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Research report

Forum: The United Nations General Assembly First Committee

Issue: Addressing the Role of External State Support in the Escalation
of Proxy Conflicts

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Introduction

Proxy conflicts have become one of the defining features of modern international security. Instead of engaging in direct military confrontation, states increasingly promote and support non-state armed groups, militaries or allied governments to extend and third party their way into executing their agenda. The external support can include different types of assistance through funding, weapons, intelligence sharing, military training, logistical assistance, cyber capabilities, and diplomatic backing.

Proxy conflicts allow external states to pursue geopolitical intentions while reducing the risks of directly being targeted at conflict, it often prolongs war, increases civilian casualties, fuels regional instability, and overwhelms peace negotiations.

The UN continues to struggle with balancing state sovereignty, legitimate security interests, and the prevention of conflicts that threaten international peace and security.

External support can strengthen armed groups and governments, allowing them to continue fighting even when domestic resources are limited.

Addressing the role of external state support in proxy conflicts requires stronger international cooperation, improved enforcement of international law, greater transparency in arms transfers, and renewed commitment to peaceful dispute resolution under the United Nations (UN) Charter.

The international community has established several mechanisms intended to address these risks. The United Nations Charter, the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), the Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Security Council arms embargoes, sanctions regimes, and international humanitarian law collectively provide a framework for regulating the transfer and use of weapons.

Evermore, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly where external states have competing geopolitical interests.

Definitions of key terms

Proxy Conflicts

A proxy conflict occurs when one or more external states pursue strategic interests within an armed conflict primarily by supporting another actor rather than relying exclusively upon direct military confrontation. The supported actor may be a government, opposition movement, militia, paramilitary organization, or other armed group.

External state support

External state support refers to assistance provided by a government to an actor involved in an armed conflict.

Non-state armed groups

An organized armed actor that is not officially a part of a state's armed forces is known as a non-state armed organization. These groups may include militias, rebel movements, insurgent groups, and some paramilitary forces.

Arms Transfer

An arms transfer involves the movement or provision of weapons, ammunition, military equipment, or related assistance from one actor to another. Transfers may be legal, regulated, restricted, or prohibited depending on applicable international and domestic law.

Arms Embargo

An arms embargo is a restriction imposed by the United Nations Security Council or another authority prohibiting or limiting the supply, sale, transfer, or provision of weapons and related assistance to specified states, territories, organizations, or individuals.

Arms Diversion

Arms diversion occurs when legally supplied weapons are transferred from their authorized recipient or intended purpose to an unauthorized actor or destination.

Conflict Escalation

An increase in an armed conflict's intensity, geographic reach, participant count, or destructive potential is referred to as conflict escalation.

De-escalation

When a potentially violent situation becomes less intense, reducing the likelihood of a conflict

End-User verification

End-user verification refers to procedures designed to ensure that weapons supplied by one actor reach and remain with the authorized recipient and are not diverted to unauthorized parties.

General overview

Proxy conflicts have existed for decades, often starting when powerful states seek to advance their strategic interests without physically engaging in direct military confrontation. During the cold war, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union contributed to numerous conflicts in which external powers would provide weapons, funding, training, intelligence, and political support to the opposite party. Conflicts such as the Korean war, Vietnam war, Soviet-Afghan War and many others just demonstrates how external involvement can influence the intensity and time of local conflicts. Instead of confronting each other directly states were able to participate indirectly by strengthening actors aligned with their political or ideological interests.

After the end of the Cold war, the nature of proxy conflicts changed considerably. Although major power rivalry continues to remain an important factor, local-regional powers increase their involvement in conflict beyond their borders in pursuit of executing security, political, economic, or strategic objectives. In the meantime, the increasing power of militias, insurgencies, paramilitary groups, and non-state armed groups gave states new ways to indirectly exert influence. Conventional weaponry, financial aid, military training, intelligence, logistical support, and political recognition are only a few examples of external support. Differentiating between domestic conflicts and conflicts driven by foreign players has become more challenging as a result of these developments. The rise of proxy wars is significantly influenced by the accessibility and mobility of conventional weaponry, especially light and small arms. Giving governments or armed groups weapons may make them more capable of fighting and prolong the violence. Moreover, firearms that are lawfully transferred may subsequently be apprehended, pilfered, sold, or transferred to unapproved parties. Notably so, the UN has created a number of tools to combat illegal arms transfers, such as the International Tracing Instrument and the Program of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons. These programs aim to enhance international collaboration, national controls, weapons marking, tracing, and stockpile management. UNODA: Light Weapons and Small Arms.

The United Nations Charter and international humanitarian law serve as the main foundations of the international framework for external engagement in conflicts. While Article 51 acknowledges the inalienable right of individual and collective self-defense, Article 2(4) of the UN Charter forbids Member States from threatening or using force against another state's territorial integrity or political independence. International humanitarian law also sets guidelines for how conflicts should be conducted and how people should be protected. International rules for the trade and transfer of conventional weapons were further established by the Arms Trade Treaty, which came into effect in 2014. It included provisions meant to stop transfers that would lead to grave breaches of international humanitarian or human rights law.

Major parties involved

The United States of America

The United States has historically played a significant role in providing military, financial, intelligence and logistical support to different governments and armed groups involved in wars, including those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine.

The Russian Federation

Lent governments and armed groups political and military backing; this has included direct military action in Ukraine as well as major participation in Syria and Libya.

The People's Republic of China

An influential international arms exporter and political player that is pertinent to conversations about arms transfers and outside assistance due to its military and commercial ties to nations affected by conflict.

The Islamic Republic of Iran

A significant regional player that has backed governments and armed non-state organizations throughout the Middle East, especially in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

The State of Israel

An major regional military actor whose security ties and interventions have an impact on conflicts involving Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and other regional players.

Al-Qaeda

Operated through transnational networks and influenced conflicts across the Middle East and Africa.

ISIS

Non-state extremist organization that has operated across several states and affected regional military interventions.

Timeline of Key Events

1945 - The UN Charter was adopted and established as the international framework for peace, security, and sovereignty.

1950-1953- The Korean war was a major Cold War proxy war. It began as a civil war between North and South Korea that had a massive global clash.

1979-1989- became a major Cold War proxy conflict where the Soviet Union backed the communist Afghan government, while the United States and its allies funded and armed the anti-communist Mujahideen resistance through Pakistan.

July 20th 2001-UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons was adopted and established as the global framework to combat illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all aspects.

April 2nd 2013- Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) legally binding agreement that sets international standards for regulating the global trade in conventional arms.

2026- Continued international efforts on arms control and conflict prevention

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Arms Embargo

Arms embargoes have been enforced by the UN Security Council on nations and armed groups engaged in hostilities, such as Yemen and Libya. The goal of these embargoes is to stop military aid and weapons from getting to parties that might exacerbate a conflict. However, when states refuse to comply or when weapons are transported through middle nations, enforcement is still challenging. The Security Council has underscored time and time again how crucial it is to establish and uphold arms embargoes.

Arms Trade Treaty

Adopted on 2nd of April 2013, the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) came into effect in 2014. It mandates that states evaluate the hazards involved in proposed transfers and set international criteria for the trading of conventional weapons.

Possible solutions

Create a weapons-tracing system

In order to link weapons recovered from conflict areas to their original suppliers and recipients, member states should enhance the marking and tracing of weapons. This could assist in locating diversionary networks and holding those responsible for them accountable.

Enhance Regional Collaboration

In terms of border surveillance, intelligence sharing, weapons tracing, and mediation, the UN might work more closely with regional groups like the African Union, European Union, Arab League, and others.

Collaborating and balancing security with Sovereignty

Any new policies must acknowledge that states may lawfully offer defense assistance and have genuine security objectives. Therefore, rather than outlawing all foreign military assistance, the objective should be to stop illegal and destabilizing support.

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