THE STATE AND THE PROXY:

IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS AMONG THE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Avante Edge Research

December 2025

Table of Contents

Conflict and the Enduring Logic of Proxy Warfare

The enemy of my enemy is my friend. This aphorism has often sounded true in the past as even at times the most unlikely of allegiances emerged to combat a perceived unified threat. Whether it was alliances of convenience, mercenaries, foreign aid, or other surrogates have enabled states to achieve one's political goals indirectly. From Roman auxiliary forces to Cold War Proxy conflicts, Indirect approaches for power projection have been a consistent feature among the international system. Information warfare, non-state actors, and indirect support for armed conflicts are thus not a new phenomenon.

These forces have historically marched alongside state militaries, yet the modern concepts of private militaries, cyber proxies, and state-sponsored actors now operate inside a far more complex environment of legal and political frameworks. Here we begin to see the problem. States and international representatives often site various moral and legal concerns with modern interpretations of this historical practice. This raises the question though, has its modern counterpart solely become highlighted due to the recent decades of globalization, or has international competition fundamentally altered how and why states employ proxies?

Looking at the topic from a contemporary perspective, proxy warfare incidents dropped following the end of the bipolar competition between the Soviet Union and the West. And during the short unipolar era by the United States, even direct interstate conflict appeared unlikely. Yet as the system transitioned into a multi-polar world, global competition once again intensified (Byjka, 2020). The aspects of multipolarity have been further complicated by the act of globalization, which has interconnected information systems, markets, and societies while simultaneously increasing the political and economic costs of direct military warfare. As a result, the lines between peace, competition, and warfare, have all become blurred.

Competition is ever present and is a natural feature within the international order (Waltz 1979). It emerges from the anarchic medium in which all states operate in and share. Globalization does not rid states of conflict, rather it too transforms. What is interesting is that in this case, both powerful and weaker states share the means in which they pursue advantage. In this realm, the non-state actor and proxy forces provide tools that offer deniability, cost efficiency, and escalation reduction within open war and a concept known

as gray zone warfare. This allows states to remain competitive, below the threshold of overt war.

This paper examines why states are increasingly employing proxies and non-state actors to achieve objectives, how these newly adapted instruments are being utilized across contemporary conflicts, and what challenges their use imposes on the international system. The evolution in these methods will increasingly drive states to utilize non-state actors and proxies in order to achieve their strategic policy objectives. Understanding the motivations and mechanisms of the matter is essential, as attribution and accountability are foundational to a functioning international order. The inability to determine intentions and actions erodes the concept of sovereignty and creates the risk of miscalculation which further threatens stability among the already contested global order.

Conceptual Framework of Proxy War and State-Sponsorship

When discussing non-state actors, proxies, or surrogate forces, clear definitions are essential. The concept of non-state actor (NSA), which in this paper will be used interchangeably with the terms proxy, surrogate, and non-state forces, generally refers to individuals or entities which does not formally represent a recognized state or body politic among the international system (Pfeifer and Schwab, 2023). Despite the absence of formal recognition, these entities possess significant social, economic, political, or coercive authority (Mullins, 2024).

When these entities possess a capability of organized force projection, ranging from small arms to advanced conventional weapons (ACW), they are normally categorized as armed non-state actors (ANSA) (Clement, Geis, and Pfeifer, 2021). This category includes private military companies (PMC), pro-government militias (PGMs), insurgent groups, and terror organizations. For the purpose of this paper, unless a distinction is necessary, the term non-state actor will be used to collectively describe these entities.

Defining proxy warfare presents similar definitional challenges. Proxy wars are commonly viewed as conflict in which a state intervenes indirectly in a foreign theatre by supporting third-party actors in order to influence the outcomes of hostilities without deploying state forces directly. These proxy strategies allow states to combat adversaries through substitutes rather than through overt military engagement, which is considerably dangerous in the nuclear age (Roithmaier, 2023; Wither, 2020). However, within military and defense scholarship, the definitional clarity is distorted by cognitive bias. Instead of being a distinct category, we can see that modern conflicts often carry proxy dynamics (Fox, 2023). As a result, contemporary researchers must recognize that the definition

needs to be broadened as the complexity of modern proxy and sponsorship relationships extends beyond the battlefield, into political, informational, economic and cyber domains.

Proxy war dynamics are understood through a principal–agent framework. It involves three actors, a sponsoring state (principal), a proxy force (the agent), and an oppositional target (Bryjka, 2020: Roithmaier, 2023). Interactions occur across a triangular relationship of three dyads: principal-agent, agent-target, and principal-target. Each has its own aspects which influence the proxy dynamic. This framework is particularly important in the modern globalized system where conflicts have increasingly become internationalized and interconnected.

Both state and non-state actors now engage in sponsorship and surrogacy. These often occur within fluid and networked relationships which cross ideological, social, and military dimensions (Pfeifer and Schwab, 2023). In contemporary cases, non-state actors are afforded higher degrees of autonomy than in earlier eras, this complicates the relationship and assumptions on conflict control and accountability. An example of this is the Iranian Axis of Resistance. Here, Iranian sponsorship flows outward across the Middle East, yet these organizations retain operational independence. They are interconnected and loosely coordinate, often outside of Iranian military hierarchies.

Globalization has not only expanded flows and interconnectivity but has also transformed the characteristics of conflict itself. A related and important concept as a result is gray zone warfare. Gray zone operations and activities refer to actions executed by states or non-state actors that are deliberately ambiguous but often are perceived as hostile. These operations are intended to achieve the desired objectives, while remaining under the threshold of open warfare (Fox, 2023; Mullins, 2024). Gray zone operations include information warfare, political and social coercion, cyber operations, economic pressures and proxy warfare. Such activities exploit gaps in legalities, constraints, and other state response mechanisms.

State Motivation and Implementation of Proxies

In the contemporary international system, the gray zone has become the primary arena of competition among powerful states seeking to advance towards end states while minimizing escalation and political risks. Strategies which involve proxies are often complex and potentially have global ramifications. The use of non-state actors creates potential risks and benefits for the sponsoring state. Cited explanations often fall into three categories: deniability, risk avoidance, and cost-efficiency (Tellidou, 2024).

From a cost-efficiency perspective, the use of proxies is often perceived to reduce the political, financial, and human costs associated with open warfare. The collective burden of conducting warfare extends far beyond the battlefield. This includes domestic political opposition to the conflict, legal and international scrutiny, as well as economic strain (Wither 2020). On the surface, sponsorship seems to reduce these by lowering the immediate resource cost by limiting casualties and financial expenditure. For example, Iran's use of proxies significantly expands its influence and regional power projection (Simsek 2025). This allows it maximum impact while simultaneously minimizing its risks and costs of operation if it were to replicate the projection with conventional forces. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. While they aim to reduce domestic pressure through political and social distancing, the savings are not always actualized as proxy engagements are often prolonged or can potentially escalate beyond expectations.

Proxy strategies are also employed as a means of risk avoidance. This is particularly cited in scenarios where direct confrontation between great powers carries extreme dangers. By supporting a proxy force, states can pursue limited objectives while avoiding direct military engagement (Mullins, 2024). This idea reflects the thought that indirect involvement among these types of local or smaller conflicts does not directly threaten vital international interests among great powers (Wither, 2020). Within the broader concept of a security dilemma, proxy warfare is thus viewed as an effective mechanism for global competition below the threshold of war. As a result, states consider proxy strategies as risk-free and low-cost, where successes are advantageous and failures are less damaging to international reputation and domestic credibility (Tellidou, 2024).

Deniability is central aspect among gray zone operations, activities, and investments. Ambiguity surrounding attribution and intent enables a state to distance themselves from actions that may potentially provoke diplomatic, legal, or even military responses. Non-state actors are thus employed to execute operations that might otherwise result in international and/or political ramifications if state forces were utilized. However, though deniability is frequently cited as a key advantage, proxies and their sponsors are often widely known or suspected (Mullins 2024). Here then, a gap exists between the international community's knowledge and formal accountability on the matter, allowing states to avoid consequences despite often credible links existing between principals and agents.

Cyberspace has emerged as a particularly salient domain for proxy activity as it further enhances the ability for deniability. Cyber operations enable states and non-state actors to disrupt communications, degrade critical infrastructure operations, expose private and

state vulnerabilities, and spread propaganda with limited risk of exposure and retaliation. States often rely on third party organizations, such as companies or even individual hackers, to conduct operations, combining elements of deniability and high expertise (Joyce 2025). Despite the increasing cooperative efforts of both governments and private companies in cyber defense, there seems to be a lack of capacity to protect and constrain hackers. This is reflective of capacity shortcomings and failed self-restraint, as efforts for legal controls and enforcement risk constraining a state's own freedom of operation.

Risks and Implications of Proxies in the International System

The use of non-state actors and proxy forces generate multiple layers of risk and implications at the local, regional, and most critically, global levels of the international system. At the local level, state sponsorship of non-state actors produces direct and socially felt consequences for civilians. Proxy forces frequently employ irregular warfare methods in which they operate within the civilian populace, blurring distinction between combatants and non-combatants (Pfeifer and Schwab, 2023). Contemporary conflict zones have become increasingly fertile ground for these actors, as most moder conflicts now exhibit some degree of irregularization (Saifullah and Ahmad, 2020). Whether it is through private military companies or armed non-state groups, the proliferation of tactics and technologies increases the risks of weapons and operational knowledge diffusing to unintended actors. This has been a common factor among the United States of America (U.S.) and Syrian intervention over the years.

The Syrian case represents the risks inherent in proxy warfare through the principal-agent relationship. When a state chooses to pursue a proxy relationship, it must select an agent capable of advancing the principal's objectives while maintaining a politically acceptable posture. The selection process here is vulnerable to adverse selection and agency slack, as ideological alignment and force projection capability rarely align or remain stable for long periods (Tellidou 2024; Bryjka, 2020). In Syria, the U.S. strategy of supporting and selecting Kurdish and other militia proxies was founded on their moderate ideologies and operational effectiveness. However, the actual process of supporting and implementing this strategy had serious ramifications. A high majority of the recruits were never properly vetted, the supporting smuggling lines ran through Turkey, a NATO and U.S. Ally, the militias suffered from operational drift, the forces did not effectively fight the Islamic State nor the Assad Regime, and finally consistent desertion to more extreme organizations with equipment and training (Bryjka, 2020). These failures underline the difficulty of controlling proxies after support is initiated.

Proxy sponsorship may contain some strategic benefits to the sponsoring state, but it can generate severe tensions and escalation risks among the global community. In Syria, the U.S. support to Kurdish forces and Syrian militias was perceived by Turkey as direct sponsorship of terrorist organizations, thus straining alliance relations. Continued proxy engagement contributed to regional power struggle that drew in Russia and Iran, resulting in multiple external actors competing within a single conflict. Paradoxically, rather than containing violence, the multiple direct and proxy efforts prolonged the conflict, increasing its lethality, and undermining diplomatic efforts. These facts highlight how proxy wars can entrench a conflict rather than solve it, ultimately weaking diplomacy as the primary instrument for international engagements.

Proxy warfare also directly contributes to the loss or erosion of state sovereignty and governance capacity. The presence of external state sponsored agents can challenge the host state's ability to maintain territorial control, enforce law and order, and manage conflict resolution (Saifullah and Ahmad, 2020). Often, non-state actors engage in illicit activities whether it is on behalf of their sponsor is negligible, as they operate outside the formal legal constraints (Mullins, 2024). These activities can have high or low visibility. Either way, their cumulative effect undermines the sovereign authority of affected states over their populations and borders.

As seen in Libya or Sudan, the consequences of proxy sponsorship are evident. In Sudan, the continued external support for competing proxy forces have contributed to the state collapse. This result compels other non-state actors to assume roles in regional security and governance. Similarly in Libya, its scenario showcases the concept described as coalition proxy warfare, in which multiple external states provide military assistance to rival factions, all while continually denying direct involvement (Wither 2020). In both cases, proxy dynamics fragmented authority and increased instability, significantly complicating conflict resolution and recovery.

From a legal perspective, proxy warfare undermines the effectiveness of international accountability mechanisms. State responsibility under international law depends heavily on attribution. (International Law Commission, 2001). With the use of proxies, we find that states are able obfuscate and deny their involvement in many cases. Thus, state responsibility for humanitarian law and international law is undermined by the support and employment of non-state actors. This reality, whether attributable or not, directly links a principal to the actions of its agent and thus should bear fault for its actions. But the nature of the relationship, though often denied, hinders the ability for international and

legal consequences of sponsorship, hindering the international function of law and diplomatic proceedings (Roithmaier, 2023).

Finally, the use of proxies poses significant risks to alliance credibility and social stability. Sponsoring states may prioritize short term operational gains over allied state perspectives, creating dilemmas and eroding trust (Fox, 2023; Tellidou, 2024). Additionally, proxy forces embedded within a civilian population exert lasting influence over societies in weakened or stateless regions. Sustained exposure to violence, coercion, and ideological indoctrination contribute to eroded social cohesion or even extremism (Pfeifer and Schwab 2023l Mullins, 2024). This implies that even after the defeat of a proxy, the communities and social structures shaped by its presence will remain, carrying on aspects or elements of its tenants.

Conclusion

The repeated use and success cases of proxies have established a precedent in which indirect violence and diplomatic subversion is an increasingly accepted form of statecraft. The normalization of sponsorship erodes the effectiveness of diplomacy and the confidence towards international institutions such as the United Nations. Whether they are through digital or kinetic means, the state employment of proxy-enable operations circumvents international enforcement mechanisms (Balarabe, 2025; Roithmaier, 2023). Their continued use will influence international political discourse and shape future conflicts. The modern era reveals that the ability to sponsor conflicts and actors is not solely related to the great powers. The multipolar world and expanding capabilities grant a greater number of states more power to enable proxies. This strategy, normally thought to reduce escalation and risk, has ultimately threatened to become an extreme destabilizing force around the globe, prolonging conflict, drawing in additional actors, and greatly increasing the likelihood of conflict internationalization.

The growing reliance on proxies demonstrates that historical and traditional mechanisms are ineffective at managing interstate competition. While deniability has been tactically and strategically advantageous for sponsoring states, its cumulative effect of their use undermines the institutions designed to regulate use of force and create significant challenges to the international norms established. Factors resulting from their use are not easily reversed once started. Entrenched radicalization and conflict diffusion as a result inherently weakens conflict resolution and leads to international institutional erosion (Pfeifer and Schwab, 2023; Clement et al, 2021).

To combat these challenges, there must be new efforts to produce solutions for reinforcing accountability, applying constraints on sponsorship practices, and adapting international legal frameworks to modern conflict norms. States who conduct sponsorship activities must be held accountable for the direct and long term consequences of their implementation. Agreements on support limitations, or increased consequences of knowledge and weapons transfers are ideal, yet still likely would remain difficult to enforce. Ultimately, modernizing accountability mechanisms is essential in order to narrow the gap between current practices and international legalities.

References

Balarabe, Muhammad Lawal. 2025. "Digital Borders and Beyond: Establishing Normative Foundations for Cyber Sovereignty." *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance* 27 (1): 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1108/DPRG-01-2024-0003.

Banks, William C. 2021. "Cyber Attribution and State Responsibility." *International Law Studies* 97: 175–194. https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2980&context=ils.

Bryjka, Filip. 2020. "Operational Control over Non-State Proxies." *Security and Defence Quarterly* 31 (4): 14–32. https://securityanddefence.pl/Operational-control-over-non-state-proxies%2C131044%2C0%2C2.html.

Clement, Maeva, Anna Geis, and Hanna Pfeifer. 2021. *Recognising Armed Non-State Actors: Risks and Opportunities for Conflict Transformation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363108693_Recognising_armed_non-state_actors_risks_and_opportunities_for_conflict_transformation.

Fox, Amos C. 2023. "Comparative Proxy Strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War." *Comparative Strategy* 42 (5): 421–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2023.2236488.

International Law Commission. 2001. *Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, with Commentaries*. *Yearbook of the International Law Commission*, vol. II, part two. New York: United Nations. https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft_articles/9_6_2001.pdf.

Joyce, C. B. 2025. "Do States Constrain Non-State Hackers? International Telecommunication Union Elections and Non-State Cyber Aggression." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 69 (10): 1687–1712. https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027251323557.

Mullins, Samuel J. 2024. *The Role of Non-State Actors as Proxies in Irregular Warfare and Malign State Influence*. Washington, DC: Irregular Warfare Center. https://irregularwarfarecenter.org/publications/research-studies/the-role-of-non-state-actors-as-proxies-in-irregular-warfare-and-malign-state-influence/.

Pfeifer, Hanna, and Rasmus Schwab. 2023. "Re-Examining the State/Non-State Binary in the Study of (Civil) War." *Civil Wars* 25 (2–3): 428–451. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2023.2254654.

Roithmaier, Kilian. 2023. "Proxy Warfare in the Form of State Support to Non-State Armed Groups: The Concept of State Complicity in Acts of Non-State Armed Groups." *European Journal of Legal Studies* 14 (2): 141–156. https://ejls.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/32/2023/02/EJLS-142-Roithmaier-1.pdf.

Saifullah, Khalid, and Azhar Ahmad. 2020. "The Increasing Influence of Non-State Actors in International Politics." *Journal of European Studies* 36 (2): 39. http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fincreasing-influence-non-state-actors%2Fdocview%2F2448237738%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289.

Simsek, H. Fatih. 2025. "Iran's Proxy War Paradox: Strategic Gains, Control Issues, and Vulnerabilities." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 37 (1): 55–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2512807.

Tellidou, Nafsika. 2024. "Unraveling Proxy Wars: A Comparison of State Sponsorship in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen." *The International Spectator* 59 (4): 512–530. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2024.2421502.

Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Wither, James K. 2020. "Outsourcing Warfare: Proxy Forces in Contemporary Armed Conflicts." *Security and Defence Quarterly* 31 (4): 3–13. https://securityanddefence.pl/Outsourcing-warfare-Proxy-forces-in-contemporary-armed-conflicts%2C127928%2C0%2C2.html