PROXY WARFARE

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For Hannah

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Introduction

The Rise of Proxy Wars

Proxy conflict represents a perennial strand in the history of warfare. The appeal of 'warfare on the cheap' has proved an irresistible strategic allure for nations through the centuries. However, proxy wars remain a missing link in contemporary war and security studies. They are historically ubiquitous yet chronically under-analysed. This book attempts to rectify this situation by assessing the dynamics and lineage of proxy warfare from the Cold War to the War on Terror, and analysing them within a conceptual framework to help us explain their appeal. The following chapters will set the international political and strategic background of proxy warfare in the modern world, tracing its development throughout the last century, and posit it as a highly pertinent factor in the character of contemporary conflict. Also addressed are questions of what defines a proxy war; why they appeal; and who fights in them. Furthermore, the book will emphasize why, given the direction of the War on Terror and the prominence now achieved by non-state actors in the Arab Spring, this is an important time to be studying the phenomenon of proxy warfare.

Proxy wars are defined here as the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome. As we will see, this prevents confusion with direct intervention or covert action. Theoretically, it will be argued that recourse to proxy war has been a perpetual element of modern warfare, and will continue to be so, because the attainment of a preferred strategic outcome in a certain conflict is outweighed by consequences of direct engagement based on an assessment of interest, ideology and risk. This tendency has been particularly prevalent

since 1945, as the shadow of nuclear war ensured more acute selectivity in conflict engagement given the consequences of a potential nuclear exchange. Where state or group survival is not at stake but the augmentation of interest can still be achieved, states and sub-state groups have historically proven to be conspicuous users of proxy methods as a means of securing particular conflict outcomes.

The aim of this book is not to give a potted history of every proxy war fought in the modern world. Instead, it will utilize empirical examples to flesh out the concept of war by proxy and offer up explanations for their causes, conduct and consequences in the past, present and future.

Stand-alone analysis of proxy war has largely been overlooked in security studies scholarship.[1] In 1996, K. J. Holsti asserted that 'war has been the major focus of international relations studies for the past three centuries.'[2] Yet this is only strictly true if we take a meaning of war that specifically covers conventionally fought inter-state conflict. The indirect engagement in violence – of both an inter- and intra-state variety – has been distinctly peripheral in discussions on the shape of modern war. A significant portion of the theoretical, causal and quantitative studies of war in the modern world overlook conflict in its proxy form.[3] Even substantial works, such as Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War*, do not substantially promulgate a conceptual understanding of proxy war despite presenting a narrative of superpower intervention in the Third World during that era.[4] Arguably, this is because such conflicts form a major part of the background fabric of Cold War historiography. As a concept, proxy war has not been an adept cross-disciplinary traveller. This book is an effort to take the large, but undiscerning, historical literature on proxy war and lever greater conceptual understanding from

it for an international relations and security studies audience.

Clausewitzean strategic thought emphasizes the changing characteristics – or 'grammar' – of warfare from era to era. It is this book's goal to demonstrate how the evolving 'grammar' of warfare in the modern world has rendered shifts in the way in which proxy wars have been perceived by states and non-state actors and thus effected their utility as a mode of strategic attainment. In the twentieth century, at the dawn of the era of total war, the mode of proxy intervention took on new resonance as the consequences of engaging in outright war came with heightened risk of high death tolls, infrastructural destruction and political annihilation. The end of the Second World War ushered in the nuclear era, starkly accentuating the risks associated with going to war or challenging the security of a nuclear nation. This nuclear weapon-induced stability/instability paradox arguably caused nations to find alternative outlets for their strategic ambitions, where the consequences were contained yet the rewards tangible. The global reach of the Cold War soon demonstrated, in the mid-twentieth century, that engagement in proxy wars was a convenient means by which the superpower states could exert their influence and attempt to maximize their interests in parts of the Third World, while simultaneously reducing the risk of conflict escalation.

Even after the bipolar system gave way to the New World Order in the 1990s, proxy intervention continued to be a recurrent element in international conflict, as a new age of globalization gave rise to the information revolution and bore witness to the increased prominence of the non-state actor in international relations. During the last decade of the twentieth century, the notion of 'intervention' became explicitly tied to the nascent 'responsibility to protect' agenda and the debates surrounding humanitarianism.[5]

This, to a large extent, overshadowed the continued presence of proxy interventions undertaken for reasons entirely alien to the liberal foreign policy agenda of that decade in the West.

The appeal of proxy war is undiminished in the post-9/11 world whereby states 'with or against' the United States, in President George W. Bush's dichotomization of world politics, jostled to secure their own strategic interests as the War on Terror came to dominate the discourse of international relations in the early twenty-first century. As state sponsors of terrorism coalesced to form Bush's self-proclaimed 'axis of evil', the mode by which both the 'coalition of the willing' and the constituents of the axis (and, significantly, their allies) could further their strategic aims has manifest itself in large part through the wider employment of proxies.

Yet it is not just superpowers that have shaped the terrain of proxy warfare. Given its lower-cost, often lower-risk, mode of conflict engagement, non-state actors including terrorist groups and more recently private security companies have been utilized as proxies. This book will therefore explore the wide spectrum of actors involved in proxy warfare, historically and contemporaneously, in order to fully analyse not only those states who sponsor proxies in conflicts, but also assess the motivations of those groups who act as the proxies themselves.

So why is proxy war an important issue in the modern world? It is largely because of two major trends in the analysis of war. First, in the words of John Mueller, is the 'obsolescence of major war'.[6] Total warfare, or conventional 'state versus state' conflicts between developed countries, is a form of conflict that has diminished given the changing nature of the system of statehood and the international order in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Second, history tells us that any rigorous academic and military focus upon

counter-insurgency (as currently witnessed during the War on Terror) is momentary and often lasts only as long as the deployment of troops. The scholarly output surrounding the Vietnam War is prodigious, yet reflections upon the nature and mode of counter-insurgency waned once the US withdrew. As a consequence, the American military (and indeed its academic community) has had to 'relearn' counter-insurgency since the degeneration of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq into asymmetric conflict quagmires. Yet, if the pattern of attention granted irregular warfare after the Vietnam pull-out is repeated after combat troops have departed the frontline of the War on Terror, then this will inevitably relegate counter-insurgency once more to the strategic backburner.[7] So when combined with the fading of traditional state-based conflict and the searing effect of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars on prospective American willingness to deploy troops in large numbers again to fight asymmetric opponents, the future direction of warfare could be heavily influenced by an increased reliance on proxy conflict.

The book will be broken down into analytically focused chapters that seek to deconstruct the essential elements that constitute wars by proxy. Each chapter will provide in-depth case studies to help put some empirical meat on the conceptual bones of the analysis. Chapter 1 will deconstruct *what* proxy war actually is. It will establish the contours of this particular form of conflict, locating it in the wider picture of modern warfare. This chapter will elaborate upon the definition offered earlier that proxy warfare is the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome. Often subsumed into the wider narrative of the history of warfare, this chapter will argue for the need to view this specific strand of war in isolation, constitutive as it is of particular motives, practices and component players. The reader will be encouraged to

observe the ubiquity of proxy war in modern conflict history. The question of what proxy war is will be illuminated by highlighting specifically what it is not. Proxy war does not include the overt supply of troops. This constitutes direct third-party intervention, and this delineation will be offered in this chapter in order to adequately define the phenomenon of proxy war itself.

Chapter 2 will address the fundamental question of *why* proxy intervention appeals to actors in international relations. Based on assessments of self-interest, it will be argued that recourse to proxy involvement is often a way of realizing long-term strategic foreign and security policy goals, either regionally or globally. Proxy intervention crosses the state/ sub-state divide given its proclivity towards furthering strategic goals regardless of unit status, hence the engagement by non-state actors in proxy war also. Although, it must be noted, historically superpowers have preserved a higher propensity for proxy intervention. This chapter will identify the primary reasons, based on assumptions of self-interest, as to why proxy interventions occur, namely, ideological interventions motivated by grand political desires (especially during the Cold War) and interventions prompted by security or strategic designs.

Chapter 3 asks '*who* engages in proxy war?' It will identify the sources of state-based intervention, but will also unpack assumptions as to the monopoly that states have upon engaging in proxy warfare by accounting for the role that non-state actors can play, such as terrorist groups and militia organizations. This chapter will assess the sources of proxy intervention in conflicts, highlighting prevalent cases of state engagement in proxy war (such as initial American involvement in the Vietnam War), as well as sources of non-state involvement, ranging from terrorist groups (such as Hezbollah's role during the Israeli war with Lebanon in 2006), and ethnic diasporas (such as Irish-Americans during the Northern Irish 'Troubles').