

FUNCTIONAL MODELS OF THE SPONSOR-AGENT RELATIONSHIP IN PROXY WARFARE

Alin CÎRDEI, Paul TUDORACHE, Lucian ISPAS

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania

cirdei.alin@armyacademy.ro, p_tudorache@yahoo.com, ispaslucian04@yahoo.com

Abstract: Proxy wars are a form of confrontation whose origins are lost in the mists of history. In the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, this type of war experienced a sharp development due to the changes that took place on the international scene. Due to the fact that the great powers avoided direct confrontation during the Cold War, for fear that this confrontation would degenerate into a new conventional or even nuclear world war, they chose to use proxy warfare as a pressure relief valve, a way to put the opponent in difficulty, to gain influence or even economic, political or other benefits. Proxy wars can take place both between states and between groups within a state, or between a terrorist group, paramilitary organisation, etc. and a state, and the common element is given by the fact that one or both of the parties benefit from external support, especially in the form of armaments, ammunitions, intelligence, expertise, advice from a sponsor of which it becomes an agent. In exchange for the sponsor's support, the agent offers him a series of advantages, influence, etc. The sponsor obtains strategic advantages without direct involvement, without exposing himself and without settling national and international image costs, while the agent is actively involved in combat operations, it is he who must ensure the achievement of objectives to satisfy both his own expectations and those of the sponsor.

Keywords: proxy war, sponsor, agent, indirect confrontation

1. Introduction

Proxy warfare is a particular form of confrontation, which can be associated with a conflict of lower intensity, with less geographical spread than a direct conflict between states of the same caliber. This type of war has always been seen as a way to gain advantages, to achieve political and military objectives without direct military intervention, by using an armed force willing to do anything to satisfy the needs and interests of the power that supports and directs the intervention, which cannot be held accountable most of the time because it does not represent a state entity. The support from the powerful state can be direct and visible or indirect, invisible,

difficult or impossible to attribute to someone and therefore it can be a preferred form of intervention to promote some interests, some objectives, to reduce the influence of a potential adversary, to cause damage etc. Proxy warfare is not something new on the international scene, it has been used since ancient times, but it returned to the attention of researchers during the Cold War [1], when the great powers, faced with the risk of a total, nuclear war, sought new forms of confrontation, repressing tensions, promoting ideologies, obtaining or maintaining spheres of influence, etc. Thus proxy war became the main form of confrontation on the international stage, with great powers choosing to support

smaller states or even armed groups that were involved in regional, local conflicts or civil wars. After the end of the cold war, the war through intermediaries did not disappear from the international scene, but acquired new forms of manifestation, being associated most of the time with a way of materializing the hybrid conflict.

2. Fundamental aspects of the proxy warfare

The proxy war is a form of confrontation that is not new and that in the 21st century acquired new forms of manifestation, the conflict evolving rapidly and becoming a form of manifestation of hybrid war. In general terms, proxy war can be defined as an international conflict, between state or non-state actors, fought on the territory of a third party, which hides under the guise of an internal or regional conflict and which uses the human resources and territory of the smaller states to fulfill the objectives of the stronger state. The concept of “proxy war” refers to wars in which a stronger state provides a smaller state or entity with support that could be useful in the course of a conflict, such as “funding, arms, equipment, advising, training, intelligence, and/or troops, for the purposes of accomplishing some strategic objective” [2].

Proxy wars are based on how power relations are constructed, on the respect and appreciation enjoyed by the conflicting parties, and also consider the consequences of direct displays of support between the parties involved. When the cooperation between the parties is based on certain agreements, on the direct assumption of certain responsibilities, rights and obligations between the parties, we can speak of the existence of an alliance or coalition, formed by entities with appropriate or identical objectives, but with different capabilities. In the situation where we are talking about the lack of open relations, the need for the relationship between the parties to remain clandestine, the existence of strong asymmetries, then

we can bring up the proxy conflict, in which one party supports, provides resources, information, etc. [3], and one side is supported in exchange for promoting the interests of the stronger side, but which wishes to remain in the shadows. The supporting party is also known as the sponsor, and the supported party is called an intermediary or agent, a power tool used by the powerful in order to achieve their own goals. In the proxy conflict everything revolves around interests and power relations, as both the sponsor and the intermediary want to obtain maximum benefits with minimum effort and exposure. However, the proxy must bear the greatest risks and the strongest consequences arising from the materialization of power relations and the way the conflict is completed. Proxy conflict is sought by powerful states, because this way they can pursue their strategic goals and at the same time avoid direct engagement, involvement in a costly, bloody and uncertain conflict. From these considerations, we can state that the proxy war is a hybrid war, which uses conventional and non-conventional means, in physical, informational and virtual dimensions, to achieve with minimal efforts and with reduced exposure some objectives of strategic importance, proxy wars being the “product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor’s weapons, training and funding” [4].

The emergence, evolution and completion of proxy war can be influenced by complex factors such as geopolitical, economic, political, ideological, cultural and last but not least military interests [5]. A state's appetite for proxy war can be understood by identifying the main reasons behind the desire to support other states or non-state actors through the use of military and economic instruments, such as: the possibility of changing or balancing the balance of power, weakening adversaries,

economic gains, obtaining political influence, promoting currents of opinion internally, the possibility of providing humanitarian support. Likewise, a sponsor's decision to engage in a proxy war may be influenced by tactical and operational factors such as the length of supply lines, the complexity of logistical support, domestic and international exposure, limitations and vulnerabilities of conventional forces, political constraints etc., elements that can make "prolonged military confrontation unattractive to many decision makers" [6], because the costs of this direct confrontation are far too great in relation to the benefits it brings and therefore it will prefer to wage a war through intermediaries.

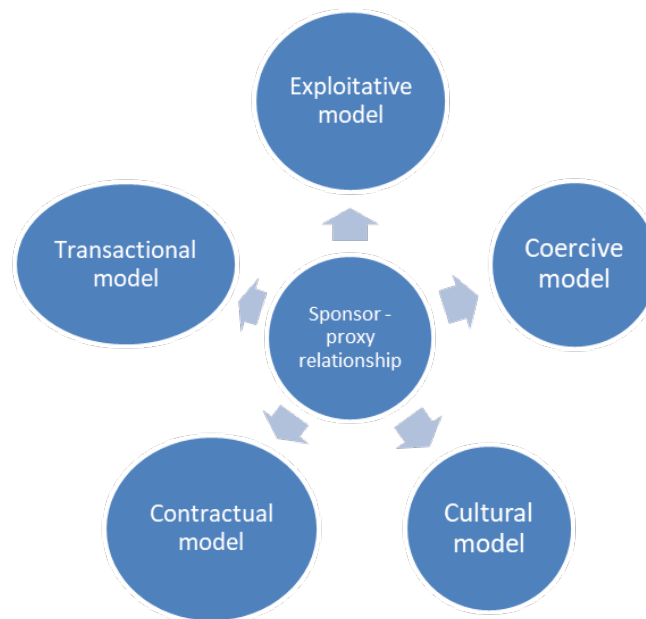
For proxy warfare to materialize there needs to be a strong asymmetry in the relationship between the parties in favor of the sponsor, and the agent must be willing or coerced to accept protection and support from the sponsor in exchange for promoting interests and concentrating efforts to satisfy demands of a sponsor who may have visible, clearly expressed or even hidden interests. The power relationship between sponsor and agent is clearly in favor of the sponsor, who will seek by any means to keep the agent under control, to prevent him from amassing too much power and desiring emancipation or even rebellion. The protector-protégé relationship is effective and sustainable as long as both parties have something to gain, as long as they see each other as partners in a symbiotic relationship and not in a parasitic relationship. When the sponsor disregards the agent, the latter's desire to get out of this relationship, to free himself from constraints and follow his own path will appear, and when the agent refuses to follow the path imposed or desired by the sponsor, tries to make its own decisions that may even be in conflict with the sponsor's interests, the sponsor will resort to coercive tools to bring the agent back under its own control, limit or withdraw its support, or even try to find another agent to compete or fight

with the original agent, who got out of control. From this perspective, even if the relationship between sponsor and agent in proxy war is a relationship based on common interests, on the possibility of easy satisfaction of political, economic or military needs, this does not mean that the situation cannot get out of control and that the mutual benefits offered by proxy war cannot turn into disadvantages. The lack of border control and the geographical positioning between the sponsor and the agent can facilitate proxy wars by enabling access to resources or providing the ability to retreat to external safe havens [7].

In proxy warfare the relations between the sponsor - the supporting party and the agent - the supported party are not formalized by a written understanding, agreement or treaty, but are based on informal, unofficial understandings, without established cooperation or coordination relationships and without existing command-control relationships between the sponsor and the agent. The relationship between the sponsor and the agent is complex and involves the sponsor delegating some responsibilities to a local actor that it does not fully control, making often important investments in equipping and supporting the intermediary's armed forces participating in the confrontations, maintaining out of the attention of the international community as long as its own interests demand it.

3. Main models of the agent-sponsor relationship in modern proxy warfare

The relationship between sponsor and agent is very complex, each war having its own peculiarities and forms of manifestation. However, studies conducted by specialists in the field have highlighted five main models of proxy conflicts from the perspective of power, influence and responsibility relationships that are established between the parties involved [8]: the exploitative model, the transactional model, the coercive model, the contractual model and the cultural model (figure no. 1).



*Figure 1: Models of proxy warfare (apud Fox, Amos C. "Strategic Relationships, Risk, and Proxy War." *Journal of Strategic Security* 14, no. 2 (2021), pp. 1-24).*

The exploitative model is based on a parasitic relationship, where the intermediary is completely dependent on the sponsor for its own survival. This dependence gives rise to very strong bonds between the sponsor and the agent, and the sponsor has almost unlimited power over the agent, who feels obliged to satisfy all the demands of the sponsor on whose support his own survival depends. After the sponsor meets its goals, the agent is no longer important and support may be reduced or even discontinued if the relationship is no longer profitable for the sponsor. In this relationship the agent is nothing more than a tool for the sponsor, who does not necessarily have any special affinity for the latter. A representative example of this model can be the relationship between the Russian Federation and the separatist republics from Eastern Ukraine, for the period 2014 - 2022.

The coercive model is based on a contingent relationship, between two parties that have nothing in common. In this relationship the sponsor forces the agent to promote his interests, the agent not being very willing to take risks, and the sponsor must constantly make his presence and importance felt in order to keep the agent

under control and focused on the fulfilment of the imposed objectives. This relationship is one of conjuncture, not based on respect or common ideals, and is characterized by an acute lack of trust, each of the parties involved having to expect changes in orientation of the other party and even attacks from its side, so as was the case with the relationship between international coalition forces and Afghan security forces. The coercive model works because the sponsor possesses significant military and economic power and has the means to influence the course of a conflict, and the agent is forced to accept support for lack of viable alternatives.

The cultural model is perhaps the most effective type of proxy relationship because, in addition to the political, military and economic interests that bring the sponsor and the agent closer together, there is also a cultural affinity between them that allows them to collaborate more effectively and that justifies the closeness between the two sides. Within this type of relationship, religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural aspects are taken into account, which are not limited to borders or geographical neighbourhoods, the relationship can also

be created between entities located at a distance from each other. Among the most important advantages of this model we can list the willingness of the parties to take risks due to these affinities, their desire to help an entity that is related and with which they partially identify, but also the high level of trust on which this is based relationship because related entities, sharing the same language, the same religion, the same traditions, come together much more easily and coalesce against a completely different entity, which shows hostility not to the agent directly, but to what it represents (religion, language, ethnicity, culture). An example of this can be the support given by Iran to various Shia militias and groups in conflict with Sunni groups in Yemen, Palestine or Syria.

The contractual model represents a new form of manifestation of the conflict through an intermediary specific to the modern era and the hybrid conflict, but essentially it represents one of the oldest relational models between the agent and the sponsor. In this model, it is about hiring mercenaries to fulfil some objectives, without the relationship between employer and employee being very clearly highlighted. The basis of this model is represented by the possibility of some states or entities to hire a private security company to serve as an instrument of force in a certain area. The use of mercenaries or private security companies can be a favorable way to solve certain problems because it can be more efficient in terms of costs and benefits, with the sponsor or employer choosing the most convenient course of action without directly exposing themselves and without having legal responsibilities related to the way of action of the Security companies, being able at most to be considered morally responsible. Examples of this model can be private security companies used by the US or Russia, such as Blackwater, Dynacorps or Wagner.

Another common model is the transactional

one, where each of the actors, both the sponsor and the agent have something to gain from the relationship, they have to give something to get something else in return. As a rule, the sponsor participates in this conflict by providing support, protection, information, advice, and the agent provides the military force fighting for the defeat of the common adversary, assuming human, material and image losses in exchange for the support received. Unlike other models, this type of relationship gives the intermediary greater bargaining power, as he is the one who requests support and the one who can shape how it is provided. In the transactional model, which can be assimilated to a commercial contract, usually without a signed document to this effect, the relationship between the two parties has a limited duration and ends when the objectives are met and when the intermediary wants to return to the previous situation, no strings attached. In the transactional relationship, the intermediary possesses a military force that allows him to act, but believes that the involvement of a sponsor increases his chances of success. Examples of the materialization of this model are: the support given by the US to Iraq for the defeat of ISIS, the support provided by Russia to Syria in the framework of the civil war, etc.

Regardless of the model in which proxy warfare fits, it will remain a preferred form of conducting conflicts, repositioning spheres of influence or releasing tensions on the international stage and will remain “a core feature of the contemporary and future strategic and security environment” [9], because, in theory, proxy war is a simple solution to a complex problem. In practice, however, it has been found that proxy war is actually a simple solution only in the short term, because the evolution of events is unpredictable and most of the time the consequences and effects are not anticipated and are very difficult to manage. Proxy warfare gives the sponsor some

flexibility and freedom of action because he is not in the foreground and can always deny or hide involvement in the conflict and “provides the principal actors a degree of standoff and limited liability” [10], both in front of domestic and international public opinion, as well as in front of international organisations, which cannot hold the sponsor responsible for the actions of the intermediary and thus the impact on the former is much reduced.

4. Conclusions

Proxy warfare is a cheap, simple, non-committal way of enabling a stronger state to achieve its strategic, military, political or economic objectives in the short and medium term. In the long term, however, they can create problems and fissures in the relationship between the sponsor and the agent, and the agent to escape from the control and influence of the sponsor, creating for him a series of problems that are difficult to solve, from the creation and maintenance of instability, the emergence of the need to intervene later to stabilize the situation, image costs, etc. Another consequence of the use of intermediaries in the promotion of different interests is related to the observance of the rules of international humanitarian law by the intermediary who, in many cases, not being bound by conventions and being difficult to hold accountable, indulges in reprehensible or even illegal acts, facts that can be imputed to the sponsor, who thus becomes morally guilty. “Proxy warfare in the form of state support to non-state armed groups is a recurrent feature of armed conflicts. While states have long recognized the strategic advantages of this form of indirect conflict intervention, several studies have linked proxy warfare to a protraction of conflicts and an increased probability of violations of international humanitarian law” [11]. In this situation, the short-term advantages obtained by the sponsoring state are cancelled out by the legal and moral consequences of the intermediary's actions.

However, their transformative effects and consequences on conflict dynamics more broadly—conflict elongation and termination, civilian abuse, victimization, fatalities—demand a careful calibration of short and long term gains, as well as costs and benefits [12].

The relationship between the sponsor and the agent is a complex relationship, characteristic of hybrid type confrontations, in which the armed arm is represented by the intermediary, the one who assumes most of the risks and bears most of the consequences, and the spring, the catalyst is represented by the sponsor, the one who provides resources, motivates, sets goals and limits. The relationship between the two parties is based on power relations, and the durability of this relationship is closely related to the model on which it is built. The more artificial, more conjunctural the relationship, the more fragile it is. Because the relations of power and influence between the sponsor and the agent are not regulated and formalized, a state of uncertainty arises, which, depending on the evolution of the conflict, can turn into a state of tension between the two main actors. It is possible that the sponsor wants to control the intermediary's actions as much as possible, considering himself entitled to the financial, material and informational support provided, and the intermediary feeling entitled to benefit from greater freedom of action, greater recognition due to the direct effort that he submits. Moreover, if the intermediary's actions are successful, it is possible to witness a desire for emancipation, to get out of the sponsor's tutelage, to obtain a better status, which can lead to additional tensions between the two parties.

Proxy war is and will remain in the future the preferred form of conflict between global and regional powers [13], which, in a multipolar and unpredictable world, where power relations are complex and where economic interdependencies make direct confrontation less likely. The war between

Russia and Ukraine, even if it does not fit into the definition of proxy war, highlights the vulnerability of a state that has a major military power against a smaller state, but which is indirectly supported by other states and which, avoiding military involvement directly in the conflict, they can influence its evolution by imposing sanctions and limiting economic and commercial relations with the aggressor state. This lesson can represent an x-ray of the current Security

environment and an element to increase the potential importance of proxy warfare in advancing interests and maintaining or expanding spheres of influence.

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