iraq," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen and Isabel Coles, "Iran-Backed Kataib Hezbollah Has Long Targeted U.S. Forces," *Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Uri Friedman, "The Blueprint Iran Could Follow After Soleimani's Death," *The Atlantic*, January 4, 2020.

## The Transnationalization of the Iranian Threat Network, 2013–Present

In the early days of the revolution, Iranian aid to its proxies was limited to very basic material support to countries in its immediate vicinity. Throughout the 1980s and 2000s, Iranian support gradually increased in its extent and sophistication, including the provision of extensive training, relatively advanced weaponry, intelligence, and other critical inputs to the military capabilities of its proxies. By 2013, Tehran was providing advanced support to a large number of groups in its region. The country began to increase the amount and sophistication of its support for key groups. Today, Iran occasionally provides support to far-flung VNSAs, with some examples of limited presence in Africa and Latin America, albeit mostly channeling this aid through its regional proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah. For the most part, however, Iran focuses its proxy activities in its immediate region, providing advanced but not truly cutting-edge capabilities to proxies in the Gulf and Levant. By 2020, Tehran had roughly a dozen proxies in half a dozen theaters and countries in the region, a complex network of forces that by some estimates is composed of nearly 200,000 fighters.<sup>18</sup>

As noted previously, the Arab Spring in general and the Syrian civil war in particular were critical to Iran's ability to grow its network of proxies and to increase its proxy capabilities. The Syrian civil war entailed some departures from Iran's typical *modus operandi*, but the war was instrumental in allowing the regime to refine its proxy capabilities, marking the start of the third phase of its proxy strategy. Iran deployed its own forces in combat alongside its proxies to fight in Syria. This was a shift from prior Iranian military interventions outside of the country's borders, as it had traditionally sent troops to train, advise, and assist proxies but not to engage in combat.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, in contrast with the past, when Iran largely focused on cultivating local forces (and, at times, complemented them with other proxies), the regime has mostly relied on foreign fighters to advance its objec-

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<sup>18</sup> Tabatabai, Martini, and Wasser, 2021; Seth Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," *CSIS Brief*, March 2019, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the Iranian military intervention in Syria and its similarities and differences with previous Iranian interventions, see Tabatabai et al., 2021.

tives of securing the Assad regime and/or ensuring a transition of power to Iran's liking. In other words, where prior to the Syrian war Iran focused its efforts on building local groups' capacity and granting them the capabilities needed to deter, counter, or harass shared adversaries, the regime was now helping mobilize and move fighters from other countries to support the war effort in Syria.

The Syrian civil war led to the deployment of two types of Iranian-backed proxies. First, Tehran's already established forces from the region (which it had cultivated during the first two phases of its postrevolution proxy strategy) began to arrive on the battlefield as early as 2012.<sup>20</sup> Iran's foremost nonstate ally, Lebanese Hezbollah, entered the war in its early stages, but the battle of al-Qusayr in April 2013 marked the first time that the group had played a significant role in leading a campaign, one that was instrumental in setting back the armed opposition.<sup>21</sup> The group provided a significant number of forces, reportedly seeing some 1,500 casualties by 2015 (a substantial part of the 15,000 forces, excluding reservists, that the group possessed at the time).<sup>22</sup> Also starting in 2012, Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias arrived in Syria to lend support to Assad's efforts.<sup>23</sup> Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and the Badr Organization (all Iraqi) were among the Shia militias sending foreign fighters to fight the war.<sup>24</sup>

Second, starting in 2014, marking the beginning of the third phase of Iran's proxy strategy, newly established groups of foreign fighters began to emerge in Syria. The Afghan Shia forces known as the Fatemiyoun (first, a brigade and later elevated to a division) and their Pakistani counterparts, the Zeinabiyoun, were different from other Iranian proxies involved in

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<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, No. 8 (Syria Special Issue), August 2013, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Blanford, 2013, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> "Hizbullah's Learning Curve—Deadly Experience," *The Economist*, August 20, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Phillip Smyth, "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, No. 8, August 2013, pp. 28–32.

<sup>24</sup> Smyth, 2013, p. 28.

Syria.<sup>25</sup> As discussed previously, whereas Lebanese Hezbollah and various Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias were created in the pursuit of local objectives (deterring and countering Saddam Hussein first and the United States in Iraq later in the case of the Shia militias and Israel in the case of Hezbollah), these new forces were formed with the goal of deployment to a different theater, serving virtually no purpose in the countries from which they were deployed. Neither the Fatemiyoun nor the Zeinabiyoun were active in their own respective countries at any given time prior to deploying to Syria, and the members of the Fatemiyoun previously residing in Iran (many were refugees or migrants in Iran) were not involved in the Iranian political and security landscapes, although some fought in the Iran-Iraq War and later against the Taliban in the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> And although the Fatemiyoun in particular may be redirected later to new theaters, having already seen some of their fighters return to Afghanistan, they are only doing so after having purportedly completed their mission in Syria and as part of a secondary and new mission.

Syria has provided Iran with the grounds to test its established proxies while training its newer ones. The two categories of Iranian proxies operating in Syria have demonstrated different capabilities as the well-established, combat-experienced Hezbollah worked side by side with the newly created forces coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The latter lacked the skills, training, experience, and capabilities that their Lebanese and Iraqi counterparts have long possessed. This likely made these forces less effective on the battlefield, but it made their deployment less costly for Iran and Hezbollah, which were able to use these fighters essentially as “cannon fodder,” used, for example, in riskier operations.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the relative newness and lack of capabilities of these newer groups has likely made them more directly reliant on both Iran and Hezbollah for command; intelligence; training; and intelligence, financial, and equipment support.

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<sup>25</sup> “Iran: Afghan Children Recruited to Fight in Syria,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 1, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Mohsen Hamidi, “The Two Faces of the Fatemiyoun (I): Revisiting the Male Fighters,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 8, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> “Iran: Afghan Children Recruited to Fight in Syria,” 2017; Hamidi, 2019.

During this phase, Iran also demonstrated an ability and the intent to provide more groups with more-sophisticated capabilities. For example, even as it was providing more-limited support to the Taliban in Afghanistan, Tehran was providing somewhat advanced capabilities to the Shia militias in Iraq and fighters in Syria and advanced systems and weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah to secure what it saw as its core interests. At the same time, Tehran was stepping up its support for the Houthis in Yemen. Iran had built a relationship with the Houthis prior to the start of the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen. As the war advanced and bogged Riyadh down, Tehran saw an opportunity to further weaken its chief regional rival amid tensions between the two countries.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Iran provided more-advanced capabilities to the Houthis, which it was also reportedly able to leverage as U.S.-Iran tensions grew starting in spring 2019.<sup>29</sup>

The cycle of escalation between the United States and Iran in 2019, which featured IRGC Navy attacks on commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, the Iranian shootdown of a U.S. Global Hawk, and the Iranian attack on Saudi energy infrastructure at Abqaiq and Khurais, eventually culminated in the Trump administration's decision to kill Qassem Soleimani while he was visiting Iraq in early 2020. Iran's response was to launch ballistic missiles on two airfields in Iraq where U.S. forces were present, although those strikes did not result in any fatalities.

Having led the IRGC-QF from 1998 to 2020, Soleimani's death prompted considerable speculation over the future course of the organization. Iran announced that Soleimani would be succeeded by his deputy, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani. Although Qaani would appear to have considerable differences in personality with Soleimani (the former generally seen as less charismatic<sup>30</sup>), it is too early to say whether the leadership transition will lead to a fourth phase of Iran's proxy strategy.

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Saul, Parisa Hafezi, and Michael Georgy, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Support for Houthis in Yemen's War," Reuters, March 21, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Saul, Hafezi, and Georgy, 2017; Richard Pérez-Peña, David D. Kirkpatrick, and Michael Crowley, "Trump Says Iran Appears Responsible for Saudi Attack but That He Wants to Avoid War," *New York Times*, September 16, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Esmail Qaani: The Next Revolutionary Guards Quds Force Commander?" American Enterprise Institute, January 11, 2012; Soufan Center, "Can Esmail

## Analysis: Why and How Iran Supported Proxies

### Why Iran Supported Proxies

As we have discussed in the previous chapters, myriad motivations and opportunities can lead to the development of proxy capabilities by states and their use in proxy wars. In the case of Iran, these factors can be divided into those drivers that predated the Islamic Republic and continue to shape its worldview and those that have emerged following and, by and large, as a result of the revolution. The first category encompasses such considerations as Iran's geopolitical and ideological perceptions of itself and its surrounding region, where it often feels othered and vulnerable. The second group of drivers also include those stemming from geopolitical interests or international security, but it additionally encompasses domestic politics and ideology, the contours of which changed drastically after the revolution with the overhaul of the Iranian political system and the introduction of a revolutionary ideology.

In terms of geopolitical interests, several motivations and opportunities have shaped Iran's decisionmaking pertaining to proxies over the decades. These include Iran's rivalries with other key players in the region (such as the United States and U.S. partners in the Middle East), the lack of traditional state alliances, spillover threats posed the collapse of states in the region (such as in Afghanistan, Iraq after 2003, and Syria in recent years), and identity. A chief consideration for Iranian leaders going back centuries lies in the country's otherness in the region. Simply put, Iran is a majority non-Arab and majority non-Sunni nation-state in a region dominated by mostly Arab and Sunni states. Having been invaded and conquered a number of times over the course of centuries and having seen foreign interference in its domestic affairs, Iran has long viewed itself as a vulnerable state. The regional landscape, which had been dominated by great powers including Russia, Great Britain, France, and, later, the United States, also contributed to this threat perception. Although Iran's postrevolution conventional inferiority marks a departure from the country's immediate prerevolution era, for centuries, the nation had to contend with militarily superior powers

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Qaani Lead Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force?" *IntelBrief*, January 23, 2020.

without the appropriate tools to do so, having largely lacked cohesive and well-trained and equipped forces until the first half of the 20th century.

To overcome its disadvantages, Iran often chose to hitch its wagon to various great powers to balance against others. Immediately prior to the revolution, Iran enjoyed Western and particularly U.S. support. Afterward, however, having lost the backing of what had been its primary security partner, the United States, and being ideologically unable to turn to the rival, atheist USSR for help, the country was now left to tackle regional rivals on its own. The combination of willing and able groups, conflicts in the region, and fragile and weak governments afforded Tehran the opportunity to leverage these co-identity groups to build a network that would provide the country with a means of defending itself and advancing its interests. Nevertheless, co-identity populations in other states have also provided Iran with a tool to overcome this otherness, providing it with the means to seek to tilt the regional balance of power in its favor.

The thread running through these considerations lies in the country's lack of conventional military capabilities. Indeed, to compete with rivals, respond to potential spillover threats, make up for its lack of alliances, and ensure the regime's survival and security, Tehran requires capabilities that it does not currently possess. The scholarly literature on Iranian defense and security and military and intelligence assessments of its strategy and capabilities thoroughly document the country's conventional inferiority.<sup>31</sup> This inferiority is due to a number of factors. First, when the Americans left Iran in 1979, they left behind a powerful military they had helped expand and modernize, but also one that had become greatly dependent on U.S. knowhow, training, advice, and arms and equipment.<sup>32</sup> Four decades after the Islamic Revolution, Iran remains largely cut off from major suppliers, in large part due to remaining sanctions and arms embargoes imposed by international bodies and states. Second, the application of coup-proofing mechanisms immediately after the revolution and in the years that followed stymied Iran's battlefield effectiveness as different cultures, training levels,

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<sup>31</sup> For example, see Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, p. 12; and Wehrey et al., 2009, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Richard L. Russel, "The Artesh: From the War with Iraq Until Today," Middle East Institute, November 15, 2011.

and experience divided the two branches of the armed forces (the Artesh and the IRGC).<sup>33</sup> During and after the war, the IRGC and Artesh made an effort to increase cohesion and jointness and to create a more effective division of labor.<sup>34</sup> Today, the two branches do effectively have different areas of competence and authority in certain cases, and while it is difficult to fully assess their overall battlefield effectiveness, it is clear that their integration leaves something to be desired. As a result of these shortcomings plaguing the Iranian armed forces and stymying the country's conventional capabilities, Tehran has sought to develop proxy warfare capabilities to offset its conventional inferiority.

It is open to debate the extent to which Iran's reliance on proxy capabilities secures it geopolitical advantage. As Iran sees it, regional states' tensions with Iran coupled with their general weakness and possible collapse are best mitigated through the use of nonstate actors. From Iran's perspective, undercutting the authority of potentially hostile regional states is a critical measure to prevent the rise of strong adversaries. Moreover, by securing ties to various nonstate actors, Tehran hopes to position itself in such a way as to prevent an unfavorable balance of power regardless of the course of events in the region. On the other hand, it can easily be argued that Iran's use of proxy warfare has helped to galvanize anti-Iranian partnerships among many of the region's major powers, thus contributing to the encirclement that Tehran had sought to avoid. Iran's actions, for instance, have helped Israel to overcome its former animosity with many of the Gulf states, replaced by tacit cooperation against Iran.<sup>35</sup> Given Iran's historic isolation in the region, some degree of competition or even rivalry with other regional powers was almost inevitable. Arguably, that competition now occurs at a higher level of cost and risk for Iran than it might have.

Ideological commitments may in part explain Iran's commitment to proxy warfare and the specific groups to which it has provided support, at least in the early years after the revolution and potentially through the pres-

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<sup>33</sup> Mohammad Heydari, "Negahi be Moravedat-e Sepah va Artesh dar jang-e Iran va Iraq," *Shahrvand*, Vol. 18, October 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Heydari, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Natan Sachs, "Iran's Revolution, 40 Years on: Israel's Reverse Periphery Doctrine," Brookings Institution, January 24, 2019.

ent. Its ideology since 1979 has long relied on a concept of a transnational community bound by faith. The revolution was not framed as a simple transition of power in Iran. It was, rather, envisioned by Khomeini as the revival of Shias and, indeed, Muslims around the world. Initially, Khomeini played down nationalism and in its stead promoted an ideology that many populations could embrace. Iran's co-sectarians have often been sidelined in their home countries, affording Iran an opening to exploit grievances and the lack of opportunities available to those communities to present itself as an alternative protector and sponsor. But Iran's proxies are not only Shia. Several Iranian partners are Sunni and lack ethnic ties to Iran. As Muslims with shared adversaries, however, they have been among groups Tehran has cultivated, including Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Israel and Palestine. In fact, the Islamic Republic has carefully tailored its messaging to appeal to Shias but also to make it digestible and appealing to non-Shias, allowing it to bring them into the fold and build relationships with groups including even radical Sunnis.

## Building the Capacity to Support Proxies

As we have seen, the Iranian postrevolution proxy infrastructure was established in three key phases. First, immediately after the revolution, Iran created a new apparatus tasked with cultivating proxies and providing them with the support required to thrive. The IRGC replaced the SAVAK and took the lead in the development of Iran's proxy warfare capabilities. The main entity within the IRGC whose mandate was to support the ITN went through several iterations. Initially, Tehran established OLM, which was responsible for cultivating nonstate clients and partners throughout the region.<sup>36</sup> After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran formally created the IRGC-QF to replace OLM.<sup>37</sup>

In a second phase, beginning in the 1990s (and within a decade and a half of the revolution), Iran had mostly put in place the groundwork, including key institutions in charge of developing and implementing its proxy strategy and capabilities. By then, Iran's chief nonstate ally, Lebanese Hezbollah,

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, New York: Random House, 2005, p. 198.

<sup>37</sup> Pollack, 2005, p. 198.

was already established, as were the country's main Iraqi Shia militias. By this period, the IRGC-QF had consolidated its position atop the hierarchy of the Iranian security and military apparatus, controlling the most significant files in the country's foreign and security portfolio. As the commander of the armed forces, Bagheri explained in 2019, the IRGC leads Iran's support for Iranian clients with some support from the Artesh or conventional military where needed.<sup>38</sup> Iran's speed and efficiency in laying out the foundations of its new proxy strategy likely were due to the fact that the Islamic Republic was not starting from scratch but was instead building on the work done prior to the revolution.

Finally, with the start of the Syrian civil war, Iran further developed the ITN into a transnational and regional network composed not just of local forces but also of foreign fighters. In this period, Hezbollah has undertaken to advise and assist missions itself, which Iran both encourages and leverages to support other proxies.

## Conclusion

As with the previous cases in this report, Iran's turn to proxy warfare was originally motivated by a profound sense of vulnerability. After the revolution, Iran was profoundly isolated, in both geostrategic and ethnosectarian terms, within its region. Unlike Israel, which was also isolated within the region, Iran lacked capable conventional forces to offset its lack of allies.

Tehran may also have had ideological motives for proxy warfare, a desire to "export" its revolution, especially among Shiite minorities throughout the Middle East. The ideological motive, however, should not be overstated. It is important to note that Khomeinist Iran was able to exploit ethnosectarian divisions in the Middle East so quickly in substantial part because the postrevolutionary regime built on the proxy warfare tools already developed by the government of the Shah. Moreover, Khomeinist Iran has not been ideologically consistent in its support for VNSAs, in some cases pro-

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<sup>38</sup> "Sarlashkar Bagheri: Inke Gofteh Mishavad az Iran Mooshak be Yemen Haml Mishavad Dorugh Ast," *Donya-ye Eqtessad*, October 1, 2019.

viding support to groups that are neither Shiite nor Persian and that may in some ways be working at cross-purposes to Tehran.

Although its initial uses of proxy warfare may have been motivated by its keen sense of vulnerability, over time Iran became increasingly aggressive in its use of these instruments. This increase in Iranian subversive activity appears to have been motivated in part by the success of Lebanese Hezbollah and in part by the increase in opportunities available in the region, particularly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The central role of the IRGC in the regime may also have reinforced Tehran's appetite for proxy warfare.

Economic factors appear to have played an important role in restraining Beijing's and Moscow's appetites for supporting revolutionary movements throughout the world. These economic constraints were particularly evident during the early days of the Soviet Union, when Moscow desperately needed Western capital and technology to fuel economic growth, and in Beijing's turn to partial economic liberalization in the post-Mao period. In contrast, economic factors do not appear to have constrained Tehran.

Despite the central role of geopolitical factors in motivating Iranian use of proxy warfare, it is not clear that these instruments of competition have on balance advanced Tehran's geopolitical interests. Clearly, Iran has benefited in a number of cases from the leverage that it gains through influence over local proxies and by weakening hostile regimes. On the other hand, Tehran's increasing use of these instruments has deepened its strategic isolation, helping the Arab regimes in the region overcome their tensions with one another and with Israel to unite against Iran.



## Summary of Findings and Policy Recommendations

Why do states engage in proxy warfare, and what do our findings suggest for likely future trends in proxy wars? In this concluding chapter, we first summarize the findings of our qualitative and quantitative analyses of sponsor motives for proxy warfare, as well as how long it has historically taken states to develop robust proxy warfare capabilities. Second, we apply these findings to the present day and assess the implications for likely future trends in proxy warfare. Finally, we conclude with a series of policy recommendations for U.S. government officials, including those in the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army, regarding how the United States might prepare for and mitigate the risks of a potentially damaging future increase in proxy warfare.

### Why Do States Use Proxy Warfare?

We identified several overarching themes regarding the factors that have in the past motivated states to pursue proxy warfare.

First, geopolitical considerations appear to be paramount in the decision to provide support to VNSAs, across most actors and at most times. While there are exceptions, the desire to undermine rivals and shift regional balances of power is the most clearly and consistently supported factor in the preceding chapters. This desire to use proxy warfare in a proactive manner, including in regions far from a state's borders, often has its roots in a reactive concern, driven by acute perceptions of the vulnerability of the state's own security to adversary proxy warfare. However, once states have developed

these proxy warfare capabilities, they often use them much more widely than simply to address the initial vulnerability. We observed this pattern across multiple different types of states, including status quo powers, such as the United States during the Cold War, and revisionists, such as the PRC under Mao or post-1979 Iran.

In many ways, it is unsurprising that geopolitical considerations play a predominant role. As with other instruments of coercion or statecraft more generally, we would expect proxy warfare to be used strategically to improve a state's security. In other ways, however, the conclusion is less obvious. Many observers view proxy warfare as practiced by Khomeinist Iran or Maoist China as predominantly an activity motivated by ideology. As we discuss below, ideology appears to play a role. But a focus on ideological motives can cause observers to overlook the potential for proxy warfare to be used by regimes without a revolutionary ideology (such as, arguably, present-day China) or to overlook the potential for proxy relationships with seemingly strange bedfellows (a frequent occurrence, as the chapters on the Soviet Union and Iran made clear).

The geopolitical motivations for proxy warfare are not as intuitive as they first appear in another respect: the frequently self-defeating nature of these instruments. The case studies in this report are full of instances of one-time proxies turning against their former sponsors, including the PRC turning against the Soviet Union and Vietnam turning against the PRC. The use of proxy warfare also frequently provokes countervailing coalitions to fight back against the state exporting insurgency, such as the coalition of Sunni Arab states that has formed in reaction to Tehran's expanded use of proxy warfare. Finally, the economic costs can be high, as the sanction regimes against contemporary Iran and Russia suggest. Although it is beyond the scope of this report to assess the costs and benefits of proxy warfare, better understanding when states are willing to bear the potential long-term costs of proxy warfare and how other states might influence this calculus is an important topic for future research.

Given these potential drawbacks to proxy warfare, why do states engage in the practice? Doubtless, part of the answer is the high degree of uncertainty involved in such geopolitical calculations and decisionmakers' tendency to discount future costs. These calculations are likely also to be shaped by the other factors analyzed in this report. In particular, ideo-

logical commitment and economic “embeddedness” in the global economy appear to shape leaders’ perceptions of their probability of success, the value to be derived if they “win” a proxy war (or the costs to be paid if the proxy war proves more disruptive than anticipated), and the range of alternatives available to decisionmakers (in particular, the potential for economic statecraft or diplomatic pressure to obtain at least partial successes at much lower levels of risk).

While difficult to separate from geopolitical considerations, ideological factors seem to have played an important role for many states in decisions to engage in proxy warfare. Consistent with previous findings, our quantitative analysis highlights that postrevolutionary regimes appear to be more likely to support VNSAs than other states. State ideology is also a crucial factor in shaping which factions most states will consider supporting, from the Iranian focus on Shia groups to the Soviet and Chinese focus on leftist or communist groups. Finally, ideology plays a role in driving the overall perception of threat from a rival that motivates much proxy war activity in the first place. The ideological divide between East and West during the Cold War was a key part of the perception on both sides that the other was an implacable adversary that needed to be combated by all available means, including proxy warfare.

We found less support for domestic politics as factors motivating states to pursue proxy warfare. We found little evidence, particularly in the case studies, that public attitudes, such as concerns for diaspora groups or particular rebel groups, were an important factor in state decisions to support VNSAs. However, we did see repeated evidence that support to VNSAs is often attractive to policymakers precisely because it avoids, or at least limits, the domestic political costs and scrutiny that would accompany the use of the country’s own military forces, especially in large numbers. This desire to reduce scrutiny or domestic political opposition through the use of proxies is apparent in both autocracies and democracies. The apparent tendency of many states to expand their use of proxy warfare over time may also have its roots in domestic politics, as the bureaucratic actors responsible for such wars seek to expand their influence over time.

Similar to the previous theme, we found considerable evidence that states turn to proxy warfare to lower the economic costs of their efforts to undermine their rivals. Proxy warfare was often perceived to be cheaper, in

fiscal and other terms, than direct military intervention. However, there is little evidence that the potential for economic gains (e.g., through seizing natural resources and/or the profits that derive from them) plays a large role in major powers' support for VNSAs. To the extent that such profit motives play a role, they appear to do so only at the margins and to involve small groups of domestic actors with close ties to a corrupt regime. On the other hand, while most major powers do not generally appear driven by profit motives to engage in proxy warfare, they may be constrained from using such weapons if they fear harm to trade and investment relationships. Our study did not focus on the motivations of nonmajor powers, but there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that economic gains may play a larger role in the decision to support proxies for these states (e.g., Rwandan support to groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberian support to groups in Sierra Leone in the early 2000s).

Beyond these overall themes, there are additional key points that emerged in each of the individual foregoing chapters that are important to highlight.

## Quantitative Analysis

The limited availability of more-recent data at the time of our research constrained the types of analyses that we could perform using quantitative data on proxy wars. Nonetheless, our investigations did produce several findings. Perhaps most notable was the clear shift in state proxy war behavior between the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. During the Cold War, most instances of state support to VNSAs during civil conflicts came from more highly capable major powers. After the Cold War, this pattern shifted, and support for VNSAs came increasingly from relatively less wealthy and less capable states, such as regional powers in the Middle East and a wide variety of states in Africa.

Beyond this notable overall pattern, we also found evidence in support of geopolitical, ideological, and, to some extent, economic explanations for state decisions to provide support to VNSAs. With regards to geopolitical factors, we found that states are more likely to support VNSAs in their rivals, as well as in regions without a clear hegemon, where the balance of power may be more fluid or open to contestation. With regards to ideology, as noted above, we also found evidence that postrevolutionary regimes are

more likely to support VNSAs, even after controlling for the presence of other likely correlates. We also found that higher levels of regional economic interdependence appear to dampen support for proxy warfare by all states.

## USSR and Russia

Geopolitical factors also seem to have been predominant in Soviet and Russian decisions to build and employ proxy support capabilities. Concerns regarding local and regional balances of power, and a desire to identify and cultivate friendly regimes that could be potential allies in a future war with the West, were paramount in Soviet thinking in particular. That said, the effect of geopolitical factors on Soviet support for proxy warfare was not simple. It is striking, for example, that the Soviet Union adopted a restrained approach to proxy warfare for decades under Stalin, fearing that such adventures could ultimately jeopardize Soviet security by galvanizing a counterreaction by the more powerful Western states. As Soviet military capabilities matured, the Soviet Union came to use proxy warfare more aggressively—although, in some cases, it was driven as much by a desire to maintain primacy within the Communist bloc as by efforts to harm the United States and its allies and partners.

During the Soviet period, ideological factors also played an important role in informing proxy support decisionmaking and, in particular, played a large role in determining which side of a conflict the Soviets were interested in supporting. Ideological factors also greatly enhanced opportunities for providing support, with leftist groups or governments being predisposed to seek out and accept Soviet assistance. But these factors seem to have been clearly secondary to geopolitical considerations, particularly in the period under Stalin.

Economic factors appear to have been of supporting importance for the Soviet Union and for Russia. Under Stalin, these factors restrained Soviet activities in support of leftist movements because of Soviet reliance on Western capital for development. More recently, there seems to be some additional profit motive associated with many deployments of Russian PMCs that goes beyond Russian geopolitical considerations, although it is not clear that these economic opportunities are a main driver of Russian activities overall.

It is also worth noting two other characteristics of the Soviet and Russian experience with proxy warfare prior to 2022. First, most Soviet and Russian proxy support has been to governments rather than VNSAs. For many years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this preference reflected the Russian preference for stability, stemming from their own perceptions of domestic insecurity, one of the few clear instances of domestic political factors affecting Russian or Soviet decisionmaking on this issue. In more-recent years, there have been important exceptions, including support to separatists in Georgia, surrogates in eastern Ukraine in the Donbas conflict beginning in 2014, and General Hiftar's forces in Libya. Second, the Soviets, in particular, frequently had trouble controlling those receiving proxy support, some of whom turned from recipients to adversaries, including, most notably, the PRC, highlighting the risks and limitations of proxy support as a policy lever for gaining geopolitical advantage.

## China

Chinese motivations to support proxy movements varied over time. In the early post-1949 period, Chinese decisions to support rebel groups were often ideological, as China sought to export its revolutionary Communist ideology. Even in this period, though, geopolitical considerations overlapped with ideological ones, as one of the key motivations for exporting revolution was to help create a wider range of potential allies and partners in an international system that the PRC found threatening, as well as to undermine (ideologically different) rivals. By the mid-1970s, however, geopolitical considerations had become even more paramount in Chinese decisions about becoming involved in proxy wars. China's strategic reorientation away from the USSR and toward the United States in the 1970s reflected this more pragmatic approach, and this was translated into decisions about when and where to support proxies. Support for ideologically Maoist groups fell out of favor, and support for groups that could provide clear strategic benefits, such as containing fellow-communist Vietnam in Southeast Asia, was prioritized.

Economic concerns also played a role in post-Maoist China's turn away from proxy warfare. Beijing decided that economic development was more important to its long-term security than gaining ideological allies, and for

economic development, it needed trade and investment with the West and stability in developing countries with which it planned to forge economic partnerships. In the post–Cold War era, China has largely abandoned any support to rebel movements in favor of a strong strategic emphasis on state sovereignty and the maintenance of existing regimes. Domestic and economic considerations have largely driven this emphasis on support to existing governments in Chinese policy, alongside perceptions of a relatively benign international security environment throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

## Iran

Geopolitical considerations have also been instrumental in shaping the Iranian approach to proxy support. Iran's sense of strategic isolation and conventional inferiority have incentivized it to create a robust capability to support proxy forces throughout its region. By building a network of reliable partners, Iran has been able either to shift state policy toward greater consideration of Iranian interests or to weaken or distract potential adversaries.

That said, while geopolitical factors have been central to Iranian proxy support, they cannot be divorced from ideological factors. Iran's identity as a Shia Islamic power is a key reason for its strategic isolation in the region in the first place. Furthermore, these aspects of its identity have helped determine the nonstate groups with which Iran works in other countries, and it has sought to use these groups to promote revivals of Shiism and Islamism. There have been exceptions as well, when ideological and geopolitical considerations diverged, and geopolitical considerations seem to have predominated, such as in Iran's limited support and engagement with the Taliban or Hamas, both largely Sunni groups. Ideological rigidity in key parts of the Iranian leadership may also have maintained the high levels of proxy support across different geopolitical circumstances. Unlike in the Soviet and Chinese cases, for instance, there is no evidence in Iranian actions that top decisionmakers in Tehran prioritized economic development over pursuing its proxy warfare agendas, regardless of the acuity of Iranian need for such development. Also notable is the fact that early Soviet and later Cold War Communist Chinese decisionmakers responded to diplomatic isolation and perceived military vulnerability with relatively restrained use of proxy war-

fare, whereas Iran responded with much more aggressive uses of this instrument. Without better information about internal policy debates in Tehran, however, the precise reasons for these patterns of behavior remain unclear.

Overall Summary

The themes above are summarized in Table 7.1 across the four main categories of motivation for proxy warfare identified in Chapter 2: geopolitical, domestic, economic, and ideological.

TABLE 7.1  
Summary of Factors Motivating States’ Use of Proxy Warfare

|                 | Geopolitical                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Domestic                                               | Economic                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Ideological                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| USSR/<br>Russia | Geopolitical factors paramount in Soviet and Russian decisionmaking: restrained during period of high vulnerability, but less so once conventional and strategic military parity established.<br><br>In post–Cold War period, Russian sponsorship of VNSAs has been opportunistic, motivated by keen sense of vulnerability and (more recently) grievance against the United States | Limited evidence for domestic factors in Soviet period | Under Stalin, desire to maintain access to Western capital limited support to anticolonial Marxist movements<br><br>In recent years, Russian use of proxy warfare (including PMCs) appears driven by both imperative to keep costs of foreign adventures low and, in part, from potential for profit | Ideology during the Cold War enhanced ability to recruit leftist groups, but geopolitical concerns often overrode ideology<br><br>Differing ideologies also drove overall perceptions of threat |

**Table 7.1—Continued**

|       | Geopolitical                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Domestic                                                                             | Economic                                                                                                          | Ideological                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| China | <p>During the early Cold War, proxy support provided a way for the PRC to ease international isolation and undermine potential rivals</p> <p>Strategic shift toward the United States and an emphasis on economic development in the late Cold War period drove the end of much Chinese support to proxies</p> | -                                                                                    | <p>Economic considerations were likely an important factor in current PRC restraint to avoid support to VNSAs</p> | <p>Early Cold War period saw much ideologically driven support to VNSAs, even those with limited geopolitical benefits</p> <p>In the late Cold War period, ideological motivation ebbed, and support became much more strategically focused and limited</p> |
| Iran  | <p>Strategic isolation and weakness motivated Iran to use VNSAs to enhance its regional security</p> <p>Support was provided to shift policies of potential allies and weaken or distract potential adversaries</p>                                                                                            | <p>Importance of IRGC may have played a secondary role in focus on proxy warfare</p> | -                                                                                                                 | <p>Ideology was likely an important factor in the scope and consistency of proxy support, largely confined to fellow Shia or Islamist groups</p> <p>Iranian identity as Shia, Persian power is a key factor in its strategic isolation</p>                  |

## How Long Do States Require to Develop a Capability for Proxy Warfare?

In addition, these cases helped shed light on one of the key questions we posed in Chapter 2: How long does it take states to develop proxy warfare

capabilities once they make the decision to do so? In this section, we distinguish between how quickly a state may be able to initially create a proxy warfare capability and how long it tends to take states to refine that capability and make it more effective or robust. Assessing the time it takes to develop an initial proxy warfare capability is complex, because many new states have an inheritance of proxy warfare capability that can substantially speed its development. The CCP, which came to power after victory in a civil war in which it was itself a VNSA, appears to have been capable of providing effective proxy support to others relatively quickly, as seen in its support of Vietnamese communists fighting the French in the early 1950s. The Soviet Communist Party had similar roots as a revolutionary group, though it initially invested far less attention and resources into developing capabilities to support others. Postrevolutionary Iran inherited a substantial set of proxy relationships and capabilities from the Shah, upon which it proceeded to build dramatically.

Whatever baseline the state started from, however, a relatively lengthy period of learning and growth to better develop proxy warfare capabilities appears to be common. Iran, which inherited a substantial proxy support infrastructure from the prior regime, still took years to build relationships and capabilities with groups such as Hezbollah. The Soviet Union took decades to progress from its early focus on coordination with potential partners through Comintern to its later, more-robust Cold War capabilities, though this timeline was substantially affected by limited initial Soviet motivation to do so. The early post-1949 Chinese experience of having become highly effective at proxy support relatively quickly therefore appears to be more unusual and likely was a product of the CCP's lengthy experience as a rebel movement itself. For most states, while an initial capability might be stood up relatively quickly, a longer learning curve should also be expected for greater proficiency.

## Looking Forward

What do these past patterns tell us about the potential for a resurgence of the use of proxy warfare in a new era of great-power competition? Below we survey the evidence from this report through three lenses. First, we assess

this possibility from the perspective of ongoing and historical trends in the incidence of proxy warfare. Second, we summarize the evidence for a potential resurgence in proxy wars across the four categories of factors identified in our analysis as driving proxy war involvement: geopolitical, ideological, economic, and domestic. Third and finally, we summarize the potential for greater proxy war involvement by states, including such key U.S. adversaries as China, Russia, and Iran.

## Trends in Proxy Warfare

Unfortunately, at the time of our research, systematic and publicly available data on the use of proxy warfare did not extend past 2010, so it is difficult to determine whether a resurgence in proxy warfare has already begun in recent years up to the time of this writing (summer 2022).<sup>1</sup> Certainly at an anecdotal level, there appears to have been an increase in cases, or at least their prominence. Perhaps more worryingly, we have seen a shift from the earlier post–Cold War pattern in which proxy warfare was largely a tool of weaker states (e.g., Rwanda in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo or Liberia in Sierra Leone). In recent years, we have seen a large increase in Russia’s and Iran’s use of proxy warfare, both quantitatively (the number of proxies that they are supporting) and qualitatively (the geographical scope of their operations and the sophistication of their use of these instruments). The big questions for analysts and policymakers going forward are (1) whether Russia and Iran will continue or increase their use of proxy warfare and (2) whether China might reengage in this form of strategic competition. These questions will be addressed below in our discussion of these states individually.

One additional dynamic identified in our historical research underlines the risks involved if one or more powerful states begin to increase (or, potentially, already have increased) their involvement in proxy warfare. Geopolitical considerations seem to be the primary driver of uses of proxy warfare, and they often do so in ways that can be self-reinforcing. In the past, regimes

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, we determined that collecting these more-recent data on a comprehensive basis such that they would be comparable to earlier available data was outside the scope of this effort.

that have made widespread use of proxy warfare have typically begun such campaigns out of an acute sense of vulnerability and a lack of other tools that are appropriate (affordable, having a sufficiently low risk of escalation, and so on). Often the use of proxy warfare expands over time, however, from instances in which it appears clearly defensive (responding to specific threats that are geographically proximate) to much more aggressive, wide-ranging uses of proxy warfare. Furthermore, the use of proxy warfare has historically prompted similar behavior in adversaries and rivals, creating a spiral in which one state's use of the tool increases its use by others. There are also numerous instances of spillover effects, where support for one local proxy leads to support for others in nearby countries (e.g., U.S. support for South Vietnam leading to involvement in wars in Laos and Cambodia or Iranian support to Lebanese Hezbollah drawing Iran deeply into the Syrian civil war). These factors highlight the potential risks that may accompany the apparent recent increase in proxy warfare.

## Factors That May Affect Future Likelihood of Proxy Warfare

As noted above, throughout this report we have identified four main types of factors that affect the motivations of states to engage in proxy warfare. Below we assess the likely future direction of each of these factors and how we assess that they are likely to alter the decisions of states to provide proxy support going forward.

### Geopolitical Factors

With the renewed focus in many regions on strategic competition, there seems to be a growing risk that states will feel increasingly threatened by their rivals and take greater steps to counteract these threats in the years to come. Our case studies highlight how such an environment can often, though not always, lead to an increased interest in supporting proxy warfare. Once one state commits to proxy warfare, its competitors or rivals may be more likely to follow suit, increasing the risk that the phenomenon will become widespread.

There are, therefore, substantial reasons to be concerned that geopolitical factors could motivate an increased interest in proxy warfare on the

part of U.S. competitors, and potentially the United States itself. Beyond the increasing bilateral intensity of competition between key rivals, the international system as a whole may be moving in a direction that makes proxy competition between rivals more feasible and attractive. During the immediate post-Cold War period, the relative unipolarity of the system went hand in hand with a reduced interest, and reduced opportunities, for other great powers, such as Russia or China, to challenge the United States through proxy warfare. As the system shifts toward greater multipolarity or, potentially, a renewed bipolar competition with China, other states may feel that they have less to risk and more to gain by challenging U.S. interests through the use of proxy warfare, given the reduced relative position of the United States in the international system.

### Ideological Factors

Contrary to the anticipated trends in geopolitical factors, our assessment of ideological factors is not as grim. Neither current major U.S. competitor, China and Russia, has a particularly ideological regime, certainly not in comparison with the regimes of the same countries during the earlier Cold War period. Neither represents a globalized ideology with a ready-made set of potential partners throughout other parts of the world (and, conversely, potential local partners lack a ready-made ideology to appeal to China or Russia for assistance). Indeed, while the extent to which these differences are sincere is unclear (and there are reasons to be skeptical), the main professed ideological difference that China and Russia represent relative to the United States and its allies is a focus on state sovereignty and the continuity of existing governments, regardless of their behavior or treatment of their people. This stated ideology may or may not help increase their willingness to provide support to governments in the midst of civil conflicts, but it hardly seems likely to increase their interest in providing support to VNSAs.

### Economic Factors

Economic motivations are likely to continue to play a restraining role on the decisions of China in particular going forward, as the country continues to become increasingly integrated into the global economy and economically invested in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe through its Belt and Road Initiative. The likelihood that investments in those regions

would pay off could be substantially undermined by a widespread resurgence in proxy warfare. This is not to suggest that geopolitical concerns cannot override economic concerns in particular countries or contexts, however. If efforts to prevent or limit Chinese economic penetration of a country succeeded, perhaps most likely in U.S. allies or partners, then China could well conclude that geopolitical factors would motivate close consideration of support to VNSAs in that country. Furthermore, China may be an outlier among U.S. competitors in the extent to which economic considerations may be restraining its proxy support. Russia's economy largely remains focused on natural resource extraction and, indeed, is already under a host of international sanctions due to its aggression in Ukraine (including support for proxies) and does not appear to have been inhibited in its willingness to support proxies in the former Soviet space, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Similarly, Iran has been under extensive economic sanctions for decades, with no apparent reduction in its interest or willingness to support proxies in its region.

### Domestic Political Factors

We anticipate that domestic political factors will remain a limited factor on state decisions to support proxy warfare going forward. That said, many states, including key U.S. competitors, retain an incentive to pursue proxy support rather than overt military interventions in order to minimize domestic political costs. The most acute recent example of this phenomenon was perhaps in Ukraine, where, prior to its 2022 invasion, Russia undertook substantial media censorship and official denials to mask its involvement in the war in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> But while such dynamics are likely to persist, we do not find reason to believe that they will change dramatically in the future to produce either an increase or a decrease from current levels of proxy warfare. It is possible that politically powerful actors within some competitors' state organs, such as Iran's Quds Force or the *siloviki* in Russia,

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<sup>2</sup> Alec Luhn, "Vladimir Putin Declares All Russian Military Deaths State Secrets," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2015; Nataliya Roman, Wayne Wanta, and Iuliia Buniak, "Information Wars: Eastern Ukraine Military Conflict Coverage in the Russian, Ukrainian and US Newscasts," *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 79, No. 4, 2017.

may be empowered by some of their successes and press to expand their activities.

## Overall Assessments by Country

Given these anticipated trends across these factors, what would we expect for the likelihood that particular states will pursue proxy warfare in the years to come?

### China

The deterioration in relations between the United States and China, the expanding strategic horizons of the PRC, and the increase in balancing behavior by other states in Asia concerned with the rise of China have the potential to increase Chinese perceptions of threats to its vital interests over the short to medium term. This could, in turn, increase Chinese motivations to support proxy warfare in countries where it feels that its interests are threatened. Based on historical examples, one would expect China to be able to reconstitute a baseline proxy warfare capability relatively quickly, should it choose to do so, probably within a couple of years of such a decision. Gaining greater proficiency, however, would likely take more time. While the early post-1949 CCP was still close to its roots as a rebel movement, the current Chinese state is vastly different and has not conducted substantial proxy warfare efforts in decades. We would therefore expect China, should it decide to pursue proxy warfare more robustly, to go through a more extensive learning process, with more-mixed results in the early stages, as has been the case with most states historically.

That said, China's widespread economic investments and continuing desire to be seen as a peacefully rising power in order to limit efforts to contain it suggest that the locations where China could find it advantageous to support VNSAs in particular are likely to be limited. Furthermore, the current Chinese regime lacks a clear ideological motivation to do so, which could otherwise have provided an accelerant to PRC proxy support. While targeted uses of Chinese proxy support could well occur in the years to come in strategically important locations, the prospect for widespread, globalized Chinese support for VNSAs on par with certain periods of the Cold War currently appears limited.

## Russia

Russia is already highly motivated to support proxy warfare, albeit in different ways in different regions. Given current trends, we do not expect this to abate; however, the long-term effects of Russia's 2022 large-scale war in Ukraine on Russian motivation to support proxy warfare remain to be seen. Russia's sense of vulnerability and desire to maintain its accustomed dominance have motivated support for VNSAs in its home region, as seen in the Donbas conflict from 2014 to early 2022 and in Georgia. Russia also presents itself as an ideological competitor to the United States in other regions and as a defender of state sovereignty, which has helped to motivate (alongside geopolitical calculations) proxy support to governments, most notably in Syria. Going forward, and particularly as long as the heightened tension in relations with the West persists, there are some indications that Russia may continue to seek out opportunities to support willing proxies in ways that advance its interests and undermine those of the United States. That said, while proxy support is often affordable in comparison with direct military interventions, the costs involved can often become substantial. Furthermore, it can be difficult for states to determine in advance which proxy support relationships will evolve to become highly costly in this manner, so the more relationships a state takes on, the higher the risk it may run of escalating costs. Even before its 2022 large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia was a notably resource-constrained state facing pressure on its defense budget because of unfavorable demographic and economic trends.<sup>3</sup> While this could change depending on future trends in the price of its fossil fuel exports, unexpected success in modernizing its economy, or the lifting of ongoing international sanctions, there are reasons to question whether Russia could sustain or increase proxy support at or above the level it is currently providing. The recent trend toward reliance on Russian PMCs may highlight how Russia might adapt to continue to provide proxy

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<sup>3</sup> Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, and Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2573-A, 2019; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2018," April 2019. For a partially dissenting view, see Pavel K. Baev, "Is Russia Really Cutting Its Military Spending?" *Real Clear Defense*, May 7, 2019.

support despite these restrictions and also underlines the salience of these restrictions to begin with.

## Iran

Iran's relations with the United States and its partners in the region, as of this writing, remain very poor. Iranian perceptions of threat seem likely to remain acute. Iran's ideology, regime composition, and identification as a Shia Islamic power also seem unlikely to change in the near term, continuing to fuel Iranian motivation to provide support to like-minded proxies. Efforts to increase sanctions on Iran in order to dissuade them from providing support to proxies or prompt regime change seem most likely to underline Iran's perceptions of threat from the United States and its allies, and, in general, sanctions have proven to be a limited tool for modifying state behavior or regime composition.<sup>4</sup> Opportunities for Iran to provide such support in active conflicts may vary, however. The regional instability following the Arab Spring substantially increased the offensive and defensive opportunities for Iranian proxy support. Some of the conflicts that stem from that period, most notably the Syrian Civil War, may be drawing to a close, and with them could come a reduction in the number or extent of Iranian support for proxy warfare (though not necessarily the end of Iranian relations with proxies established during those conflicts). Whether a future wave of conflicts in the region would provide additional opportunities for Iranian proxy intervention is uncertain, but some forecasting efforts find that the Mideast is likely to remain conflict-prone for some time.<sup>5</sup> It remains to be seen, as of this writing, how the January 2020 death of Qasem Soleimani could affect Iran capabilities in this area. However, the overall motivations for Iran to utilize proxy warfare as a key element of its security strategy seem likely to remain intact.

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<sup>4</sup> Manuel Oechslein, "Targeting Autocrats: Economic Sanctions and Regime Change," *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 36, 2014; Nikolay Marinov and Shmuel Nili, "Sanctions and Democracy," *International Interactions*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Matthew Lane, Alexander Stephenson, and Colin P. Clarke, *A More Peaceful World? Regional Conflict Trends and U.S. Defense Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1177-A, 2017.

## Policy Recommendations

To conclude, we provide policy recommendations for the United States government, including the Department of Defense and the U.S. Army, drawn from our analysis. The preceding chapters suggest that proxy warfare, although far from inevitable, has real potential to increase in frequency in the future. In recent years, Russia and Iran have increased the number, geographic scope, and sophistication of their use of proxies. Were China to become involved in this form of strategic competition, it could create an even more dangerous situation.

Our examination of the causes of proxy warfare gives reasons to hope that such wars will not become as prevalent as they were during the Cold War but also reasons for concern that they may increase over the levels observed today. On the one hand, the same ideological factors that helped to propel the Cold War either do not exist or exist in much weaker forms. China's integration into the world economy also gives Beijing a stake in the continued stability of the international order, as well as nonmilitary tools to apply leverage against states that threaten its interests. On the other hand, many of the same geopolitical factors that fueled proxy warfare in the past exist in this new era of strategic competition. Moreover, proxy warfare has a tendency to feed upon itself in positive feedback loops, leading to yet more instances of such wars. Were proxy warfare to again become a common form of strategic competition, it would likely pose serious challenges to the United States and its allies and partners, and pragmatic steps to limit this risk appear warranted. To that end, we make the following recommendations.

### Strategic Competition: Limiting Proxy Warfare Where Possible

While this report has focused on how, when, and to what effect states engage in proxy warfare, the first lesson to emerge from our analysis is that the United States should avoid involvement in such conflicts where possible without sacrificing vital U.S. interests. These conflicts can impose considerable costs, both on the United States and on the countries involved.

That said, there may still be circumstances in which adversary proxy support threatens important U.S. interests, and a military response is war-

ranted. Adversary support to VNSAs could threaten countries that are of strategic interest to the United States, whether because of their strategic position (e.g., the Philippines), the potential for spillover violence (e.g., Iraq, Syria), or possibly the location of natural resources (although our analysis does not suggest that this is generally an important trigger of proxy warfare for major powers). It is thus not hard to imagine circumstances that might prompt a U.S. response, either through an escalated level of U.S. proxy support to the affected states or through direct U.S. military intervention.

To the extent that the United States can avoid or minimize such situations, however, it should do so. Seeking to establish limits or rules of the road in strategic competitions such that leaders in competitor countries do not feel an acute sense of threat from the United States to the security of their states or regimes could mitigate what has historically been the key motivation for states to expand proxy warfare and could, in turn, reduce the likelihood that the United States will be drawn into such potentially costly conflicts. The United States also has a wide range of nonmilitary instruments, such as economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, with which it can impose lesser costs on other major powers that employ proxy warfare without the same risks of military escalation.<sup>6</sup>

## Attribution

In the event that U.S. adversaries do pursue, or continue to pursue, substantial proxy warfare activities, there are steps that the United States can take to counter them. The first of these is the need for improved intelligence to establish adversary proxy support relationships in ways that can be publicized. States often pursue proxy relationships precisely because of their greater deniability, both internationally and at home. To the extent that the U.S. government can establish the nature and extent of these relationships publicly, it can help undercut one of the key benefits that states seek in choosing proxy warfare and potentially reduce its attractiveness and

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Stephan John Stedman, "Yugoslavia," in Richard Haass, ed., *Economic Sanctions and American Diplomacy*, Washington, D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, 1998; and Risa A. Brooks, "Sanctions and Regime Type: What Works, and When?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2002.

frequency. While information that the United States can collect to understand these relationships at a private or classified level can be helpful for policymakers, by itself it lacks the benefits that could accompany public attribution. For example, public information regarding the links between Iran and the Houthis in Yemen, long a source of speculation, could be helpful in altering international attitudes toward that conflict and Iran's role in it. Additional investments in capabilities designed to uncover such information in ways that could be publicized without compromising vital sources and methods would therefore be useful. Such investments might be either direct (such as through U.S. technical means) or indirect (such as through information-sharing with partners).

## Shaping and Resilience

Recognizing that the United States may not be able to avoid or deter all instances of adversary support to VNSAs in strategically important countries, the United States can also help prepare countries that are vulnerable or likely to be targeted by such support. The United States should conduct a strategic-level assessment of key U.S. allies and partners that are potentially vulnerable to proxy warfare where additional stabilization support could be provided in advance. While such an assessment is outside the scope of the present analysis, states such as the Philippines, Thailand, or Indonesia seem likely to be highlighted. The additional support provided by the United States to such countries could include economic development assistance and transportation links for subnational regions with a history or potential for separatist or other grievances. This support might entail diplomatic and political support for reconciliation efforts and political settlements with separatist groups that could become targets for adversary proxy support in the future. Or it could include resources dedicated to improving security governance in at-risk states, especially in states that show a willingness to undertake reforms. In parallel, the United States should also identify countries that could serve as safe havens or transit corridors for potential proxy groups in key U.S. allies or partners and invest in advance in their stability and relations with the United States.

Although these conflicts are already ongoing, this recommendation is also relevant to Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Freedom's Sen-

tinel in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively. While proxy support dynamics have been key aspects of these conflicts from the beginning, given the long-standing involvement of Iran in supporting Shia militias in Iraq and Pakistani support for a number of militant groups in Afghanistan, proxy involvement in these conflicts could still intensify or expand, especially as the United States further draws down its presence, as the more recent expansion of Iranian and Russian involvement in Afghanistan highlights. The United States should therefore continue to assess the risks both to mission and U.S. personnel of greater third-party involvement in these conflicts and take necessary actions to mitigate those risks as needed.

## Hedging Investments in U.S. Military Capabilities to Counter Proxy Warfare

Great powers have frequently discovered that the costs of proxy warfare cannot be justified by the national interests at stake. In some cases, however, the United States may determine that critical interests are threatened by foreign support for VNSAs. The United States should therefore continue to make investments in U.S. military capabilities critical to combating such threats. Indeed, by remaining prepared for such contingencies, the United States may help to deter the sorts of hostile activities that would be most likely to draw it into such an intervention.<sup>7</sup>

A detailed examination of such investments is beyond the scope of this report; a companion report assesses the specific warfighting challenges that can be posed by state support to VNSAs, and it offers recommendations on the doctrinal, training, personnel, and other investments that the United States might undertake to hedge against the risk of proxy warfare.<sup>8</sup> In general, these investments are low-cost and would have at most marginal impact on U.S. readiness for conventional combat.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy,” 2020, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Watts et al., 2023.



# Appendix to the Quantitative Assessment of Proxy War Trends and Drivers

This appendix provides the technical details for the quantitative analysis presented in Chapter 3. It includes information on the data sources used to construct our integrated dataset of instances of proxy warfare and precise regression output.

## Data and Research Design

In this section, we provide additional details on the datasets used to compile data on proxy support.

### Compiling the Dataset of Proxy Support in Civil Conflicts

The dataset of VNSA support relationships that we utilized reflects several choices that we made that define the scope of our assessments. First, we limited the VNSAs in which we were interested to those groups that were actively engaged in an intrastate conflict with the government of the state in which they were located. We therefore excluded nonstate actors that may oppose their government but are not actively engaged in a violent conflict with it. To that end, the dataset that we compiled covers instances of significant external support to actors involved in armed conflicts between a state

and a VNSA from 1946 through 2010, based on the list of such conflicts compiled by the UCDP at the time of our research (2019–2020).<sup>1</sup>

Based on this list of intrastate conflicts, we then needed to identify the instances of significant external support to VNSAs. To compile this information, we used a number of existing datasets with information on the type, source, and dates of external support to actors in civil conflicts. After reviewing the available data sources, the research team picked four datasets with the most comprehensive information on external support: the UCDP External Support Dataset;<sup>2</sup> the NAGs dataset;<sup>3</sup> the NSA dataset;<sup>4</sup> and the UCDP/PRIO ACD, version 19.1.<sup>5</sup>

The reasoning behind using multiple datasets was twofold. First, no dataset that was available at the time of this project had coverage for the entire period of 1946 through 2018. In fact, no dataset covered 2012 through 2018 in a complete manner.<sup>6</sup> Second, we encountered issues in reliability or completeness for some of the information gathered by some of the datasets. Utilizing multiple datasets that overlapped in their temporal coverage therefore allowed us to check these reliability and completeness issues to help improve our compiled dataset. The manner in which we utilized each of these four datasets is discussed in detail below.

### Uppsala Conflict Data Program External Support Dataset

We treated the UCDP External Support dataset as authoritative in its period of coverage, 1975–2009. The dataset is organized at an annual level and includes the most detailed information on the types of support that actors

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<sup>1</sup> Although the UCDP dataset does list armed conflicts in more-recent years, through 2018 as of this writing, the data sources covering external support are more-limited temporally, which is why our quantitative analysis ends in 2011. See Oberg, Pettersson, and Högladh, 2019; and Gleditsch et al., 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Högladh, Pettersson, and Themnér, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> San-Akca, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan, 2013, pp. 516–531.

<sup>5</sup> Oberg, Pettersson, and Högladh, 2019; Gleditsch et al., 2002.

<sup>6</sup> The ACD contained some information on these years but was incomplete.

receive from their sponsors.<sup>7</sup> The level of detail and coding notes made this dataset a clear choice to serve as the baseline for its period of coverage. Because no dataset was likely to capture the entire universe of cases, we developed a strategy for adding data that the UCDP dataset may have missed. We identified instances of additional external support before, during, and after UCDP's coverage period by relying on the three other datasets. We discuss this strategy below after discussing the criteria for including observations from the other datasets.

### Nonstate Armed Groups Dataset

The NAGs dataset covers the period stretching from 1922 through 2010 on an annual basis. We excluded all data before 1946 as the nature of the international system in this period differed substantially from the post-1945 period and was therefore less germane for our study. The NAGs data helpfully indicate the confidence level their coders had in identifying instances of external support. Their confidence is coded on a four-point scale. We kept items with the highest confidence levels of 1, which indicates that a sponsor claimed its support or the support was otherwise documented by the sponsor or another state. For the tests featured here, the NAGs data are primarily useful for fleshing out instances of proxy support before the UCDP data begin in 1975.

### Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict Dataset

The NSA dataset covers the period from 1945 through 2011 and is organized at the dyad-conflict-period level. This means that instances of external support are only coded for blocks of years. For example, the NSA dataset might identify support from country X to rebel group Y in the period from 1960 to 1975 but without specifying whether this support occurred in every year in this period or just some of them. The NSA data also do not clearly or consistently identify the VNSAs involved by preserving actor or dyad numeric identifiers. In order to determine whether the rebel groups involved were in fact already present in other datasets, such as the UCDP external support

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<sup>7</sup> It also includes information on support provided to states and VNSAs from nonstate actors and populations that is not the subject of our dataset. These items were removed prior to merging the dataset into our own.

data, we relied on other datasets that matched NSA and UCDP IDs, as discussed below.

We undertook a number of steps to merge the NSA data with the other data sources. First, we annualized the data according to the start and end years of the periods identified. Doing so risked overcounting the consistency of external support to VNSAs, but we assessed this risk to be preferable to the risk of ignoring relationships identified only in the NSA data altogether. Second, to merge the datasets, we leveraged the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset,<sup>8</sup> which includes ID numbers for the rebel groups used in both the UCDP and NSA datasets. Third, we merged by name those smaller number of remaining rebel actors without identifiers in the FORGE data. We manually harmonized slightly different naming conventions in some instances by reviewing nonmatching observations by hand. Additionally, all observations for the year 1945 were dropped.

#### Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Peace Research Institute Oslo Armed Conflict Dataset, Version 19.1

We utilized the ACD for two purposes. First, as noted above, we used the universe of cases in the ACD to define the set of states that experienced an internal armed conflict in a given year.<sup>9</sup> Second, we used the ACD as an additional, though secondary, source with which to identify external support relationships. The ACD contains data on secondary warring parties that become involved in armed conflicts on behalf of either government or rebel groups. States are coded as secondary warring parties when they contribute troops to the conflict. While this is a very limited form of state support, the ACD is also the only dataset covering the entirety of 1946–2019, and so we wanted to take advantage of its coverage of periods outside of that

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<sup>8</sup> Jessica Maves Braithwaite and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, “When Organizations Rebel: Introducing the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence Dataset,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> This requirement was undertaken as the NSA and UCDP External Support datasets were built on previous versions of the ACD that had different observations than the most recent version.

covered by the UCDP external support data. The current version of the ACD supplied the conflict IDs to merge all datasets together.<sup>10</sup>

The ACD only captures some state sponsors and forms of support, and it does not specify which VNSA actors actually receive support. Instead, it lists all VNSAs as belonging to one side of the conflict, whether or not these groups cooperate or are individually recipients of support. For example, in Yemen, Ansarallah, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Forces of Hadi are all listed in a single row as an opposition force in 2015, with Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates coded as supporting that entire side. Of those groups listed by UCDP as the opposition forces for 2015, clear evidence exists for state support for only the Forces of Hadi.<sup>11</sup> The coalition of countries was backing the Forces of Hadi when the UCDP considered it the government of Yemen, while it controlled the capital, and as a nonstate actor after Ansarallah took control. We also removed some instances where we could not find corroborating information where the ACD had coded external support.

While the most recent ACD dataset through 2019 has issues, as noted above, it is still suggestive of more recent trends in proxy warfare. The ACD identifies 94 unique conflicts between 2011 and 2019, of which 28 percent featured intervention on behalf of the government and 6 percent on the side of rebel groups. This suggests a movement toward greater support—in its most overt form—of governments over the past decade. However, these data are severely limited in their granularity. They do not, for example, code any Syrian rebels as receiving intervention at any point in the conflict even though rebel-biased interventions have played an important role in how the Syrian Civil War has unfolded.

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<sup>10</sup> The UCDP External Support, NAGs, and NSA datasets each utilized the old UCDP conflict IDs, while the UCDP External Support and NAGs datasets also utilized the old UCDP dyad and actor IDs. These ID discrepancies occurred because the UCDP revised its IDs in 2017. In order to ensure that our IDs matched the current versions, we utilized conversion datasets from the UCDP to bring the UCDP dyad and conflict IDs to the present in all three datasets. The ACD itself did not require translations as it was built using the current UCDP IDs.

<sup>11</sup> “Saudi ‘Decisive Storm’ Waged to Save Yemen,” *Al Arabiya News*, March 24, 2015; “More Bahrain Troops for Yemen,” *Emirates 24/7*, November 24, 2015; “Factbox: Saudi-Led Coalition against Yemen’s Houthis,” Reuters, April 10, 2015.

## Estimation Approach

The models reported below are all multinomial logistic regressions of the form

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

where  $Y_{i,t}$  is the support choice of each potential sponsor in each conflict-year. It can take the value of “Rebel,” “Government,” or “None.”  $\beta_{i,t}$  represents a vector of coefficients for the independent variables of interest and other control variables.  $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  is an error term, which is clustered at the conflict level in the analysis to account for potential serial correlation in the error term over time within conflicts. We chose to cluster errors by conflict, but the central results are robust to clustering errors at both the dyad (potential sponsor–target government) and potential sponsor levels.<sup>12</sup> In separate models, we accounted for temporal dependence by including a count of years preceding a potential sponsor’s decision to become involved in a conflict. See Tables A.10–A.15 for results.

## Model Output

This section contains the tables for the models discussed in the quantitative chapter. Table A.1 shows results for the baseline models reflected in Table 3.1 in Chapter 3.

Table A.2 shows results that use interaction terms for the measures of regime type, state capabilities, and wealth to explore the robustness of the findings from the baseline models. The baseline models split the sample according to time period.

In Table 3.1, we included diagonal shading where the results for variables with interaction terms in Table A.2 showed a different result in terms of statistical significance at conventional levels. Splitting the sample and including time-period interaction terms are two different approaches to estimate

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<sup>12</sup> See Tables A.8 and A.9 for these results. The significance at conventional levels of ongoing conflict in contiguous states is reduced in the models with errors clustered at the dyad or supporter level instead of at the level of the conflict in question.

**TABLE A.1**  
**Baseline Model Results**

|                             | Cold War             |                      | Post–Cold War       |                     |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                             | Government           | VNSA                 | Government          | VNSA                |
| Autocratic pot. sup.        | 0.293<br>(0.716)     | –0.530<br>(0.761)    | –1.668**<br>(0.672) | –0.129<br>(0.309)   |
| Democratic pot. sup.        | –0.0680<br>(0.597)   | –0.569<br>(0.645)    | 0.395<br>(0.466)    | –0.335<br>(0.417)   |
| Contiguous ongoing conflict | –14.30***<br>(0.441) | 0.813*<br>(0.431)    | 0.762**<br>(0.382)  | 0.680**<br>(0.320)  |
| Pot. sup. capabilities      | 6.221***<br>(2.049)  | 7.001**<br>(2.816)   | 13.62***<br>(4.818) | –6.470<br>(7.392)   |
| Pot. sup. GDP per capita    | 0.611***<br>(0.101)  | –0.107<br>(0.121)    | –0.0789<br>(0.160)  | –0.433**<br>(0.177) |
| Major power                 | 0.224<br>(0.404)     | –0.663<br>(0.677)    | –0.406<br>(0.382)   | –0.257<br>(0.545)   |
| Conflict intensity level    | 0.652**<br>(0.302)   | 0.917*<br>(0.547)    | 0.676**<br>(0.279)  | 0.720<br>(0.459)    |
| Economic integration        | 4.973<br>(5.218)     | –17.49<br>(12.79)    | 7.434<br>(11.64)    | –8.892<br>(15.39)   |
| Capability ratio            | –1.054*<br>(0.619)   | –1.328***<br>(0.364) | –0.641**<br>(0.300) | –0.266<br>(0.195)   |
| Joint democracy             | –0.432<br>(0.580)    | –2.425***<br>(0.637) | –0.219<br>(0.309)   | –0.0488<br>(0.541)  |
| Joint autocracy             | 0.696<br>(0.561)     | –0.00715<br>(0.479)  | 2.336***<br>(0.559) | 0.0382<br>(0.261)   |
| Former colonial power       | 0.955*<br>(0.525)    | 1.009***<br>(0.386)  | 1.379***<br>(0.511) | 0.278<br>(0.388)    |

**Table A.1—Continued**

|                              | Cold War             |                     | Post–Cold War        |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                              | Government           | VNSA                | Government           | VNSA                 |
| Alliance with conflict state | 1.191***<br>(0.405)  | –0.436<br>(0.366)   | 0.640*<br>(0.374)    | –0.457<br>(0.321)    |
| Rivalry with conflict state  | –0.604<br>(0.603)    | 2.793***<br>(0.289) | 0.133<br>(0.602)     | 2.415***<br>(0.344)  |
| Constant                     | –6.551***<br>(0.514) | –3.117**<br>(1.388) | –4.680***<br>(0.594) | –3.290***<br>(0.568) |
| Observations                 | 16,412               | 16,412              | 15,158               | 15,158               |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses. Pot. sup. = potential supporter.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

whether the effect of a variable changes across time periods. For variables that did not have interaction terms in the pooled model below, we did not indicate different results in the table below. The coefficients on variables without interaction terms in pooled model are not comparable to those in the split-sample model because only in the latter case does the coefficient represent an estimate that is time period specific.

For example, in Table A.2 the coefficient for *Potential sponsor capabilities* is significant for VNSA support in the post–Cold War period while it is insignificant in the split sample model in Table A.1. The two approaches thus differ in whether *Potential sponsor capabilities* has a different effect across time periods. In contrast, the *Alliance* variable below does not speak to potentially time-varying effects, whereas the results in the model above do. We therefore did not indicate a difference in the results we summarized in Table 3.1 in this case.

The results in Table A.1 have a focus on characteristics of potential sponsors, including their relationship with the conflict state. We also included the *Regional hegemony* variable in additional analysis. The central results

**TABLE A.2**  
**Baseline Models with Interaction Terms**

|                                    | Government           | VNSA                 |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Autocratic pot. sup.               | -0.258<br>(0.713)    | -0.487<br>(0.720)    |
| Autocracy × post-C.W.              | -0.296<br>(0.568)    | 0.218<br>(0.794)     |
| Democratic pot. sup.               | -0.0229<br>(0.540)   | -0.641<br>(0.676)    |
| Democracy × post-C.W.              | 0.612<br>(0.642)     | 0.520<br>(0.755)     |
| Pot. sup. capabilities             | 8.649***<br>(2.757)  | 5.951**<br>(2.401)   |
| Pot. sup. capabilities × post-C.W. | 2.004<br>(4.398)     | -10.89**<br>(5.335)  |
| Pot. sup. GDP per capita           | 0.643***<br>(0.108)  | -0.139<br>(0.129)    |
| Pot. sup. gdppc × post-C.W.        | -0.727***<br>(0.179) | -0.309<br>(0.211)    |
| Capability ratio                   | -1.039*<br>(0.606)   | -1.268***<br>(0.339) |
| Capability ratio × post-C.W.       | 0.402<br>(0.615)     | 1.055***<br>(0.360)  |
| Post-Cold War                      | 1.825***<br>(0.655)  | -0.508<br>(0.993)    |
| Pot. sup. ongoing conflict         | 0.469**<br>(0.212)   | 0.362*<br>(0.216)    |

**Table A.2—Continued**

|                              | Government          | VNSA                |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Major power                  | −0.00861<br>(0.256) | −0.459<br>(0.484)   |
| Conflict intensity level     | 0.681***<br>(0.190) | 0.868*<br>(0.477)   |
| Economic integration         | 6.230<br>(6.239)    | −11.88<br>(11.85)   |
| Joint democracy              | −0.317<br>(0.319)   | −0.847*<br>(0.497)  |
| Joint autocracy              | 1.360**<br>(0.532)  | 0.0752<br>(0.313)   |
| Former colonial power        | 1.071***<br>(0.410) | 0.662**<br>(0.289)  |
| Alliance with conflict state | 0.964***<br>(0.320) | −0.441*<br>(0.251)  |
| Rivalry with conflict state  | −0.0523<br>(0.519)  | 2.769***<br>(0.210) |
| Observations                 | 31,570              | 31,570              |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

from Table A.1 are unchanged.<sup>13</sup> The regional hegemony variable is weakly significant during the Cold War, indicating a positive association with sup-

<sup>13</sup> In terms of conventional levels of significance, *Conflict intensity level* is no longer significant during the Cold War for VNSA support (coefficient estimate of 0.795, standard error of 0.512), and *Alliance with conflict state* is now a significantly negative predictor of intervention on behalf of VNSAs during the Cold War (coefficient estimate of −0.680, standard error of 0.322).

port for both governments and VNSAs.<sup>14</sup> There is no significant relationship during the post-Cold War period. This finding would be consistent with the view that conflicts in regions characterized by hegemonic influence were subject to greater external contestation during the Cold War than afterward.

We also ran the models in Table A.1 with an indicator variable for the United States as a potential sponsor (see Table A.7). The results are largely consistent. The U.S. indicator is significant across the board for all types of support in both time periods. *Democratic potential sponsor* is now negatively and significantly associated with government support during the Cold War. The results for *Potential sponsor capabilities* are substantially different when accounting for the United States separately, which is unsurprising given its preponderant capabilities in the sample. Greater capabilities are negatively associated with government support during the Cold War and are no longer significantly associated with VNSA support during the Cold War or government support thereafter.

Greater wealth is now negatively associated with government support after the Cold War, indicating that greater wealth is a negative predictor of support of any kind in recent decades. Major power status is now positively associated with government support during the Cold War. Alliance with the conflict state is no longer (weakly) associated with support for governments after the Cold War, though it is now (weakly) associated with a lower likelihood of VNSA support.

Table A.3 contains results for the models that use data on postrevolutionary regimes.

Figure A.1 displays predictions for postrevolutionary regime proxy support. The figure uses models from Table A.3.

Table A.4 contains results for Table 3.2 in Chapter 3. It includes an additional model that controls for the U.S.-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War and the United States as a potential intervener. Note that results for the balance of power between rivals during the Cold War are not robust to the inclusion of these additional control variables.

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<sup>14</sup> Coefficient (and standard error) estimates for government and rebels respectively during the Cold War are 0.0881 (0.0510) and 0.226 (0.0891).

TABLE A.3

**Postrevolutionary Regimes and Proxy Support**

|                                     | Potential Sponsor Within<br>Ten Years of Revolution |                    | Count of Years Since<br>Revolution |                    |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|
|                                     | Pro-Gov.                                            | Pro-Reb.           | Pro-Gov.                           | Pro-Reb.           |
| Sponsor in post-rev. period         | -0.12<br>(0.18)                                     | 0.26***<br>(0.10)  |                                    |                    |
| Years since last revolution         |                                                     |                    | 0.03***<br>(0.01)                  | -0.004<br>(0.004)  |
| GDP of sponsor                      | 0.69***<br>(0.06)                                   | -0.08**<br>(0.04)  | 0.85***<br>(0.09)                  | -0.07<br>(0.05)    |
| Sponsor ongoing civil<br>conflict   | 0.24*<br>(0.12)                                     | 0.25***<br>(0.08)  | -0.15<br>(0.21)                    | -0.02<br>(0.09)    |
| Sponsor capabilities                | 7.94***<br>(1.04)                                   | 7.04***<br>(1.12)  | -1.94<br>(3.49)                    | -3.52<br>(2.53)    |
| Major power sponsor                 | -0.41**<br>(0.17)                                   | -0.79***<br>(0.13) | -0.11<br>(0.46)                    | -0.24<br>(0.28)    |
| Intensity level                     | 0.60***<br>(0.08)                                   | 0.97***<br>(0.07)  | 1.16***<br>(0.14)                  | 0.75***<br>(0.08)  |
| Econ. integration w/pot.<br>sponsor | 15.72***<br>(1.42)                                  | -7.63**<br>(3.37)  | 44.46***<br>(4.45)                 | 15.52***<br>(5.11) |
| Ratio of capabilities               | -0.85***<br>(0.11)                                  | -0.85***<br>(0.06) | -0.77***<br>(0.19)                 | -0.94***<br>(0.08) |
| Joint democracy                     | -0.34**<br>(0.14)                                   | -1.12***<br>(0.17) | -6.51<br>(9.51)                    | 0.58***<br>(0.21)  |
| Joint autocracy                     | 1.39***<br>(0.11)                                   | 0.23***<br>(0.07)  | 1.43***<br>(0.19)                  | 0.39***<br>(0.10)  |
| Colonial history                    | 1.13***                                             | 0.87***            | 0.78*                              | 0.67**             |

**Table A.3—Continued**

|                               | Potential Sponsor Within<br>Ten Years of Revolution |           | Count of Years Since<br>Revolution |          |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------|----------|
|                               | Pro-Gov.                                            | Pro-Reb.  | Pro-Gov.                           | Pro-Reb. |
|                               | (0.14)                                              | (0.15)    | (0.45)                             | (0.26)   |
| Alliance w/ potential support | 1.06***                                             | -0.34***  | 0.64***                            | -0.60*** |
|                               | (0.11)                                              | (0.11)    | (0.21)                             | (0.13)   |
| Rivalry w/potential sponsor   | -0.62**                                             | 2.83***   | -0.28                              | 2.37***  |
|                               | (0.27)                                              | (0.08)    | (0.28)                             | (0.09)   |
| Constant                      | -6.57***                                            | -4.12***  | -8.17***                           | -3.08*** |
|                               | (0.24)                                              | (0.16)    | (0.42)                             | (0.21)   |
| N                             | 22,276                                              | 22,276    | 8,670                              | 8,670    |
| Akaike information criterion  | 12,266.24                                           | 12,266.24 | 6,067.96                           | 6,067.96 |

NOTE: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . Reference category is no intervention. Postrevolutionary periods are defined as being within ten years after a revolution. The last model only includes sponsors with revolutionary leaders.

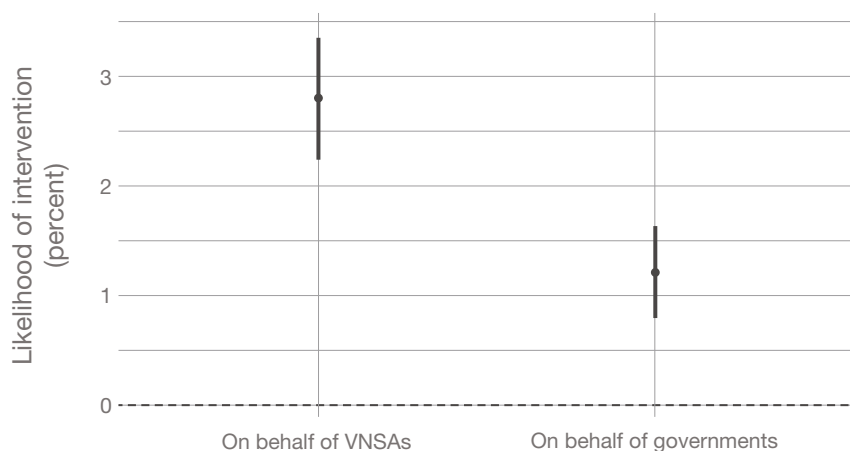
**FIGURE A.1****Likelihood of VNSA Support for Postrevolutionary States**

TABLE A.4

**Rivals' Capabilities and Probability of Intervention in Nearby Conflicts**

|                                   | Dependent Variable: Both Rivals Intervene |               |           |               |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|
|                                   | Cold War                                  | Post-Cold War | Cold War  | Post-Cold War |
| US-USSR rivalry                   |                                           |               | 0.89**    |               |
|                                   |                                           |               | (0.45)    |               |
| US                                |                                           |               | 0.46**    | 1.20*         |
|                                   |                                           |               | (0.22)    | (0.72)        |
| Capability difference             | -4.50**                                   | -6.94         | -2.34     | -6.53         |
|                                   | (2.28)                                    | (4.35)        | (2.00)    | (4.53)        |
| Capability difference (sq.)       | 4.32*                                     | 7.00          | 2.66      | 6.70          |
|                                   | (2.42)                                    | (4.65)        | (2.18)    | (4.78)        |
| Regional hegemony ratio           | 0.17*                                     | -0.20*        | 0.17*     | -0.20**       |
|                                   | (0.09)                                    | (0.10)        | (0.09)    | (0.10)        |
| Major power                       | 1.81***                                   | -3.95***      | 2.01***   | -4.34***      |
|                                   | (0.67)                                    | (1.49)        | (0.65)    | (1.50)        |
| Capability transition             | -0.98**                                   | 0.48          | -0.99**   | 0.53          |
|                                   | (0.40)                                    | (0.67)        | (0.41)    | (0.71)        |
| Potential intervener capabilities | -9.96***                                  | 25.81***      | -14.68*** | 25.75***      |
|                                   | (2.95)                                    | (8.29)        | (3.27)    | (8.90)        |
| Conflict state capabilities       | -103.85                                   | -139.34*      | -101.95   | -137.60*      |
|                                   | (147.66)                                  | (72.97)       | (144.30)  | (72.60)       |
| Joint democracy                   | 0.04                                      | -0.06         | -0.15     | -0.27         |
|                                   | (0.55)                                    | (0.41)        | (0.54)    | (0.34)        |
| Minimum distance (log)            | -0.06                                     | -0.09         | -0.08*    | -0.10         |
|                                   | (0.04)                                    | (0.07)        | (0.05)    | (0.08)        |

**Table A.4—Continued**

|                              | Dependent Variable: Both Rivals Intervene |               |           |               |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|
|                              | Cold War                                  | Post–Cold War | Cold War  | Post–Cold War |
| Conflict intensity           | 0.71*                                     | 0.73**        | 0.68*     | 0.72**        |
|                              | (0.42)                                    | (0.33)        | (0.40)    | (0.33)        |
| Constant                     | –3.81***                                  | –2.22         | –4.22***  | –2.27         |
|                              | (0.78)                                    | (1.66)        | (0.94)    | (1.72)        |
| Observations                 | 12,792                                    | 8,052         | 12,792    | 8,052         |
| Log likelihood               | –1,464.49                                 | –587.15       | –1,446.30 | –583.64       |
| Akaike information criterion | 2,950.97                                  | 1,196.30      | 2,918.61  | 1,191.27      |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses. "Dependent Variable: Both Rivals Intervene" means that all models in the table are using that dependent variable. The only differences across the columns are that each uses a different set of independent variables.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Tables A.5 and A.6 present results for economic integration among potential interveners. These results are reflected in Table 3.3 and Figure 3.3. Note that the central results are unchanged with the inclusion of a control variable for potential sponsors that are part of the European Union.

TABLE A.5

**Major Power Economic Integration with Nearby States and Proxy Support Behavior**

|                                        | Cold War             |                      | Post–Cold War        |                     |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
|                                        | Government           | VNSA                 | Government           | VNSA                |
| Econ. integration w/<br>conflict state | 85.55***<br>(11.59)  | –3.254<br>(32.60)    | 55.82***<br>(8.417)  | 26.17<br>(21.49)    |
| Econ. integration w/<br>nearby states  | 1.430<br>(38.67)     | –10.18<br>(38.63)    | –16.54<br>(12.14)    | 8.421<br>(9.595)    |
| Conflict intensity                     | 0.622*<br>(0.322)    | 1.524***<br>(0.578)  | 0.728*<br>(0.391)    | –1.616<br>(1.099)   |
| Joint democracy                        | –0.548<br>(0.453)    | –2.043***<br>(0.738) | –0.493<br>(0.440)    | –1.344*<br>(0.740)  |
| Joint autocracy                        | 0.755<br>(0.472)     | –0.429<br>(0.428)    | 0.278<br>(0.675)     | –0.941<br>(0.942)   |
| Oil rents                              | –0.0346<br>(0.0357)  | –0.0741<br>(0.0549)  | –0.0130<br>(0.0241)  | –0.0348<br>(0.0541) |
| Sponsor capabilities                   | 11.65***<br>(4.461)  | 16.83***<br>(5.465)  | 0.633<br>(4.099)     | 4.899<br>(9.948)    |
| Constant                               | –5.710***<br>(0.836) | –6.776***<br>(1.149) | –4.663***<br>(0.657) | –3.716**<br>(1.455) |
| Observations                           | 3,193                | 3,193                | 3,867                | 3,867               |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \* p &lt; 0.1.

TABLE A.6

**Non-Major Power Economic Integration with Nearby States and Proxy Support Behavior**

|                                        | Cold War             |                      | Post-Cold War          |                      |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
|                                        | Government           | VNSA                 | Government             | VNSA                 |
| Econ. integration w/<br>conflict state | 57.98***<br>(19.97)  | -47.98<br>(51.75)    | 42.48***<br>(12.43)    | -47.19<br>(46.04)    |
| Econ. integration w/<br>nearby states  | -11.80<br>(15.88)    | -3.335<br>(3.394)    | -7.893**<br>(3.133)    | -15.89***<br>(3.586) |
| Conflict intensity                     | 0.819<br>(0.615)     | 0.823**<br>(0.333)   | 0.604*<br>(0.334)      | 0.383<br>(0.248)     |
| Joint democracy                        | -16.11***<br>(0.571) | -2.249***<br>(0.701) | -1.577**<br>(0.661)    | 0.125<br>(0.504)     |
| Joint autocracy                        | 0.566<br>(0.523)     | 0.0409<br>(0.407)    | 1.131***<br>(0.368)    | 0.669***<br>(0.254)  |
| Oil rents                              | -0.0737<br>(0.0762)  | -0.0191<br>(0.0239)  | 0.0328***<br>(0.00804) | -0.0166<br>(0.0108)  |
| Sponsor capabilities                   | -17.14<br>(17.54)    | 25.35<br>(21.75)     | 30.68***<br>(9.612)    | -18.65<br>(14.53)    |
| Constant                               | -4.891***<br>(0.909) | -3.516***<br>(0.524) | -5.542***<br>(0.495)   | -2.856***<br>(0.390) |
| Observations                           | 6,331                | 6,331                | 10,254                 | 10,254               |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \* p &lt; 0.1.

## Sensitivity Analysis

This section reports additional analyses that explore the sensitivity of findings to different substantive concerns and modeling approaches (Tables A.7 through A.15).

**TABLE A.7**  
**Baseline Models with U.S. Indicator Variable**

|                             | Cold War             |                      | Post–Cold War       |                      |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
|                             | Government           | VNSA                 | Government          | VNSA                 |
| Autocratic pot. sup.        | 1.433<br>(0.915)     | –0.459<br>(0.770)    | –1.250*<br>(0.664)  | –0.0423<br>(0.296)   |
| Democratic pot. sup.        | –1.137**<br>(0.540)  | –0.965<br>(0.711)    | 0.299<br>(0.495)    | –0.354<br>(0.418)    |
| Contiguous ongoing conflict | –13.85***<br>(0.480) | 0.709<br>(0.477)     | 0.650*<br>(0.339)   | 0.665**<br>(0.312)   |
| Pot. sup. capabilities      | –11.33**<br>(5.426)  | –1.339<br>(7.404)    | 2.611<br>(6.563)    | –15.80**<br>(7.788)  |
| Pot. sup. GDP per capita    | 0.595***<br>(0.107)  | –0.236<br>(0.171)    | –0.419**<br>(0.173) | –0.559***<br>(0.183) |
| Major power                 | 2.141***<br>(0.619)  | –0.176<br>(1.002)    | 0.115<br>(0.453)    | –0.0113<br>(0.579)   |
| Conflict intensity level    | 0.579*<br>(0.302)    | 0.869*<br>(0.527)    | 0.687**<br>(0.295)  | 0.732<br>(0.466)     |
| Economic integration        | 3.908<br>(3.978)     | –24.21<br>(14.94)    | 7.992<br>(11.22)    | –8.975<br>(14.60)    |
| Capability ratio            | –1.076*<br>(0.615)   | –1.448***<br>(0.415) | –0.781**<br>(0.324) | –0.322<br>(0.207)    |
| Joint democracy             | –0.536<br>(0.653)    | –2.344***<br>(0.617) | –0.161<br>(0.321)   | –0.0199<br>(0.507)   |

**Table A.7—Continued**

|                              | Cold War             |                     | Post–Cold War        |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                              | Government           | VNSA                | Government           | VNSA                 |
| Joint autocracy              | 0.653<br>(0.551)     | –0.0322<br>(0.495)  | 2.066***<br>(0.554)  | –0.102<br>(0.248)    |
| Former colonial power        | 1.219*<br>(0.623)    | 1.192**<br>(0.499)  | 1.573***<br>(0.541)  | 0.337<br>(0.389)     |
| Alliance with conflict state | 0.916**<br>(0.389)   | –0.490<br>(0.370)   | 0.323<br>(0.349)     | –0.552*<br>(0.314)   |
| Rivalry with conflict state  | –0.620<br>(0.614)    | 2.822***<br>(0.306) | 0.203<br>(0.575)     | 2.524***<br>(0.355)  |
| US                           | 3.051***<br>(0.735)  | 2.111**<br>(1.058)  | 2.088***<br>(0.629)  | 3.526***<br>(0.923)  |
| Constant                     | –7.150***<br>(0.679) | –2.659**<br>(1.319) | –3.777***<br>(0.590) | –2.977***<br>(0.523) |
| Observations                 | 16,412               | 16,412              | 15,158               | 15,158               |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \* p &lt; 0.1.

TABLE A.8

**Baseline Model Results with Potential Sponsor-Clustered Errors**

|                             | Cold War             |                      | Post-Cold War        |                     |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
|                             | Government           | VNSA                 | Government           | VNSA                |
| Autocratic pot. sup.        | 0.293<br>(1.318)     | -0.530<br>(0.680)    | -1.668**<br>(0.701)  | -0.129<br>(0.368)   |
| Democratic pot. sup.        | -0.0680<br>(0.946)   | -0.569<br>(0.638)    | 0.395<br>(0.480)     | -0.335<br>(0.492)   |
| Contiguous ongoing conflict | -14.30***<br>(0.537) | 0.813**<br>(0.402)   | 0.762<br>(0.540)     | 0.680<br>(0.453)    |
| Pot. sup. capabilities      | 6.221**<br>(2.935)   | 7.001*<br>(4.183)    | 13.62***<br>(3.977)  | -6.470<br>(8.514)   |
| Pot. sup. GDP per capita    | 0.611***<br>(0.210)  | -0.107<br>(0.167)    | -0.0789<br>(0.193)   | -0.433**<br>(0.212) |
| Major power                 | 0.224<br>(0.636)     | -0.663<br>(0.576)    | -0.406<br>(0.515)    | -0.257<br>(0.783)   |
| Conflict intensity level    | 0.652**<br>(0.257)   | 0.917***<br>(0.285)  | 0.676***<br>(0.235)  | 0.720**<br>(0.281)  |
| Economic integration        | 4.973<br>(6.425)     | -17.49*<br>(10.51)   | 7.434<br>(8.798)     | -8.892<br>(11.98)   |
| Capability ratio            | -1.054*<br>(0.565)   | -1.328***<br>(0.347) | -0.641***<br>(0.217) | -0.266<br>(0.229)   |
| Joint democracy             | -0.432<br>(0.290)    | -2.425***<br>(0.539) | -0.219<br>(0.419)    | -0.0488<br>(0.593)  |
| Joint autocracy             | 0.696<br>(0.747)     | -0.00715<br>(0.503)  | 2.336***<br>(0.695)  | 0.0382<br>(0.428)   |
| Former colonial power       | 0.955<br>(1.085)     | 1.009<br>(0.771)     | 1.379***<br>(0.463)  | 0.278<br>(0.499)    |

**Table A.8—Continued**

|                              | Cold War             |                      | Post–Cold War        |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                              | Government           | VNSA                 | Government           | VNSA                 |
| Alliance with conflict state | 1.191***<br>(0.232)  | –0.436<br>(0.367)    | 0.640<br>(0.399)     | –0.457<br>(0.349)    |
| Rivalry with conflict state  | –0.604<br>(0.641)    | 2.793***<br>(0.390)  | 0.133<br>(0.615)     | 2.415***<br>(0.358)  |
| Constant                     | –6.551***<br>(0.792) | –3.117***<br>(0.958) | –4.680***<br>(0.652) | –3.290***<br>(0.631) |
| Observations                 | 16,412               | 16,412               | 15,158               | 15,158               |

NOTE: Sponsor-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \* p &lt; 0.1.

TABLE A.9

**Baseline Model Results with Dyad-Clustered Errors**

|                              | Cold War             |                      | Post-Cold War        |                     |
|------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
|                              | Government           | VNSA                 | Government           | VNSA                |
| Autocratic pot. sup.         | 0.293<br>(0.695)     | -0.530<br>(0.673)    | -1.668**<br>(0.701)  | -0.129<br>(0.368)   |
| Democratic pot. sup.         | -0.0680<br>(0.700)   | -0.569<br>(0.710)    | 0.395<br>(0.480)     | -0.335<br>(0.492)   |
| Contiguous ongoing conflict  | -14.30***<br>(0.554) | 0.813<br>(0.511)     | 0.762<br>(0.540)     | 0.680<br>(0.453)    |
| Pot. sup. capabilities       | 6.221**<br>(2.908)   | 7.001**<br>(3.423)   | 13.62***<br>(3.977)  | -6.470<br>(8.514)   |
| Pot. sup. GDP per capita     | 0.611***<br>(0.153)  | -0.107<br>(0.208)    | -0.0789<br>(0.193)   | -0.433**<br>(0.212) |
| Major power                  | 0.224<br>(0.508)     | -0.663<br>(0.685)    | -0.406<br>(0.515)    | -0.257<br>(0.783)   |
| Conflict intensity level     | 0.652***<br>(0.227)  | 0.917***<br>(0.334)  | 0.676***<br>(0.235)  | 0.720**<br>(0.281)  |
| Economic integration         | 4.973<br>(5.661)     | -17.49<br>(15.54)    | 7.434<br>(8.798)     | -8.892<br>(11.98)   |
| Capability ratio             | -1.054**<br>(0.473)  | -1.328***<br>(0.306) | -0.641***<br>(0.217) | -0.266<br>(0.229)   |
| Joint democracy              | -0.432<br>(0.592)    | -2.425***<br>(0.586) | -0.219<br>(0.419)    | -0.0488<br>(0.593)  |
| Joint autocracy              | 0.696<br>(0.524)     | -0.00715<br>(0.434)  | 2.336***<br>(0.695)  | 0.0382<br>(0.428)   |
| Former colonial power        | 0.955<br>(0.666)     | 1.009<br>(0.751)     | 1.379***<br>(0.463)  | 0.278<br>(0.499)    |
| Alliance with conflict state | 1.191***             | -0.436               | 0.640                | -0.457              |

**Table A.9—Continued**

|                             | Cold War   |           | Post–Cold War |           |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
|                             | Government | VNSA      | Government    | VNSA      |
|                             | (0.436)    | (0.415)   | (0.399)       | (0.349)   |
| Rivalry with conflict state | –0.604     | 2.793***  | 0.133         | 2.415***  |
|                             | (0.609)    | (0.388)   | (0.615)       | (0.358)   |
| Constant                    | –6.551***  | –3.117*** | –4.680***     | –3.290*** |
|                             | (0.619)    | (1.147)   | (0.652)       | (0.631)   |
| Observations                | 16,412     | 16,412    | 15,158        | 15,158    |

NOTE: Dyad-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \* p &lt; 0.1.

TABLE A.10

**Baseline Model Results with Count of Years Without Intervention**

|                             | Cold War             |                      | Post–Cold War       |                     |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                             | Government           | VNSA                 | Government          | VNSA                |
| Autocratic pot. sup.        | 0.539<br>(0.693)     | –0.358<br>(0.756)    | –1.266**<br>(0.603) | –0.210<br>(0.281)   |
| Democratic pot. sup.        | 0.118<br>(0.597)     | –0.333<br>(0.687)    | 0.365<br>(0.418)    | –0.753*<br>(0.417)  |
| Contiguous ongoing conflict | –14.11***<br>(0.428) | 0.928**<br>(0.391)   | 0.440<br>(0.354)    | 0.381<br>(0.336)    |
| Pot. sup. capabilities      | 4.544**<br>(1.981)   | 6.624**<br>(2.695)   | 12.49***<br>(3.546) | –2.468<br>(6.569)   |
| Pot. sup. GDP per capita    | 0.620***<br>(0.0975) | –0.0921<br>(0.121)   | –0.0844<br>(0.118)  | –0.371**<br>(0.186) |
| Major power                 | 0.444<br>(0.392)     | –0.599<br>(0.604)    | –0.121<br>(0.312)   | –0.130<br>(0.499)   |
| Conflict intensity level    | 0.664**<br>(0.316)   | 1.028*<br>(0.533)    | 0.914***<br>(0.299) | 0.811*<br>(0.484)   |
| Economic integration        | 3.152<br>(4.157)     | –24.94**<br>(12.17)  | 4.176<br>(6.735)    | –13.58<br>(14.62)   |
| Capability ratio            | –0.980*<br>(0.565)   | –1.221***<br>(0.288) | –0.459**<br>(0.226) | –0.140<br>(0.190)   |
| Joint democracy             | –0.326<br>(0.575)    | –2.566***<br>(0.685) | 0.214<br>(0.332)    | 0.724<br>(0.524)    |
| Joint autocracy             | 0.658<br>(0.553)     | –0.0330<br>(0.424)   | 2.084***<br>(0.514) | –0.0586<br>(0.351)  |
| Former colonial power       | 0.806*<br>(0.479)    | 0.991***<br>(0.355)  | 1.187***<br>(0.442) | –0.0144<br>(0.489)  |

**Table A.10—Continued**

|                              | Cold War   |           | Post–Cold War |           |
|------------------------------|------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
|                              | Government | VNSA      | Government    | VNSA      |
| Alliance with conflict state | 0.988**    | –0.437    | 0.324         | –0.580*   |
|                              | (0.387)    | (0.358)   | (0.310)       | (0.315)   |
| Rivalry with conflict state  | –0.474     | 2.536***  | 0.0342        | 2.257***  |
|                              | (0.495)    | (0.268)   | (0.597)       | (0.351)   |
| Years since no intervention  | –0.493***  | –0.568*** | –0.385***     | –0.435*** |
|                              | (0.0939)   | (0.132)   | (0.0830)      | (0.0901)  |
| Constant                     | 5.602***   | –2.199    | –3.869***     | –2.147*** |
|                              | (0.512)    | (1.381)   | (0.548)       | (0.627)   |
| Observations                 | 16,412     | 16,412    | 15,158        | 15,158    |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

TABLE A.11

**Baseline Models with Interaction Terms and Count of Years Without Intervention**

|                                    | Government           | VNSA                 |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Autocratic pot. sup.               | 0.0312<br>(0.649)    | -0.280<br>(0.742)    |
| Autocracy × post-C.W.              | -0.318<br>(0.532)    | -0.0211<br>(0.818)   |
| Democratic pot. sup.               | 0.136<br>(0.558)     | -0.417<br>(0.720)    |
| Democracy × post-C.W.              | 0.505<br>(0.624)     | -0.0292<br>(0.774)   |
| Pot. sup. capabilities             | 6.454**<br>(2.569)   | 4.970**<br>(2.319)   |
| Pot. sup. capabilities × post-C.W. | 3.306<br>(3.715)     | -5.044<br>(5.289)    |
| Pot. sup. GDP per capita           | 0.648***<br>(0.0947) | -0.115<br>(0.126)    |
| Pot. sup. gdppc × post-C.W.        | -0.727***<br>(0.137) | -0.239<br>(0.234)    |
| Capability ratio                   | -0.978*<br>(0.535)   | -1.204***<br>(0.279) |
| Capability ratio × post-C.W.       | 0.538<br>(0.548)     | 1.114***<br>(0.299)  |
| Post-Cold War                      | 1.949***<br>(0.575)  | -0.313<br>(1.003)    |
| Pot sup. ongoing conflict          | 0.452**<br>(0.195)   | 0.359*<br>(0.212)    |

**Table A.11—Continued**

|                              | Government            | VNSA                  |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Major power                  | 0.254<br>(0.226)      | -0.380<br>(0.458)     |
| Conflict intensity level     | 0.799***<br>(0.209)   | 0.929*<br>(0.477)     |
| Economic integration         | 3.712<br>(3.966)      | -17.89<br>(11.57)     |
| Joint democracy              | -0.0385<br>(0.340)    | -0.482<br>(0.468)     |
| Joint autocracy              | 1.283***<br>(0.472)   | 0.00722<br>(0.312)    |
| Former colonial power        | 0.846**<br>(0.387)    | 0.466<br>(0.334)      |
| Alliance with conflict state | 0.693**<br>(0.289)    | -0.507*<br>(0.259)    |
| Rivalry with conflict state  | -0.0769<br>(0.478)    | 2.494***<br>(0.208)   |
| Years since no intervention  | -0.427***<br>(0.0654) | -0.505***<br>(0.0920) |
| Observations                 | 31,570                | 31,570                |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

TABLE A.12

**Postrevolutionary Regimes and Proxy Support with Count of Years Without Intervention**

|                                  | Potential Sponsor Within Ten Years of Revolution |                       | Count of Years Since Revolution |                        |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
|                                  | Pro-Gov.                                         | Pro-Reb.              | Pro-Gov.                        | Pro-Reb.               |
| Sponsor in post-rev. period      | -0.396**<br>(0.183)                              | 0.181*<br>(0.103)     |                                 |                        |
| Years since last revolution      |                                                  |                       | 0.0552***<br>(0.00631)          | 0.0149***<br>(0.00398) |
| GDP of sponsor                   | 0.389***<br>(0.0477)                             | -0.206***<br>(0.0370) | 0.729***<br>(0.0864)            | -0.0685<br>(0.0525)    |
| Sponsor ongoing civil conflict   | 0.373***<br>(0.120)                              | 0.355***<br>(0.0796)  | -0.0415<br>(0.189)              | 0.00602<br>(0.0993)    |
| Sponsor capabilities             | 7.355***<br>(1.062)                              | 7.064***<br>(1.178)   | -0.189<br>(3.820)               | -7.657***<br>(2.869)   |
| Major power sponsor              | 0.0442<br>(0.159)                                | -0.480***<br>(0.140)  | -0.439<br>(0.502)               | 0.154<br>(0.322)       |
| Intensity level                  | 0.618***<br>(0.0866)                             | 1.026***<br>(0.0693)  | 1.229***<br>(0.142)             | 0.871***<br>(0.0900)   |
| Econ. integration w/pot. sponsor | 4.531***<br>(1.045)                              | -12.47***<br>(3.159)  | 29.77***<br>(4.205)             | -3.848<br>(5.192)      |
| Ratio of capabilities            | -0.956***<br>(0.103)                             | -0.716***<br>(0.0567) | -0.499***<br>(0.163)            | -0.789***<br>(0.0813)  |
| Joint democracy                  | 0.0212<br>(0.140)                                | -0.736***<br>(0.181)  | -14.83<br>(700.5)               | 1.108***<br>(0.231)    |
| Joint autocracy                  | 0.945***                                         | 0.0234                | 1.354***                        | 0.271***               |

**Table A.12—Continued**

|                               | Potential Sponsor Within Ten Years of Revolution |           | Count of Years Since Revolution |           |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------|
|                               | Pro-Gov.                                         | Pro-Reb.  | Pro-Gov.                        | Pro-Reb.  |
|                               | (0.107)                                          | (0.0768)  | (0.187)                         | (0.101)   |
| Colonial history              | 0.993***                                         | 0.685***  | 1.286***                        | 0.0702    |
|                               | (0.152)                                          | (0.165)   | (0.446)                         | (0.301)   |
| Alliance w/ potential support | 0.891***                                         | -0.310*** | 0.519***                        | -0.506*** |
|                               | (0.106)                                          | (0.108)   | (0.198)                         | (0.132)   |
| Rivalry w/potential sponsor   | -0.365                                           | 2.505***  | -0.238                          | 2.094***  |
|                               | (0.228)                                          | (0.0832)  | (0.255)                         | (0.0983)  |
| Years without intervention    | -0.444***                                        | -0.570*** | -0.433***                       | -0.498*** |
|                               | (0.0247)                                         | (0.0239)  | (0.0389)                        | (0.0264)  |
| Constant                      | -4.686***                                        | -2.774*** | -7.371***                       | -2.330*** |
|                               | (0.217)                                          | (0.156)   | (0.414)                         | (0.220)   |
| N                             | 22,276                                           | 22,276    | 8,670                           | 8,670     |
| Akaike information criterion  | 12,266.24                                        | 12,266.24 | 6,067.96                        | 6,067.96  |

NOTE: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . Reference category is no intervention. Postrevolutionary periods are defined as being within ten years after a revolution. The last model only includes sponsors with revolutionary leaders.

TABLE A.13

**Rivals' Capabilities and Probability of Intervention in Nearby Conflicts with Count of Years Without Intervention**

|                                   | Dependent Variable: Both Rivals Intervene |                      |                     |                      |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
|                                   | Cold War                                  | Post-Cold War        | Cold War            | Post-Cold War        |
| US-USSR rivalry                   |                                           |                      | 0.97**<br>(0.44)    |                      |
| US                                |                                           |                      | 0.50**<br>(0.20)    | 0.72**<br>(0.36)     |
| Capability difference             | -4.14**<br>(2.04)                         | -9.36*<br>(5.10)     | -2.05<br>(1.85)     | -8.96*<br>(5.12)     |
| Capability difference (sq.)       | 3.92*<br>(2.22)                           | 9.71*<br>(5.79)      | 2.31<br>(2.11)      | 9.31<br>(5.73)       |
| Regional hegemony ratio           | 0.09<br>(0.08)                            | -0.20*<br>(0.12)     | 0.09<br>(0.08)      | -0.20*<br>(0.12)     |
| Major power                       | 2.11***<br>(0.58)                         | -4.70***<br>(1.58)   | 2.36***<br>(0.55)   | -4.95***<br>(1.59)   |
| Capability transition             | -1.13***<br>(0.40)                        | 0.58<br>(0.71)       | -1.09***<br>(0.41)  | 0.59<br>(0.72)       |
| Potential intervener capabilities | -10.61***<br>(2.17)                       | 28.33***<br>(7.35)   | -15.54***<br>(2.85) | 28.30***<br>(7.62)   |
| Conflict state capabilities       | -86.36<br>(89.01)                         | -74.08***<br>(27.80) | -82.65<br>(85.18)   | -73.10***<br>(27.71) |
| Joint democracy                   | 0.13<br>(0.46)                            | 0.50<br>(0.59)       | -0.11<br>(0.45)     | 0.32<br>(0.51)       |
| Minimum distance (log)            | -0.07*<br>(0.04)                          | -0.08<br>(0.07)      | -0.09**<br>(0.04)   | -0.09<br>(0.07)      |

**Table A.13—Continued**

|                              | Dependent Variable: Both Rivals Intervene |                   |                    |                   |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
|                              | Cold War                                  | Post–Cold War     | Cold War           | Post–Cold War     |
| Conflict intensity           | 0.71*<br>(0.40)                           | 0.75*<br>(0.44)   | 0.68*<br>(0.38)    | 0.74*<br>(0.43)   |
| Years without intervention   | –0.38*<br>(0.21)                          | –0.22**<br>(0.11) | –0.37*<br>(0.20)   | –0.22**<br>(0.11) |
| Constant                     | –3.81***<br>(0.78)                        | –2.22<br>(1.66)   | –4.22***<br>(0.94) | –2.27<br>(1.72)   |
| Observations                 | 12,792                                    | 8,052             | 12,792             | 8,052             |
| Log likelihood               | –1,464.49                                 | –587.15           | –1,446.30          | –583.64           |
| Akaike information criterion | 2,950.97                                  | 1,196.30          | 2,918.61           | 1,191.27          |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses. "Dependent Variable: Both Rivals Intervene" means that all models in the table are using that dependent variable. The only differences across the columns are that each uses a different set of independent variables.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

TABLE A.14

**Major Power Economic Integration with Nearby States and Proxy Support Behavior with Count of Years Without Intervention**

|                                    | Cold War             |                      | Post-Cold War        |                     |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
|                                    | Government           | VNSA                 | Government           | VNSA                |
| Econ. integration w/conflict state | 76.26***<br>(9.773)  | -3.031<br>(29.79)    | 43.24***<br>(7.229)  | 23.03<br>(19.33)    |
| Econ. integration w/nearby states  | 25.98<br>(27.66)     | 15.34<br>(27.18)     | -6.294<br>(8.460)    | 9.096<br>(10.32)    |
| Conflict intensity                 | 1.013**<br>(0.423)   | 1.859***<br>(0.512)  | 1.195***<br>(0.359)  | -1.517<br>(1.083)   |
| Joint democracy                    | -0.705<br>(0.496)    | -2.288***<br>(0.750) | -0.0297<br>(0.424)   | -0.993<br>(0.868)   |
| Joint autocracy                    | 0.508<br>(0.405)     | -0.437<br>(0.440)    | 0.212<br>(0.521)     | -1.081<br>(0.857)   |
| Oil rents                          | -0.0293<br>(0.0329)  | -0.0958<br>(0.0631)  | -0.00698<br>(0.0150) | -0.0320<br>(0.0618) |
| Sponsor capabilities               | 9.082**<br>(4.011)   | 12.55**<br>(5.266)   | 1.575<br>(3.721)     | 5.684<br>(9.678)    |
| Years without intervention         | -0.566***<br>(0.124) | -0.638***<br>(0.195) | -0.529***<br>(0.130) | -0.158<br>(0.0996)  |
| Constant                           | -4.499***<br>(0.777) | -5.350***<br>(1.091) | -3.800***<br>(0.621) | -2.995**<br>(1.447) |
| Observations                       | 3,193                | 3,193                | 3,867                | 3,867               |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \* p &lt; 0.1.

TABLE A.15

**Non-Major Power Economic Integration with Nearby States and Proxy Support Behavior with Count of Years Without Intervention**

|                                    | Cold War             |                      | Post-Cold War          |                       |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
|                                    | Government           | VNSA                 | Government             | VNSA                  |
| Econ. integration w/conflict state | 51.57***<br>(19.57)  | -62.47<br>(50.07)    | 35.67***<br>(10.01)    | -55.54<br>(46.91)     |
| Econ. integration w/nearby states  | -10.20<br>(16.80)    | -1.823<br>(2.680)    | -7.468**<br>(2.947)    | -15.19***<br>(3.429)  |
| Conflict intensity                 | 1.197**<br>(0.585)   | 1.115***<br>(0.405)  | 0.615**<br>(0.306)     | 0.749***<br>(0.219)   |
| Joint democracy                    | -13.23***<br>(0.547) | -1.644**<br>(0.684)  | -1.530**<br>(0.633)    | 0.755*<br>(0.410)     |
| Joint autocracy                    | 0.690<br>(0.527)     | 0.208<br>(0.375)     | 1.000***<br>(0.364)    | 0.553*<br>(0.306)     |
| Oil rents                          | -0.0795<br>(0.0775)  | -0.0275<br>(0.0316)  | 0.0305***<br>(0.00694) | -0.0179<br>(0.0132)   |
| Sponsor capabilities               | -28.39<br>(23.85)    | 27.27<br>(19.18)     | 27.20***<br>(8.230)    | -25.33*<br>(13.76)    |
| Years without intervention         | -0.660***<br>(0.184) | -0.829***<br>(0.135) | -0.241***<br>(0.0643)  | -0.480***<br>(0.0947) |
| Constant                           | -4.126***<br>(0.910) | -2.590***<br>(0.572) | -4.452***<br>(0.473)   | -1.972***<br>(0.387)  |
| Observations                       | 6,331                | 6,331                | 10,254                 | 10,254                |

NOTE: Conflict-clustered standard errors are in parentheses.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.01, \*\* p &lt; 0.05, \* p &lt; 0.1.



# Abbreviations

|           |                                                                                   |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACD       | Armed Conflict Dataset                                                            |
| CAR       | Central African Republic                                                          |
| CCP       | Chinese Communist Party                                                           |
| CIA       | Central Intelligence Agency                                                       |
| CIS       | Commonwealth of Independent States                                                |
| CSTO      | Collective Security Treaty Organization                                           |
| FORGE     | Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence                                              |
| GDP       | gross domestic product                                                            |
| IRGC      | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps                                                 |
| IRGC-QF   | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Quds Force                                      |
| ISIS      | the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria                                               |
| ITN       | Iran Threat Network                                                               |
| MPLA      | People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola                                    |
| NAGs      | Nonstate Armed Groups                                                             |
| NATO      | North Atlantic Treaty Organization                                                |
| NKVD      | Narodny Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) |
| NPA       | New People's Army                                                                 |
| NSA       | Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict                                                |
| OLM       | Office of Liberation Movements                                                    |
| PLA       | People's Liberation Army                                                          |
| PMC       | private military contractor                                                       |
| pot. sup. | potential supporter                                                               |
| POUM      | Workers' Party of Marxist Unification                                             |
| PRC       | People's Republic of China                                                        |
| SAVAK     | Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar                                          |
| UCDP      | Uppsala Conflict Data Program                                                     |
| UCDP/PRIO | Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Peace Research Institute Oslo                   |

|       |                                                                                                              |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNITA | União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola<br>(National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) |
| USSR  | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics                                                                          |
| VNSA  | violent nonstate actor                                                                                       |

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CIA—See Central Intelligence Agency.

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The authors used both quantitative analysis and case studies of China, Iran, and Russia to examine the causes and likely future trends in *proxy wars*: civil wars in which at least one local warring party receives material support from an external state. The purpose of the project was to provide insight into the determinants of state support for violent nonstate actors, assess the risks that third-party support poses to U.S. overseas contingency operations, and analyze policy options available to the United States to counter such foreign support.

With the renewed focus in many regions on strategic competition, there seems to be a growing risk that states will feel increasingly threatened by their rivals and take greater steps to counteract these threats in the years to come. The case studies highlight how such an environment can often, though not always, lead to an increased interest in supporting proxy warfare. Of even greater concern is the fact that geopolitical drivers of proxy warfare can often be self-reinforcing.

The states considered in the case studies were usually able to develop at least a rudimentary capability for proxy warfare very quickly, within a couple of years, often building on the capabilities of prior efforts or regimes. Beyond this baseline capability, however, a relatively lengthy period of learning and growth to better develop proxy warfare capabilities appears to be common.

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