Russia’s disastrous 2022 invasion of Ukraine offers an important—if unoriginal—lesson for all major powers: war is hard and unpredictable. If Vladimir Putin were to consider aggression in the future (or could rewind the clock), he might instead turn to proxy war, another time-honored tool of foreign policy. By working with a lesser power, or more likely a rebel group, to achieve its interests, a major power can weaken a rival, shift control over borders, or gain influence in a new theater—all potentially at low cost. Other powers watching the Russian debacle in Ukraine, such as China and even the United States, might also conclude that this indirect way of waging war is the smarter one.

Support for proxies comes in many forms. Researchers Frank Hoffman and Andrew Orner present a spectrum, beginning with basic security assistance in the form of simply providing weapons on one end. More substantial forms of support might include extensive advising and training, followed by limited military assistance in the field such as providing artillery support or medical care. At the other end of the spectrum is using the major power’s own military forces in select roles to bolster the proxy.¹

Proxy war, usually at a regional level, peaked during the Cold War.² The United States backed anti-communist forces, including Hmong fighters against Pathet Lao communists, the Nicaraguan contras against the pro-Soviet Sandinista regime, Angolan fighters under UNITA, and Afghan militants against the Soviets.³ Moscow, for its part, supported the North Vietnamese in their war against America and rebels in places as diverse as Congo, El Salvador and Yemen, among many other struggles against pro-American regimes.⁴

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Proxy wars are usually bloodier and harder to resolve than other wars but are often effective and the ability to weaken its rivals, all at a low—or at least lower—price. For example, Russia’s meddling in Ukraine in 2014 enabled Moscow to exercise de facto control over part of Ukraine with only a limited expenditure of resources. From the past record, we can learn a lot about how proxies might be used in the future by major powers, but the dynamics of contemporary major power conflict will add its own complexities: Chinese-backed proxies must be handled differently than Iranian-backed ones. To understand proxy war, it is vital to recognize its advantages but also its risks, particularly escalation. The United States might find supporting proxies in response to major power aggression or to fight terrorists a better use of its resources than direct intervention. In addition, leaders considering supporting proxies must understand that their control is likely to be limited even with the supposed power imbalance. Despite bribes, threats, and efforts to find the right bedfellows, proxies have their own interests. It is vital that intelligence services focus on the links between major powers and proxies and identify potential friction points. When major powers support proxies, there is a high risk of escalation, and states must prepare for conflict beyond proxy war itself.

This article first explains why states might support proxies. It then goes into great detail on the many, and often rarely acknowledged, risks of using proxies, discussing in particular the danger of escalation, the problems in controlling proxies, and the difficulties major power support creates for the proxies themselves. The next two sections explore how China and the United States might use proxies in the future. The article concludes by discussing the policy
implications of proxy war, including managing the risks of escalation and the need to consider responses across the conflict spectrum.

**Why Use Proxies?**

Major powers might use proxies for an array of reasons, but these days ideology is probably not going to be one of them. This is at least a partial break from the past. The Soviet Union and Mao’s China backed various revolutionary groups that mouthed Communist slogans, Libya under Qaddafi scattered money among various radical Palestinian groups, and Iran backed groups like Hezbollah that genuinely embraced its ideology. But Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are cynical dictators, not ideologues, and even Iranian leaders today focus far more on *realpolitik* than on spreading the Islamic revolution. US adversaries will pick and choose friends and enemies based on their usefulness, not on whether they claim to be fellow believers.

Proxies can be useful to destabilize a hated neighbor, give a supporting power influence in a far-off theater, create a de facto buffer zone, and otherwise advance a sponsor’s interest. Proxy warfare also offers a form of power projection. Iran, for example, works with Palestine Islamic Jihad against Israel; it would not be able to sustain a significant number of its own conventional forces that far from its border.

Although proxies usually do not fight as well as their sponsors, they are a lot cheaper. Given the devastation to Russia’s military in the Ukraine war, Moscow’s military forces will be weak in the years to come. Some of the lower cost is financial: helping a proxy with small arms and mortars sustain an insurgency is a lot cheaper than deploying a state’s armored divisions. But the biggest cost-saver is human, at least for the sponsoring state. For example, after the 2015 Saudi intervention in Yemen, Iran was able to weaken Saudi influence there by increasing support for Houthi fighters, essentially fighting to the last Yemeni while avoiding Iranian loss of life. As political scientist Andrew Mumford warned in 2013, the privatization of warfare also decreases the human cost of proxy war for the sponsoring state (though often making it higher for the local population). At times, proxies may involve foreign troops imported to the conflict: fighters from Syria showed up in Ukraine after the 2022 invasion and the UAE sent Colombian mercenaries to fight in Yemen in 2015. This lower cost is especially important for proxy war: as security researchers Matthew Wiger and Kyle Atwell point out, often the interest in question is a second-tier objective, not a priority, and thus states might be loath to commit their own forces.

Proxy war is also an alternative when great powers seek to confront other great powers armed with nuclear weapons: what scholars have called the
stability-instability paradox. Because high-end conflict is unthinkable given the risk of nuclear war, some regimes may feel freer to engage in low-level warfare, including proxy war, with less fear of escalation. Pakistan, for example, has backed an array of militant groups against India, secure in the knowledge that its nuclear weapons program raises the risks for India of any response and make great power intervention more likely should unwanted escalation occur. As scholar Tyrone Groh notes, proxy war was particularly attractive in the Cold War due to this nuclear escalation fear.

State support, of course, can make proxies far more formidable. Weapons, money, and especially training and a haven can have a decisive impact. Under Iran’s tutelage from the early 1980s through today, the Lebanese Hezbollah became a highly skilled proxy, able to battle formidable Israeli forces, conduct sophisticated international terrorist operations, and even engage in urban counterinsurgency in Syria. In these battles, Hezbollah has used anti-ship cruise missiles and rocket systems as well as more typical small arms and mortars. Pakistan’s sheltering of the Taliban enabled its leaders to minimize the risk of US decapitation operations and allowed the organization to rebuild and retrain when it suffered setbacks in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. The Taliban, in essence, could control the pace of its own casualties. State support also helps proxies out-recruit rival rebel groups, both because they can offer higher salaries and because their better weaponry and training is attractive to would-be recruits. Finally, states—especially major powers—can use their international influence to advance the proxy’s cause.

Deniability is one of the biggest benefits to sponsoring states of backing proxies. A sponsoring state can simply deny that it is behind a particular attack or otherwise feign non-involvement. This, in turn, makes it hard to blame the sponsor and retaliate against it. The process of detection and attribution is often difficult, especially as the next step of deniability is to blame “rogue elements” within the state. In the case of Russia, which has used semi-private paramilitaries like the Wagner Group and terrorist organizations like the Russian Imperial Movement to train potential supporters, it can be difficult to know where state culpability begins and ends.

Yet, deniability is often more political showmanship than a real defense. Intelligence agencies often know who is funding, supplying, training, and otherwise supporting a rebel group and inform their governments accordingly. The seemingly universal proclivity of young fighters to take selfies and brag about the training and weapons they are receiving makes such accountability even easier.
today than during the Cold War, and also allows amateur sleuths to uncover the connections, increasing the risk of escalation as governments cannot keep hostile state involvement in a conflict secret from their own people. Prisoners of war also tend to talk, revealing the sponsor’s role. However, other states not eager to escalate have a reason to go along with the pretense of deniability. As an insurgency developed after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Iran backed an array of Iraqi militant groups, arming them with explosively formed penetrators which proved highly lethal to US soldiers. Even though Washington was well aware that the weapons came from Iran, the Bush administration did not treat this support as an act of war from Iran, as it would have if Iranian forces had crossed the border and attacked US troops.

For great powers, proxy war is likely to be one tool in a broader toolkit of unconventional war and destabilization. Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014 is instructive. Moscow was able to tap into the patronage networks of ousted president Viktor Yanukovych and other elites. Russia tried to avoid official involvement in the Donbas rebellion, but Russian-backed separatist rebels proclaimed “People’s Republics” in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, seizing government buildings there. Russia provided them with weapons (which over time included more advanced arms and mechanized systems) and massed over 40,000 of its own troops on Ukraine’s borders, forcing the Ukrainian military to divert its forces away from the Donbas.

In addition to backing proxies in Ukraine from 2014 onward, Russia also engaged in cyber campaigns there, attacking pro-democracy organizations with denial-of-service attacks, blocking pro-Ukrainian democracy sites on Russian social media, and later disrupting election systems and the electric grid. While covert Russian forces were annexing Crimea, denial-of-service attacks hit Ukrainian government websites and social media. Amnesty International detailed numerous assassinations of local politicians and pro-Ukrainian activists, and the funneling of financial support for various politicians. Perhaps most importantly, Moscow engaged in vast information and disinformation campaigns in Ukraine. Proxy support was therefore an important tool, but it was only part of a broader effort.

Great power competition itself makes proxy war more likely. Great powers may see the growth in influence of a rival in another part of the world as a threat and look to counter this, with proxy war being one of their options. When one power backs a proxy rebel group, its rivals may back another to ensure their influence in the opposition or support the government. During the Cold War, Washington and Moscow backed rebel groups and governments throughout Africa as a way to
counter each other’s influence. Proxy war, however, has limitations for great powers as well as for regional ones, making it a difficult tool to use effectively.

The Risks of Proxy War

Despite its many advantages, proxy war often fails and can unexpectedly impose significant costs on its sponsor. Many problems stem from the interests of the proxies themselves, which rarely correspond neatly with those of their backers. In Syria, the United States sought to avoid becoming embroiled in the larger civil war. Instead, in 2014 the Obama administration focused on the threat of ISIS, which supported terrorist attacks against the United States and would later conduct several bloody attacks in Europe. Syrian groups, in contrast, saw the regime of Bashar al-Assad as a far more important and immediate threat: Assad’s forces had slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Syrians. Not surprisingly, it was difficult to find a group that shared Washington’s priority.

This divergence is the norm, not the exception: proxies may seek a greater degree of independence than the sponsor wants, favor a different type of government, or otherwise have fundamentally different interests. This divergence shows up at the tactical level too. For instance, in the 1980s the Syrian regime hired the Abu Nidal Organization to kill Israeli soldiers. The military target, however, proved difficult and dangerous for Abu Nidal, and its operatives chose to strike Israeli civilians instead. This choice, in turn, increased the risk of retaliation against Syria itself, as Israel was especially sensitive to any threat to civilians.14

Indeed, proxies may want to simply take their sponsors’ money and do nothing, either siphoning it off for their own enrichment or using it to keep the group intact without taking any risks. In Afghanistan, the corruption of various Afghan military, police and warlord forces funded by the United States constantly bedeviled operations and hindered their legitimacy, increasing support for the less-corrupt Taliban.15

Many rebel groups are often brutal, and sponsors are tarred with their tactics. Human rights groups accused the US-backed contras in Nicaragua of murdering, kidnapping and torturing civilians.16 Such credible accusations decreased political support for funding the contras and increased international criticism, making it harder to sustain, let alone expand, the program. Russia faced international condemnation after its pro-Russian separatist proxies in Ukraine shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014, using Russian-provided SA-11 air-to-surface missiles.

As discussed below, many proxies prefer a high degree of independence. Both Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas have received Iranian funding and weapons. Hamas, however, has sought to preserve its independence and is better able to
do so given its greater level of domestic support, broad funding networks, and ties
to many Arab governments. Palestine Islamic Jihad, in contrast, was nearly bank-
rupt when it turned to the Iranians. It lacked significant popular support and
otherwise offered far less to Tehran than Hamas would have.

Three particular problems stand out for states employing proxy war and the proxies that would
work with them: the difficulty of controlling proxies; the danger the proxies themselves run; and
the potential for unwanted escalation.

The Control Problem
Getting proxies to strike the right targets, avoid cor-
ruption and brutality, and not be so zealous or active
that they bring on escalation is a difficult balancing
act. Such a Goldilocks solution often requires the
sponsor to exercise a high degree of control, but in practice this is difficult.
Indeed, the more capable the proxy is, the less it needs the money and support
the sponsor provides, and thus the more potential independence it can maintain.
Proxies that are desperate for help, in contrast, are often less capable and thus less
useful. One approach is simply to try to pick groups that share your interests or
indoctrinate them to accept your ideology and worldview. With Hezbollah and
to a lesser degree proxies in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, Iranian military trainers
have tried to instill their ideology in Shiite Muslim groups they support.
However, this commonality is rarely a possibility in most civil wars. In Syria,
the United States struggled to find groups that shared a pro-Western, democratic
worldview. Even Iran has had little luck reshaping the interests and ideology of
the Kurds and the Sunni Palestinians with which it works.

In theory, sponsors can also use rewards and punishments, increasing support
when the proxy goes in the right direction and cutting it off—or far worse—when
the proxy does not. A sponsor might provide limited backing to several groups
and, as their effectiveness and loyalty become clearer, increase support for the
one they prefer. Once-favored leaders might lose funding or even be arrested.
After 2014, the Wagner Group, presumably at the Russian government’s
behest, reportedly killed rival commanders in Donbas who would not work
with Moscow’s preferred clients.17 On the most extreme end, Syria and Pakistan
sponsored rival Palestinian groups and different organizations active in Kashmir,
respectively, even using some of their new clients to target their old ones.18

In practice, such tailored support is difficult. The political buy-in required
among internal elites, and at times in democracies the public, can make it diffi-
cult to cut off once-lauded heroes of the resistance, especially if the proxies are
tied to a regime’s legitimacy. As support unfolds, bureaucracies come into being that then begin to advocate for greater support. This political support, which often spills out into the media, makes deniability harder, although other states may still prefer to pretend that it exists for their own purposes. Perhaps most importantly, it is hard to measure success and failure on the ground. Indeed, the proxy would argue that its setbacks are a reason the sponsor should provide more support and even involve its own forces.

At times, proxies may have connections that their sponsor opposes. Under President Obama, the United States spent over $1 billion to arm and train Syrian rebels. However, The New York Times reported that some US weapons ended up in the hands of fighters linked to Al Qaeda. This was almost an inevitability given the chaos and swirling loyalties of the many opposition groups in Syria, but it proved embarrassing for the Obama administration. Control becomes even harder when the sponsor itself is not running the proxy programs. As scholars Niklas Karlén and Vladimir Rauta argue, proxy war often involves “dual delegation,” where a sponsor works with another state, which in turn supports the proxy. As a result, problems can occur at both the proxy level and at the level of the state doing the day-to-day management. US support for the anti-Soviet mujahedin, for example, was run by Pakistani intelligence. Pakistan funded the more religiously extreme elements of the Afghan opposition that were more subservient to Islamabad, and gave less support to Ahmed Massoud’s forces, even though they were the most militarily effective, because Massoud sought more autonomy from Pakistan.

**Limits for the Proxy**

Although sponsors can make proxies far more dangerous and protect them from their enemies, this support usually comes with a high price. Fearing escalation or a loss of control, sponsors often place limits on what they transfer to their proxies. Russia, for example, has never transferred chemical weapons to its Ukrainian proxies. Other states can coerce or buy off the sponsor, leaving the proxy twisting in the wind. Iraqi Kurds, for example, received and lost support from the United States, Iran and Israel in the 1970s after the Iraqi government caved to Iran’s requests over their disputed border. The Iraqi regime then brutally crushed the rebels.

Proxies may also lose touch with their constituents due to outside backing, making them less effective. Scholar Jeremy Weinstein has found that when rebel groups have easy access to finances, as they do when outsiders provide them money, they often fail to develop ties to local community. This in turn decreases their popular support and makes them more likely to mistreat civilians, making the conflict bloodier, and at times the proxy less likely to win.
groups may also lose nationalist credibility, which can be vital even for Islamist and other non-nationalist groups which nevertheless depict themselves as fighting foreigners. Palestine Islamic Jihad, for example, benefited financially from Iranian funding, but in so doing it was depicted as a pawn of Iran, an especially serious charge in a highly polarized sectarian environment.22

To judge the broader impact of outside support, it is useful to shift perspectives and consider the rebel movement as a whole as opposed to the fate of individual groups. A group, indeed many groups, may benefit from outside support. But if multiple groups are supported, the need for unity decreases, and groups often operate at cross-purposes or even turn on each other (at times even encouraged to do so by rival sponsors). Multiple sponsors fragmented the Palestinian national movement; at different times from the 1940s through today, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria all supported various factions, with Israel also playing a role. Small groups benefited from the money and support, but the movement became strategically incoherent, with rival states arresting and even assassinating different Palestinian leaders. Abu Iyad, one of the leaders of Fatah, contended that the proliferation of small groups “practically strangled” the Palestinian cause.23

The Risk of Escalation

Although the proxy may at times be less effective due to outside support, the sponsoring state may not care. Often the biggest danger for the sponsor is that other states retaliate, all-out war breaks out, or both. This risk is an ironic one, as states often turn to proxies to avoid escalation, whether through the stability-instability paradox or via the fiction of deniability. Yet proxy warfare can easily get out of control.

One cause of escalation is the political buy-in associated with proxy warfare. To sell support for a proxy, leaders may often overstate the virtues of the proxy and understate the risks. In the late 1990s, for example, the United States began working with the Iraqi opposition to overthrow Saddam Hussein, playing down their venality and limited competence.24 Others, including dictators, may feign a matter of principle: supporting the proxy adds to the legitimacy of the regime. The Syrian regime in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, supported an array of Palestinian groups to prove its bona fides as the “beating heart” of the Arab nation, often using its support to discredit Arab rivals.25

Such rhetoric and willful blindness allows support to begin and be maintained, but it also makes it hard to walk away, forcing the state to double down on its support, or at least stay in the game. At the very least, the sponsor would have to admit to a mistake, which all leaders are loathe to do. Even more risky, as

Proxy warfare can easily get out of control
the Palestinian example above suggests, the proxy itself now has power: it can claim betrayal if it does not receive the support it wants, and the government’s past praise now comes back to haunt it. When the proxy suffers defeats, the supporting regime may feel compelled to act with its own forces. Syria felt it had to intervene to live up to its own rhetoric when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 to expel the Palestinian presence there, which resulted in a military disaster for Syria. Russia, for its part, felt obliged to intervene with its own troops in 2008 when the South Ossetian and Abkhaz proxies it supported in Georgia proved unable to fight government forces on their own, even with Moscow’s backing.

Misperception can also increase the risk of escalation. A state’s adversaries, understandably, may see proxy support as a form of war or as a prelude to greater involvement. Moscow sees NATO states’ involvement in the Ukraine war as a form of proxy warfare meant to overthrow the Putin regime, and in Putin’s hyperbolic words, to “destroy Russia.” The steady increase in NATO military support shores up this narrative. The proxies themselves may feed misperceptions, as Iraqi opposition leaders did when they warned of non-existent Iraqi WMD programs, encouraged a US invasion by declaring that Iraqis would greet American soldiers as liberators, and suggested that there would be no sectarian strife should Saddam Hussein be overthrown. Proxy support that is less deniable may increase the risk that adversaries see it as a prelude to war or great involvement, as the publicity increases the perception of hostility and makes it harder for other countries to ignore the aggression.

Perhaps the biggest risk is that proxy war can beget proxy war. States that may care little about the factions in a civil war do care if a powerful rival joins the fray, even indirectly. Yemen offers a textbook case. In 2014, the country’s small civil wars spilled into a great big one, pulling in more and more sponsorship from regional states. Limited Iranian ties to Houthi rebels in Yemen and concerns about Muslim Brotherhood-linked factions there led to a Saudi and UAE intervention in 2015. This, in turn, led to a far more extensive Iranian intervention, as the now-desperate Houthis sought more help and Tehran realized that it could give its Saudi and UAE rivals a bloody nose at little cost to itself.

As the above discussion makes clear, proxy war is risky. Controlling proxies is difficult, the proxies themselves might become less effective, and rival states might escalate. Yet despite these risks, regional states and great powers might use proxies to achieve their ends.

How Might China Use Proxies?

Proxy warfare was an important tool for China during the Maoist era (1949-1976), but it has avoided using it since then. China’s post-Mao leadership
rejected much of his revolutionary tradition, the fall of the Soviet Union led to the end of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, and Beijing sought peaceful relations with its neighbors, focusing on economic growth and domestic stability. In recent years, however, China’s foreign policy has become more confrontational, with Beijing alienating many neighbors and developing a contentious relationship with the United States. China seeks to avoid conventional war but still compete with the United States, expand its influence, and weaken its adversaries: a combination of goals and concerns tailor-made for proxy war. Beijing already conducts what a CSIS report has labeled “political warfare”: attempting to influence other states with a wide range of activities short of war (or even short of kinetic activity) including cyber operations, disinformation, economic coercion, the exploitation of international regimes, and other measures.30 In many of these activities, Beijing seeks a degree of deniability.

A Chinese proxy war would not be waged in isolation, and indeed China’s power, when compared with Iran or even Russia, gives it far more options. Even more than Russia, Beijing is a multidimensional actor, with a leading economy, powerful cyber capabilities, and strong conventional forces. A 2023 RAND study argued that it would probably take China at least several years to develop a highly skilled proxy war-support apparatus within its intelligence services and military, but this possibility is at least a long-term concern and bears watching carefully.31

In addition to its intelligence and military forces, China might conduct proxy war through its private security companies, which operate in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Unlike their Russian counterparts such as the Wagner Group, which provide military support, Chinese security companies do not serve as mercenary fighters, and indeed Wagner’s 2023 rebellion is likely to make Beijing more careful to limit the role of private security companies. Instead, they provide training; protect projects related to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to expand China’s influence globally by building infrastructure; and offer intelligence analysis and security consulting, among other services.

Beijing’s support for proxies would be likely to intersect with other efforts like the BRI, cyber campaigns, and economic coercion. China might punish an adversary’s companies (and even those of an adversary’s ally) and try to sow chaos through cyber-attacks while providing arms or a haven to local insurgents. Such efforts could be ratcheted up or reduced to coerce foes or simply weaken any countries that side with the United States or otherwise go against Beijing’s interests.
Although some adversaries, notably Taiwan, appear too strong domestically to face a violent challenge, it is easy to imagine China working with substate groups in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, as well as Central Asia if area governments become hostile to Beijing or too close to its adversaries. India almost always suffers numerous low-level civil conflicts as well as violence in Kashmir, and Beijing could exploit these to put pressure on New Delhi, at times working via Pakistan and at times using its own assets. China might also back overseas Chinese should they become involved in violent conflict. Farther from its borders, China might work with insurgents to undermine governments close to its adversaries or simply to protect BRI investments in areas that rebels control. China might also become involved in a conflict because rival states have intervened there.

Although the potential is considerable, so too are the risks for Beijing. There is no reason to expect that China would avoid the problems with proxies that have plagued other powers in the past or be able to fully control groups it supports. Similarly, other powers may become more hostile to Beijing or step up support for its rivals if China does back rebel groups. So far, China has been cautious in supporting proxies and with kinetic behavior in general, but as Beijing’s power grows and US-China tension increases, the Chinese leadership might decide the risks outweigh the rewards.

How the United States Might Use Proxies

The United States, like other great powers, has many incentives to use proxies and considerable capacity to do so. Indeed, the Special Forces were created to fight “by, with, and through” local allies in anti-Communist struggles, acting as a force multiplier, and the US military as a whole often embraces this concept with its training and other support missions. Much of the effort to disrupt Al Qaeda and the Islamic State was done via proxies, many at the substate level, who fought jihadist insurgencies in Libya, Somalia, Syria and other countries. Given the relatively low cost of working with these allies, and recent administrations’ desires to focus on great power competition, such proxy efforts are likely to continue, especially if the jihadist threat increases.

It is likely that the United States would consider working with proxies should Russia, China or other major powers attack their neighbors. In contrast to the Cold War, the United States is not seeking to use proxies to roll back Russia and China’s current level of influence—Washington would not support rebels in Belarus, for example. Rather, the approach would be defensive, using local groups to push back against aggression and otherwise defend the current world order. It is plausible that if the US competition with China becomes even more heated, the United States might support insurgencies against China’s
allies, or step up support for area governments threatened by Chinese-backed insurgencies. For now, this is a hypothetical, but it is a plausible one.

As this brief review suggests, proxy war is likely to continue at both the state and the sub-state levels. The United States may back tribal groups against jihadists or guerrillas against an aggressive China or Russia. But Washington also might support a regime under attack by Chinese or Russian proxies, in part simply because Washington seeks to reduce Russian and Chinese influence in different parts of the world.

**Policy Implications**

Proxy war is here to stay. Iran and Russia already have formidable proxy war capabilities, China might develop them in the future, they are a regular part of the US national security toolkit, and the Ukraine conflict is a reminder to all states that direct intervention can fail or even backfire.

Understanding an adversary's use of proxies is fundamentally an intelligence question. To understand the full range of support, states often need to track a variety of actors ranging from secretive intelligence operatives to private military companies. Beyond these traditional collection issues, states also need to determine possible interest divergence between sponsors and proxies, the level of proxy competence, the degree of command exercised, and other measures to judge the quality of the relationship.

From this information, states can pursue information campaigns that play up the role of outside support, both to decrease the benefits of deniability to the sponsor and to discredit the proxy on nationalist grounds. This does not mean that democratic states should seek to use disinformation campaigns, which can backfire if revealed. Instead, assuming they want to risk escalation rather than sweep the proxy support under the rug, they might selectively play up different parts of the truth such as potential corruption, weak proxy performance, and different interests—all this can be magnified through skilled operations.

Deniability itself should be challenged when a state wishes to respond or escalate. As noted, the United States and its allies usually know the basic outlines, if not the details, of Russian, Pakistani, Iranian, or other state support for proxies. Outing these states makes it easier to gain public and diplomatic support for any response or retaliation.

When a proxy has great power support, however, it will be far harder to take action. If Iran retaliates against increased US pressure, its economic and political
power is limited, as are its military forces. China, or even a now-depleted Russia, however can block any meaningful action in the United Nations and otherwise use their diplomatic clout to win over countries or at least keep them neutral. Similarly, economic interdependence and the potential loss of market and investment opportunities makes governments far less likely to support sanctions or other forms of economic pressure.

Foreign internal defense efforts are vital given the risk that China, Iran, Russia or other powers might support substate proxies—Iran is already doing so in several Middle Eastern countries. Training allied military forces and intelligence services are vital parts of these efforts, and the United States needs to maintain, or even expand, these capabilities.

Military operations are also far more difficult when great powers are involved. Decapitation strikes are far harder to pull off if a great power offers proxy leadership a haven in its own country. Even attacks on the proxy are riskier. The United States and its allies have grown used to having secure forward operating bases and a monopoly on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. When a proxy has great power support, however, it might have access to formidable surveillance assets and, with the sponsor’s help, be able to strike at forward operating bases with drones or other systems with little warning.

States must also prepare for possible escalation. The US and European success in helping the Ukrainian government contain rebels in Donbas after 2014 can rightly be viewed as a (limited) policy achievement. However, Russia’s ambitions to dominate Ukraine continued, and perhaps even grew in response to greater Western support for Kyiv, setting the stage for the 2022 invasion. China, for its part, might step up economic coercion or other measures short of war in response to setbacks in a proxy conflict. Sponsors often do not wish to escalate, but their rivals must be prepared for this possibility.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in addressing any future uptick in proxy conflicts involving Russia and China is ensuring that any response is multi-dimensional. Great power sponsors, and even regional ones like Iran, often combine proxy sponsorship with information operations, cyber campaigns, economic pressure, and other policy instruments. Those opposing proxy war must also respond to these different instruments, or else success in one area will be swamped by failure in others.

Notes


5. For an excellent assessment, see Groh, The Least Bad Option.


10. Groh, The Least Bad Option, 211.


