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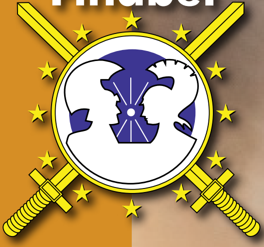

Proxy Warfare in a Post-Covid World

AN EXPERTISE FORUM CONTRIBUTING TO EUROPEAN ARMIES INTEROPERABILITY SINCE 1953

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This paper was drawn up by Alberto Rizzi under the supervision and guidance of Mr Mario Blokken, Director of the Permanent Secretariat.

This Food for Thought paper is a document that gives an initial reflection on the theme. The content is not reflecting the positions of the member states but consists of elements that can initiate and feed the discussions and analyses in the domain of the theme. All our studies are available on www.finabel.org

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INTRODUCTION

At first glance, defence would rarely be seen as a domain affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, the disruption brought by the virus into our societies can significantly impact the security environment. The strong pressure on healthcare systems, together with the necessity to relaunch the economy, would inevitably weigh heavily on defence budgets. Reduced revenue from taxes and the urgency to fight the pandemic, support suffering businesses and people, will potentially reduce allocations for defence budgets. This, however, comes at a time where global security is deteriorating, and defence forces are facing multiple and diverse threats. They have also been often called to help in another war, the one against the virus.

To effectively fight threats despite the lack of resources, cost-effective solutions need to be found. Among the options, an increased reliance on proxy warfare, which already constitutes a trend of contemporary great power competition, appears to be a feasible one, given its limited costs. Countries unwilling or unable to spend vast resources for conventional forces would thus enhance their defence posture through the employment of local actors and sub-state armed groups.

This paper will analyse the perspective of proxy warfare in the context brought about by Covid-19. First, it describes the current situation and expected trends of defence budgets, coming under strong pressure due to the dramatic economic consequences of the pandemic, especially in light of the likely expectation of lower financial allocation for defence budgets. Proxy warfare as a potential solution would then be analysed, showing how it could constitute a viable tool to help states maintain a credible deterrence and defend their interest abroad. This overview of contemporary proxy warfare would provide both the advantages and challenges of such a strategy for countries financially stressed by the pandemic and its consequences. The main finding is that the use of proxies could represent an effective strategy. Still, to overcome its many limitations, it can only be employed as complementary to a conventional apparatus.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DEFENCE

Covid-19 is heavily affecting the domain of defence and will continue to do so. The emergency response to the virus and the dramatic economic consequences of the pandemic are likely to significantly impact the defence capabilities of countries worldwide. Not only have armed forces been often called to the frontline to provide help and logistical support to the affected population and the overburdened civilian health personnel, but they are also facing a potentially disruptive reality.

Political leaders and officials have often framed the pandemic in Europe in military

terms. The struggle against Covid-19 has been immediately branded as a "war" that each nation, and Europe as a whole, should "win". The virus, despite its largely immaterial form, was the "enemy" against whom the whole population was supposed to unite for the fight (Musu, 2020). Despite the different interpretations that have been given to this attitude, between democratic risks and misunderstandings of the mechanics of virology, the military has been directly involved in pandemic response all around Europe.

Military personnel are often deployed within national borders not just for security operations, but also for disaster-relief programmes, and similar civilian activities. This pandemic, despite its peculiarity, has not been different: troops were tasked with helping the civilian population against the pandemic threat. This intervention has been threefold: logistical support to hospitals, moving patients from the most affected areas towards less occupied hospitals; direct participation in the medical activities, either by providing medical personnel to public hospitals or setting up field hospitals to cope with the pandemic; participating in the accessory control of the population for those countries that adopted a lockdown (Opillard, Palle & Michelis, 2020). Finally, in the most affected area of Europe, the province of Bergamo in Northern Italy, the military has also received the grim task of transporting the deceased towards cremation facilities in other regions, since local ones could not cope with the death rate in the early weeks of the pandemic.

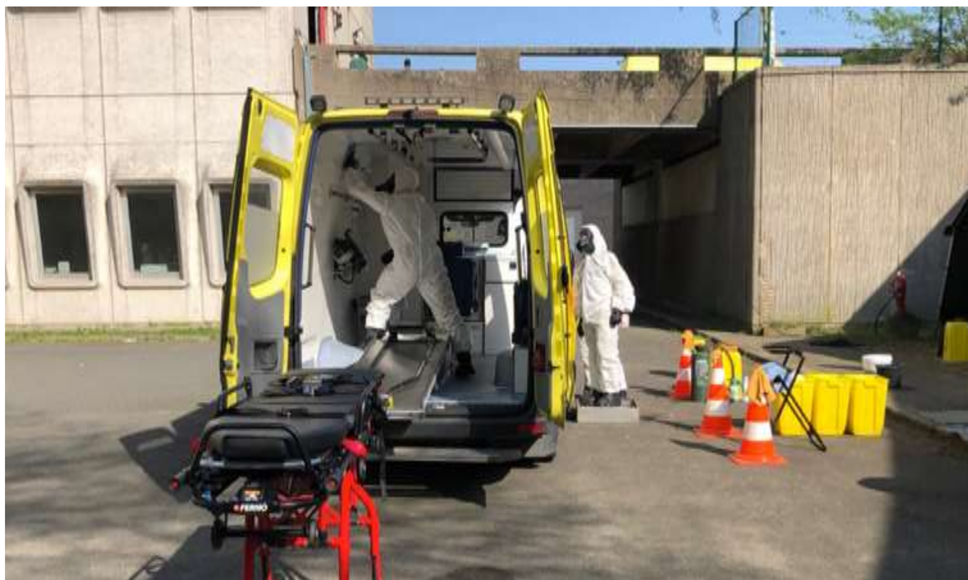
The employment of the military in similar operations, such as the French "Operation Resilience", is an established trend in European nations, where armies are often called to provide the most immediate response to environmental disasters, like wildfires or earthquakes. However, this time the scale and magnitude of the deployments have been extremely significant. Often, instead of being strictly localised to the disaster-affected area, a nationwide approach has been adopted.

This is the first way in which the pandemic has effectively impacted the military and, while not directly jeopardising effective capability, has nonetheless "diverted" personnel and equipment from the defence of the national territory from external threats. More than that, this deployment has also meant additional strain on military forces, namely the necessity to avoid contagion. Military life, with its shared spaces and close contact, offers an opportunity for the virus to spread, as it happened especially in the enclosed spaces of warships (BBC, 2020). Prevention measures among the military, which have also been enacted overseas, diminish the military's capabilities.

Budgetary cuts and reduced spending

With the pandemic still ongoing in many areas of the globe, it is too soon to effectively analyse all the effects of the virus. Nonetheless, the sharp economic downturn experienced globally, together with the necessity to find resources to ease the effects of the pandemic and allow for recovery of all economic activities, would put strong pressure on defence capabilities. Spending plans for 2020 are unlikely to be altered significantly due to budgetary allocations being planned, but starting from next year, military expenditures

would be strained.
2019 marked a peak in military expenditures worldwide, with almost $2 trillion (Metha, 2020), representing the largest increase in a decade, and driven by increases in defence budgets in several regions, from Europe to East Asia. While SIPRI reports that figures for Western Europe were still lower than 2010, it represented a significant year on year increase (SIPRI, 2020), mostly due to the German large increase (+10% over 2018). Even before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, defence budgets in Europe were facing several challenges. On one side, global security is rapidly deteriorating. Thus states need to shape their defence policies (and financial allocations) accordingly to face a larger amount of more diverse threats. While this global trend towards a more insecure scenario will be explained later in this paper, it goes without saying that such a situation calls for increased military expenditures, and the construction of a more multifunctional military able to effectively deal with those multiple threats.
At the same time, already in the last part of 2019, several economic constraints to increasing or maintaining the previously planned defence allocations had emerged. A global GDP slowdown had been evident already since July, as testified by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2019), and later confirmed in October of the same year. The main causes of the slowdown identified by the IMF were mainly related to global trade, heavily affected by rising protectionism and the US-China trade war, considered as other disruptions were the strong geopolitical tensions in the Persian Gulf, the Far East, and uncertainty on the Brexit process (IMF, 2020). Global GDP growth in 2019 has been below 3%, representing the slowest expansion since the 2007/2008 financial crisis, as reported by the



Fund (IMF Datamapper, 2020). This overall economic environment explains clearly how, even in the absence of Covid-19, defence budgets were already under pressure, trapped between the necessity to enhance capabilities, and the continuous downgrade of global growth, meaning that incoming state revenues would have been lower than previously expected. Thus, defence expenditures were not expected to increase further than 2019 levels.

Then, the whole world was affected by Covid-19. The spread of the virus from Asia to the rest of the globe was soon followed by social distancing measures, forced closure of economic activities, and prolonged lockdown periods, where basically everything except for essential shops and services was obliged to shut down to contain the proliferation of the virus. Although not all countries enacted total lockdowns, and those who did still had different degrees of intensity, the economic consequences of this forced inactivity have been devastating. The economic forecast points to an almost 5% recession of global GDP and to sharp falls in the GDP of the most advanced economies, which, on average, would be double the global one (IMF, 2020). Europe was already in a phase of sluggish economic growth before the pandemic, and experienced a second recession with the Eurozone crisis. This would thus be the third economic recession in less than fifteen years for Europe, hitting in a moment when the wounds of the previous one had not fully healed yet. In such a scenario, economic recession would strongly diminish states' revenues, resulting in lower resources for allocations for military expenditures. At the same time, the scarcity of financial resources also means that decision-makers would be forced to prioritise certain areas. With the need to counter a pandemic and restart the economy, it is hard to imagine that defence budgets would feature those priorities.

Changing political priorities

Beyond the financial issue, another element that would curb the willingness and capability of maintaining current military expenditures is the transformation of political priorities because of the virus. The coronavirus pandemic has shown several fragile points of welfare and health systems in Europe and has heavily affected businesses all around the continent.

While it might seem early to determine the future of defence budgets, some considerations can already be made. Defence budgets are quite often calculated and compared based on a percentage of GDP or public spending. A classic example is NATO guidelines, stating that member states should dedicate at least 2% of their GDP to defence expenditure (Techau, 2015). While the effectiveness and necessity of this threshold have often been questioned, if not openly contested (Cordesman, 2019), here it will only be used as a demonstrative example of possible disruptions to defence budgets in a post-Covid-19 world. Even if the countries that pledged to meet the 2% threshold would continue to do so in the coming years, the actual spending will likely diminish significantly. While the relative size of defence expenditures would remain the same, its actual value would decrease significantly. This is worth being stressed to understand that even in a best-case scenario,

where expenditure commitments as a share of the GDP were to be kept, Europe would still see a significant decline in its defence spending. Thus, only commitments that have been approved in exact figures could be considered "safe" from the Covid-19 upheaval. All the rest might suffer cuts due to lower resources available, but most of all due to changes in political priorities.

Defence budgets are part of national budgets, and, as such, are drafted by governments and parliaments, being inevitably subject to political scrutiny, and thus changing according to the economic environment and the governing parties. Contrary to other components of a country's accounts, defence budgets have shown some stickiness, especially in the US (Lofgren, 2020). The concept of "sticky budgets" is the same as economic stickiness: a sticky variable is one that seldom experiences significant changes even when major economic disruptions occur. The reasons for this are several, ranging from the fact that defence expenditure generally has multi-year planning, and that economic shocks rarely change defence goals. However, the severity of the economic recession caused by the pandemic is unprecedented, at least since World War II, meaning that this previous trend cannot be confirmed. Expenditures in 2021 would hardly be changed, new major disruptions would happen in the last month of the year, but in the following years, planned increases might be cancelled as well cuts introduced. Several countries have already announced cuts in military spending for 2021: South Korea and Thailand have stated that they would reduce the defence budget to free resources for the struggle against Covid-19 (Lye, 2020), while India announced the suppression of 9,300 posts in the Military Engineering Services (Singh, 2020). While in Thailand's case, Covid-19 is explicitly stated as the main reason for the cuts (Grevatt & MacDonald, 2020), in India's case, it is part of a rationalisation of expenditures because Covid-19 would likely prevent any budgetary increase soon.

Even though no trend for the following years is clear, economic recovery from the pandemic and the recession would be prioritised, while defence capabilities would hardly feature among the priorities. Long-term analyses of the defence budget indicate stagnation and reduction in the expenses compared to pre-pandemic scenarios (Research and Markets, 2020). For many countries, pressure to reduce military expenditure would be not only significant, but also unlikely, countered by the necessity of maintaining the military in a position to respond quickly to a pandemic scenario. (Barrie, Childs & McGerty, 2020).

In short, Europe is going towards a future of stagnant, if not lower, defence expenditures, preventing the possibility of effectively countering the diverse set of threats that are merging in the contemporary global order.

Do more with less: a scenario of increasing insecurity

After being on the frontline against Covid-19, providing emergency relief and critical logistical assets, militaries in Europe will face the coming years with fewer resources than expected. The degree of reduction or stagnation of defence budgets is not clear yet, even though several elements point towards a decline in defence expenditures, which would

be more severe in the medium and long term. What is not declining, however, is global insecurity. On the contrary, instability and threats are on the rise in almost every region of the world, undermining the security of national actors, including European ones.

The end of American unipolar dominance has deeply changed the international system. The combined effect of the deterioration of Washington's primacy in global affairs, and the rise of Russia and China, is creating a strategic environment appearing completely different from the last three decades. If the US had not faced any real competitor for global dominance earlier, today it is facing increasingly assertive opponents, which, even though not yet capable of dethroning America, are nonetheless eroding the uncontested position the US has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War. Albeit it is not possible to speak of a new global order yet, given that it is a phase of transition, the direction the world is taking is relatively clear: we are heading towards an open world, where rivalry among great powers is strongly returning (Rapp-Hooper & Friedman Lissner, 2019).

Specular to the return of great power competition at the global level, new challenges are also arising in the regional dimension of current international relations. The partial "retreat" of America and the changing distribution of power at a global level allow for a greater role to be played by regional actors. This renewed global competition is highly different from the one experienced during the Cold War: during the second half of the 20th Century, the competition was between the two blocks, dividing almost the entire globe on a single ideological line, while today the difference is much more blurred, and the global race involves a number of competitors. This means a loosening of the constraints placed upon regional powers and opening a space where they can compete for local primacy. In no region, this has been more evident than in the Middle East. The diminished American presence has opened a phase of renewed regional great power competition. The return of Iran, even before the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the transformation of Saudi Arabia from a wealthy oil producer into a considerable military power, is turning the Gulf into a battleground between Teheran and Riyadh (Van der Heiden & Krijeger, 2018). However, renewed great power competition is not limited to the Middle East: in 2014, the seizure of Crimea by Russia and the civil conflict perduring in the Eastern part of Ukraine are a powerful reminder that Europe is also part of the global chessboard.

Furthermore, threats are not limited to conventional actors engaged in competition, but include the danger of civil conflicts and states' failure. It is the case of Syria, where, even though the civil war is almost over, the situation is far from peaceful, and Libya, which is still entangled in a military struggle that not even the pandemic has been able to slow down. Potentially, even Lebanon might become a conflict area after a massive explosion in the port of Beirut forced the government to resign, opening up a political and social crisis. These conflicts and crises do not just represent a security threat by themselves. They also constitute the ideal terrain for terrorist groups, militias, and other formations to develop, given the absence of control by central authorities.

This already significant security risk is being further increased by lowering access barriers to disruptive technology and weaponry. The digital revolution and the technological developments of the last decades have also meant that previously extremely expensive equipment has now been made largely available with very limited control on buyers. This is especially the case for dual-use technology such as drones, tracking devices, or other unmanned vehicles. Many of them are on the market for commercial, recreational, or utility functions, but they can easily be turned into weapons or be used for military purposes without major alterations.

These trends, characterised by a collapsing global order, the strong return of great power competition, and the formation of areas that could represent a haven for terrorist groups, show an increasingly insecure scenario. Threats are inherently diverse, ranging from conventional actors competing for global and regional primacy to local armed groups and non-state actors, thus requiring different capabilities to be countered. When effectiveness is needed, a reduction of resources available would require cost-effective solutions for national defence.

PROXIES AS A COST-EFFECTIVE OPTION

Non-conventional warfare in the 21st Century

The main characteristic of contemporary great power competition, be it at the regional or global level, is that it seldom involves confrontations between rival states. Even though several rivalries for regional primacy or global ambitions can be traced between states, interstate conflict is in sharp decline. Correlates of war data show a remarkable decline of interstate military confrontations today (Sarkees, Reid & Wayman, 2010). That does not mean that there are no forms of militarised competition between great powers, but the greater part of such positional conflicts between actors is indirect. Instead of fighting each other directly, states seem to prefer a different form of competition. Far from the direct engagements between great powers of the 19th and early 20th century fought in the respective territories and overseas possessions, contemporary struggles for regional primacy are fought outside the borders of the two contenders, frequently on a low-intensive scale and involving only limited participation of the regular armed forces of the regional contenders. Proxy wars are conflicts where the main opponents do not confront themselves directly, but instead, rely on third parties to fight. This happens when, in the context of an already existing war or rivalry, opposing states would support the opposing parties in that conflict, trying to prevail over the party sponsored by their enemy. The third parties involved in the actual fighting could be states, local governments, militias, and paramilitary groups of various nature. The support provided by rival main powers take the form of supplies, weapons, political protection, and

financial assistance, or reach the point of providing air support or the deploying of Special Operations Forces (SOF). The general assumption of proxy warfare is that the main powers behind it pursue their objectives without being directly involved in a costly conflict themselves (Mumford, 2013).

Proxy warfare, civil conflicts, and great power competition are nothing new. The very first war of which we have a detailed political analysis, the Peloponnesian War, had several elements of proxy conflicts (Thucydides & Rustten, 2003), and the Cold War era was characterised by proxy-patron relationships. However, several elements make contemporary proxy warfare different from previous experiences. Above all, proxy warfare appears to be the main vehicle of great power competition nowadays. Uppsala Conflict Data Program shows an increase from 2010 to 2017 in the number of conflicts, most of them coming either from state or non-state actors, but virtually none constituting direct inter-state war (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2020). Such conditions mean that proxy warfare is becoming the main form of military confrontation. If during the Cold War proxy warfare represented a way to avoid a confrontation between the two superpowers, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine would have made such a move unthinkable, and earlier proxies merely constituted a sideshow in wars between great powers, today the picture is entirely different. Proxies are not employed to alter global politics as much as they constitute the main tool of regional power politics today. Russia's use of proxies in Ukraine and Georgia does not directly target the US, and it rather aims to strengthen Moscow's regional stance in the Caucasus and the Black Sea (Heinsch, 2015). Moscow's activities made news in August 2008, when an open war between Russia and Georgia erupted. Still, Moscow's proxy involvement dates back to the 1991-1993 civil conflict, and is continuing today. Proxy warfare by Moscow is main-

ly related to its peripheral regions, and the strengthening of Russia's global power play is a consequence of that. In the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, proxy warfare all around the Middle East, from Lebanon to Yemen, is the main tool of power competition for primacy in the Gulf (Jones, 2019). The entire region is being shaped according to the contraposition between Riyadh and Teheran, and the greatest effect of such a rivalry is proxy warfare in third states (Mabon, 2018). The 21st century appears as the era of proxy warfare, but of a profoundly different kind from the past (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019).

The strong emergence of proxy warfare is not merely a trend in international politics. It might also represent a potential answer to the weakening of defence budgets due to the pandemic. One of the main reasons for engaging in proxy warfare has always been the lower costs. Wars are extremely expensive, but building credible conventional deterrence implies high costs for defence budgets, requiring large acquisitions of advanced equipment, and dedicated armed forces training. However, not all countries have the required expenditure capacity, and, as it has been previously described, most countries will be forced to limit military expenditures in the coming years. The use of proxies, despite being far from the silver bullet for stretched-thin defence budgets, would constitute a potential solution to maintain capabilities and counter rising threats, as well as to remain present in distant theatres of conflict.

Lower Economic and Political Costs

War on the cheap has always been a temptation for states unwilling (or unable) to dedicate vast resources to military operations. The first and foremost advantage of proxies is that they perform their tasks at a low cost. Deploying a state's military in operation abroad, especially if overseas, requires high costs: troops have to be trained for that specific territory and conflict, as well as being fed, equipped, and quartered. On top of that, transportation costs for vehicles and heavy weaponry add up, further increasing expenditures. Proxies do not require all those costly efforts: they are already there, they do not need long and logistically complex supply lines, and they often operate for a mere fraction of the costs of a regular military (Byman, 2018). This would suit the necessities of countries that are not financially able to dedicate large resources to their defence apparatus. Before the pandemic, proxy warfare was mainly, albeit not exclusively, employed by countries that were in difficult financial situations and had no other option. A classic example is Iran: with its economy crippled by sanctions, and unable to modernise its ageing military equipment, Teheran is forced to rely on militias and groups abroad to meet its defence needs. However, this behaviour is not limited to poor countries: oil-rich Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have also been using their proxies in Yemen to counter Iranian ones, showing how appealing this option is for countries with large defence budgets.

Conventional wars are extremely expensive, especially considering the amount of technological investment required to maintain the competitive edge over an adversary. Precision-guided missiles, advanced bombs, and jets are expensive military equipment that im-

pose high financial costs on countries wishing to acquire them, involving significant expenditures to be used as a deterrent. In case of actual use, costs would increase even further, requiring replenishing stocks of serpent ammunition, fuel, and missiles. Finally, vehicles and planes lost or damaged in action would need to be replaced, pushing up the potential costs. There is thus an immediate interest by states to remain below the point of direct war against an opponent (Watling, 2020). Proxies cost only a tiny portion of a conventional military apparatus: a relatively old and soon-to-be-replaced jet like the F-15 Eagle D has a unitary cost of almost 30 million dollars (U.S. Air Force, 2005), which is allegedly more than what Iran yearly spends on its entire Houthi proxy force in Yemen (Al-Hamndani, 2019). For countries hard-pressed by the necessity to devote large resources to post-pandemic economic recovery measures, maintaining or buying state-of-the-art weaponry on a large scale might simply not be an option, nor would any country severely hit by Covid-19 be willing to engage in military endeavours, making the use of proxies a low-cost solution to some security issues. Besides representing a means to overcome purely budgetary constraints, proxies also constitute a tool that allows militarily weaker countries to challenge more powerful ones. In the case of a significant imbalance of power, building a conventional military is usually beyond the economic possibilities of the weaker part.

Proxies can turn the conventional rivalry into an asymmetrical one, forcing the stronger opponent into a contest where its initial advantage has lower importance. While this often might not be enough to fundamentally alter the existing balance of power, it could become an effective deterrence mechanism. Using proxies and the implicit threat of retaliation carried out through them, a country can equip itself with a credible dissuasive defence apparatus for a limited cost. As analysed in a recent study by CNA, proxies are among the cheapest forms of insurance a state can deploy against external attacks (Rosenau & Gold, 2019). This is because proxies represent a viable opportunity for other reasons linked to defence capacity and allocations beyond mere deployment costs. Firstly, proxies do not require a significant level of power projection. The ability of a state to send its troops abroad is dependent not only on its financial ability to pay for the deployment, but also on its structural and logistical capacity to send a large force abroad. This is something that very few countries can do, considering the necessity for large aerial and maritime components that are inevitably required to move and support such a force. As the case of the US in Syria shows, even countries capable of projecting their power might not be willing to do so, for fear of finding themselves overstretched, or simply because of the possible reactions to such move: the use of proxies might save the costs of a direct power projection while allowing for a certain degree of presence (Cordesman, 2012).

Additionally, in case of deployments overseas, a large network of military bases abroad and alliances is crucial to allow power projection, to enhance the defence posture of a state. This is something that only a limited number of countries can afford. Additionally, to maintain and upgrade large maritime and aerial forces, substantial financial allocations are

necessary. A state can bypass these difficulties by employing proxies: being local actors, they require no deployment. Moreover, proxies usually do not require extensive support in terms of delivery of military equipment or supplies. Being already existing groups, they are often able of supporting themselves, at least for the most basic functions, without the necessity of continuous shipments. Furthermore, the geographical distance might matter less in case of an intervention by proxy.

Another reason for the reduced cost coming from proxies is related to the domain of politics. Proxies allow for a distant military presence without the usually associated political costs. Contrary to proxies, regular troops might not be welcomed by the local population, thus limiting their effectiveness, and suffering casualties and losses could be deemed as politically unacceptable at home. Proxies would bear the majority of casualties, preventing casualties among the regular forces that are harder to accept and much more costly to replace. Proxies also require a smaller amount of training and equipment. Besides, for countries that have experienced large numbers of deaths caused by the pandemic, it would be even harder to face the prospects of casualties in military operations. More than 1.2 million people have died of Covid-19 in Europe alone (Reuters, 2021). Not to mention the US, with almost 600.000 deaths (Reuters, 2021). While it would be inappropriate to compare deaths resulting from a pandemic with casualties in a war, considering the fundamental difference between the two phenomena, it would nonetheless remain politically difficult to engage in a conflict when the virus is still raging or when memories of the lives lost to it would yet have to fade.

Additional savings from the use of proxies derive from the lower diplomatic costs often associated with their use. First, opposite to alliances, which generally rely on a strong and long-lasting commitment, patron-agent relationships like the proxy ones tend to have a much more limited engagement with support in exchange for action. The contemporary use of proxies is inherently transactional and not institutionalised, allowing for a minimum diplomatic footprint and a quick withdrawal of the support when not needed anymore. Of course, as it was in the case of ended support by the US for Kurdish forces in Syria (Bozsogi, 2019), states might have to sustain some degree of reputational cost. Still, given the light framework of proxy cooperation, they would remain limited.

On the other hand, building an alliance requires a much more significant investment of political capital, and considering that international politics resembles a game with repetition (Snidal, 1985), breaking it is associated with additional costs, not only with the partner state, but also with other allies. The credibility of the commitment to come in defence of attacked allies is the bulk of an alliance system, and the failure to have upheld it in the past might prevent future alliances because of a lack of trust (Crescenzi, Kathman, Kleinberg & Wood, 2012). Proxy-patron relationships, instead, are relatively easy to break when its usefulness disappears, depending on the intensity of the link between the two parts. The alleged “betrayal” of Syrian Kurds by the United States (Barndollar, 2019) has not damaged US credibility towards its allies, nor has it prevented them from engaging

in other proxy relationships.
Proxies represent a cost-effective solution for countries that cannot mobilise large amounts of resources to their defence, either because of severe economic downturns, or due to the necessity of giving priority to other sectors. The deep global GDP recession of 2020 anticipated by the IMF (IMF, 2020), together with the still ravaging pandemic, would force states to prioritise economic recovery and health spending over defence, thus making the resort to proxies a viable alternative to maintain a credible defence posture, as well as safeguarding power projection in certain areas without costly direct operations.

PERSPECTIVES, CHALLENGES AND OF PROXY WARFARE

Here to stay

Having become the main tool for great power competition, the resort to proxies seems to be developing into a clear trend of contemporary global politics. Long before this pandemic could have been anticipated, proxy warfare had appeared as a consolidated trend in several areas of the world. Stemming primarily from the necessity to defend a state's interests and the lack of desire to commit - and potentially lose - large human and economic resources to this, proxy warfare has become increasingly appealing to countries in recent years (Mumford, 2017).
This desire has been accompanied not only by the collapse of the global order provided by American unipolarism, but also by the deterioration of state structures and institutions. The most prominent example of this are the consequences of the Arab Spring, which triggered a wave of demands and actions for political change against long-standing rulers. In many cases, this has resulted in widespread rebellions, opening the path to an outright civil war as in Syria and Libya, or reducing the degree of states' control on the territory, and thus paving the way for the emergence of local armed groups and formations, which constitute the main proxy material. A breakdown of the central authority and the subsequent security deterioration create an environment where proxies can operate. Without a strong national army ensuring the monopoly of violence, ample room for non-state actors growth opens, paving the way for their use by other states.
While this trend is most evident in the greater Middle East, Europe has not been spared, and the still-ongoing conflict in Ukraine is a powerful reminder that this tendency is present also at its borders. The wider area of the Eastern Partnership is not immune either. Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated in border conflicts (Stronski, 2020), subsequently erupting in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Also, Georgia, with the two entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and a continuous political crisis, might constitute a fertile terrain for proxies in case of a deterioration of the situation.
Countries would not only be looking to-

wards proxies to save resources in favour of the rebuilding of their economies and their healthcare systems, but they would also be encouraged to do so thanks to the weakened condition of the international order. The weakening of central authorities, if not their direct collapse, coupled with increased accessibility to technology, would empower non-state groups and promote their use as proxies to rival powers (Warrell, 2020). States lacking the financial means or the political will to build large and expensive conventional forces would be inevitably turned towards the use of proxies to meet their defence necessities. The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to strengthen this trend by further reducing the financial capacities of states and their desire to spend on military build-ups.

No silver bullet

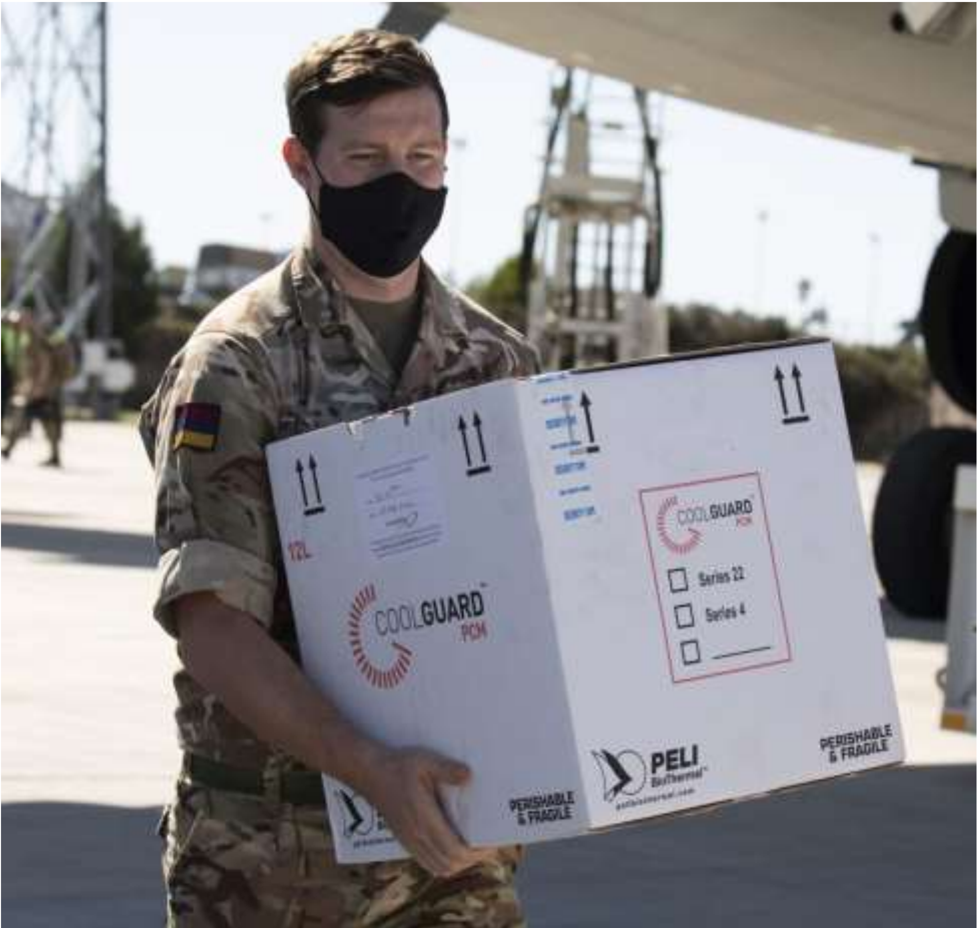
Despite the advantages offered by their employment, proxies are not the solution to all defence needs of countries, and reliance on them also encounters several challenges. They could not be considered a comprehensive solution to all defensive needs of states in the contemporary era. On the contrary, the use of proxies is accompanied by an extensive set of challenges and limitations that are yet to be understood by states before resorting to them. The first and foremost limitation is related to the principal-agent relationship and the inherent problems in that regard. Proxies are actors by themselves, meaning that they are groups and entities with their motivations and goals. Contrary to regular troops, non-state actors used as proxies are characterised by a certain amount of self-interest. While their degree of autonomy might vary according to the situation, or by developing the relationship with their sponsor state, they would always act to obtain their own political goals. Relationships between the proxy and the principal might be diverse depending on the relative strength of the two sides. Still, there never is a full coincidence of objectives and a complete adherence of the two sides, thus allowing room for manoeuvre to the proxy (Fox, 2019). The lack of complete control over a proxy might have important consequences, including the impossibility to reach all the objectives of a state's policy. As analysed by Gold and Rosenau (CNA, 2019), the employment of proxies tends to achieve only some of the original objectives of the state, leaving some others unattended due to the proxies' inability or unwillingness to do so.

Connected to this limit of proxy forces, there is another one affecting their performance. Contemporary proxies are usually militias and sub-state actors with military branches. In most cases, they lack formal military training beyond what the sponsoring state is providing, and often their weaponry does not include heavy equipment or vehicles. While this might be an advantage in guerrilla tactics, it also reduces the spectrum of employment and the targets they can attack. The lack of advanced and armoured vehicles or air capability prevents proxies from having the same effectiveness as regular armed forces. While employed correctly, they can prove extremely effective. They generally do not constitute a substitute for a conventional military apparatus. Even countries that rely significantly on proxies maintain conventional forces. Iran, allegedly the most effective user of prox-

ies in the Middle East, has one of the most numerous regular forces globally, counting more than 600,000 servicemen (IISS, 2020). This example shows that while proxies are a cost-effective alternative to meet some defence needs, especially in the contemporary world, they cannot substitute a conventional military force in its entirety (Spencer & Collins, 2020).

Furthermore, proxies can only be employed where they already exist, meaning that they also require certain permissive conditions while they can overcome the previously mentioned constraints. The first is the presence of an environment where the weakening or collapse of a central authority makes the emergence of local forces possible. Moreover, as proxy warfare requires an agent, it is indispensable that at least a group or a loose entity able to fight is present on the ground. Proxies cannot simply be created from nothing: even Hezbollah, perhaps the proxy that more than anyone else owes its establishment as an organised group to its patron, was carved by revolutionary Iran from a galaxy of smaller Shia groups already present in Lebanon and willing to fight Israel (Avon, Khatchadourian & Todd, 2012). A degree of ideological similarities such as the one between Iran and Hezbollah may not be necessary. Other links are possible: Russia and its proxies in Ukraine and Georgia possess a strong similarity in terms of ethnicity, language, and cultural heritage. What matters most is a common enemy: Israel, the government in Kiev, Daesh, Lebanese Sunni forces and Saudi Arabia, or Assad are all examples of the common enemies of recent experiences of proxy warfare. In short, the patron and the proxy should possess a certain degree of shared objectives and adversaries to develop a proxy relationship. That does not mean that whenever there is a common opponent, a proxy would be willing to fight: Obama's first experiences with Syrian opposition forces have shown that the common antagonism towards Assad was not enough to turn all those groups into one effective fighting force capable of overthrowing Assad's regime (Rosenblatt & Kilcullen, 2020). Only later on, Washington was able to reach effective cooperation with other groups. Nonetheless, to start a potential proxy conflict, a common opponent is necessary. Proxies are not mercenaries or PMCs: while the degree of their willingness to engage in combat may partially depend on the level of support they receive from their patrons, they are also local actors with their agenda, which could be somewhat adapted to the patron's desires, but not completely bent, especially when the degree of control is not very high.

Finally, the employment of proxies still requires a certain degree of expense to sustain them and quite often, they would still necessitate certain forms of regular military assistance. Training them to use advanced weapons, providing air support to their offensives, and increasing their effectiveness through the presence of small SOF units are all activities that require direct engagement of the proxy's sponsor (Rosenau & Gold, 2019). Thus, even under the most favourable conditions, proxies would still require some boots on the ground presence and a degree of involvement of their sponsor. The use of proxies minimises costs and potential losses, but it does not eliminate them.



CONCLUSION

The resort to proxy warfare has increased significantly in the 21st century due to the weakening of US hegemony. The return of great power competition, both globally and regionally, has mainly taken the form of low-intensity conflicts, where the state employs local non-state actors and militias in typical proxy-patron relationships. This trend is likely to be reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic because of the indirect impact of the virus on defence budgets. With a global recession on the horizon, resources available for defence would be limited, and the priority given to economic recovery would push affected countries to limit defence allocations even further. In this scenario, states need to find cost-effec-

tive solutions to ensure their defence capabilities and protect their interests.

Proxy warfare might constitute an adequate answer to these dynamics. The resort to local actors as defence tools greatly reduces the costs associated with direct intervention or long-term commitments like alliances. It requires lower investment in conventional forces and could constitute the preferred option for states that lack adequate power projection or are in a condition of inferiority vis-à-vis the regular forces of their opponents. Even from a political perspective, the use of proxies, limiting the potential losses of national lives, is compatible with countries that have experienced a high number of Covid-19 victims and would be less likely to accept further deaths.

However, proxies are not a silver bullet for countries in need to strengthen their defence and lack the resources to do so. Their use is restricted to the contexts where the situation on the ground allows for the emergence of local actors with shared objectives. Moreover, their effectiveness remains limited, and proxies can only operate under certain conditions. The reliance on non-state actors and armed groups represents a valuable defence strategy. Still, it is by no means able to substitute a conventional military apparatus, limiting the use of proxies as complementary to regular forces.

Despite their limitations, proxies are nonetheless likely to be used more often in the context of a global recession with limited resources for defence budgets and political priorities mainly oriented towards economic recovery.

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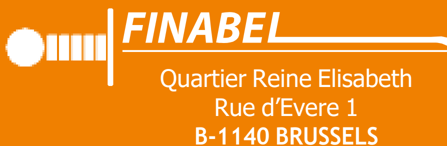

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