

STEPHEN WATTS, BRYAN FREDERICK, NATHAN CHANDLER, MARK TOUKAN, CHRISTIAN CURRIDEN,
ERIK E. MUELLER, EDWARD GEIST, ARIANE M. TABATABAI, SARA PLANA, BRANDON CORBIN,
JEFFREY MARTINI

Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition

Overarching Findings and Recommendations

This report synthesizes and summarizes findings from two companion reports, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends* and *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Military Implications*.¹ These reports respectively examine the causes and military implications of *proxy wars*, which we define as civil wars in which an external state sponsor provides at least one local warring party with support that could be useful for waging

armed conflict, such as funding, arms, equipment, advising, training, intelligence, and/or troops, for the purposes of accomplishing some strategic objective. More specifically, the reports address four questions:

- Why do external states provide military support to parties to a civil war?
- Do these motivations provide any indication of whether proxy wars, and especially proxy wars involving major or regional powers, might increase substantially within the time horizon currently driving long-term U.S. defense planning (i.e., through 2035)?
- If a state not currently engaged in proxy warfare were to decide to dramatically expand the geographical reach or military

KEY FINDINGS

- Major powers often begin to engage in proxy wars out of a sense of acute vulnerability to the actions of other states. As they develop their capabilities, they frequently begin to engage in proxy wars on a wider basis. This competition through proxies risks a self-reinforcing dynamic.
- Ideological factors also play a role, providing a motive for such forms of competition and sometimes providing ready-made local allies with similar ideologies.
- Economic factors usually play a more restraining role, especially for those powers whose trade and investment relationships might be harmed by such conflicts. Russian intervention in Ukraine is an exception in this regard.
- There are worrying indications that geopolitical factors may be driving countries, including Russia and Iran, to more frequent use of proxy warfare, and China might return to such forms of competition under certain circumstances.
- If the U.S. Department of Defense has focused exclusively on high-intensity, conventional warfighting contingencies, it is likely to be poorly prepared for the challenges posed by nonstate actors who are functioning as proxies for other major powers.

sophistication of its proxy activities, how long would it take that country to develop the necessary capabilities to do so?

- What military challenges are posed by violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) who receive military support from state sponsors, and what are the implications for U.S. defense capabilities generally and U.S. Army capabilities specifically?

The research to answer these questions was conducted in four steps. First, we conducted an extensive review of the existing literature on proxy warfare. Second, we used quantitative analysis to assess trends in and drivers of proxy wars. Third, we conducted case studies of the three major U.S. adversaries powers that have been the primary users of proxy warfare over the past several decades—Russia (and the Soviet Union before it), China, and Iran—to determine why they had engaged in proxy warfare and, for the periods in which they had turned away from this instrument of competition, why they stopped such practices.² Fourth, we conducted case studies of four proxy wars—the First and Second Indochina Wars, the Houthi Rebellion, and the Donbas War prior to Russia’s invasion in 2022—to assess the military implications of cases in which VNSAs gain more sophisticated military capabilities in part through state support.³

It is important to note that these reports were written before the February 2022 outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine. The analysis herein therefore does not include any assessment of the current situation in Ukraine, nor of the implications of these findings for the proxy war taking place there. However, the Ukraine war has added urgency to the issue of proxy warfare, and these findings and the related recommendations remain important in the context of these more-recent events.

Abbreviations

DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
RLSF	Russian-led separatist forces
VNSA	violent nonstate actor

Research Findings

Why Do States Use Proxy Warfare as a Tool of Strategic Competition?

States engage in proxy warfare for a complex mixture of geopolitical, ideological, domestic political, and economic motivations. Geopolitical and, to a lesser extent, ideological concerns appear to be the primary motives for such conflicts, while political and economic considerations play mostly a limiting role. We summarize our assessment of these factors in five main points.⁴

First, geopolitical considerations appear to be paramount in the decision to provide support to VNSAs, across most actors and at most times.

While there are exceptions, the desire to undermine rivals and shift regional balances of power is the most clearly and consistently supported factor in the report. This desire to use proxy warfare in a proactive manner, including in regions far from a state’s borders, often has its roots in a reactive concern, driven by acute perceptions of the vulnerability of the state’s own security to adversary proxy warfare. However, once states have developed these proxy warfare capabilities, they often use them much more widely than simply to address the initial vulnerability. This pattern was observed across multiple states, including the People’s Republic of China under Mao and post-1979 Iran. Russia’s expanding involvement in civil conflicts—including in countries far from its borders, such as Syria, Libya, and Mali—suggest that it might be following a similar pattern.

Second, while difficult to separate fully from geopolitical considerations, ideological factors also seem to have played an important role for many states in decisions to engage in proxy wars.

Postrevolutionary regimes appear to be more likely to support VNSAs than other states.⁵ State ideology is also a crucial factor in shaping which VNSAs most states will consider supporting, from the Iranian focus on Shia groups to the Soviet and Chinese focus on leftist or communist groups. Finally, ideology plays a role in driving the overall perception of threat from a rival that motivates much proxy war activity in the first place.⁶

Third, we found less support for domestic politics as factors motivating states to pursue proxy warfare. We found little evidence, particularly in the case studies, that public attitudes, such as concerns for diaspora groups or particular rebel groups, were an important factor in state decisions to support VNSAs. However, we did see repeated evidence that support to VNSAs is often attractive to policymakers (both in democracies and autocracies) precisely because it avoids, or at least limits, the domestic political costs and scrutiny that would accompany the use of the country's own military forces, especially in large numbers. The fact that states that develop a capability for fighting proxy wars seem to expand their use of this tool over time may also suggest that a bureaucratic mechanism is at play. That is, politically powerful actors within a state's bureaucracy, such as Iran's Quds Force or the *siloviki* in Russia, may be empowered by initial successes and press to expand their activities.

Fourth, similar to the previous theme, we found considerable evidence that states turn to proxy warfare to lower the economic costs of their efforts to undermine their rivals. However, there was little evidence that the potential for economic gains (e.g., through seizing natural resources and/or the profits that derive from them) plays a large role in most major powers' support for VNSAs.⁷

Finally, despite the lower direct costs of proxy warfare (compared with conventional warfare) for the sponsoring state, it was repeatedly clear in our case studies that there can be considerable indirect costs. Surrogates sometimes turn on the sponsoring state, embarrass it with their behavior, or contribute to undesired levels of escalation between the sponsoring state and its rivals.⁸ If the sponsoring state gets drawn more deeply into a direct role in what started as a proxy war, the associated costs can skyrocket. In many cases, sponsoring states terminated particular proxy relationships or turned away from proxy warfare altogether (at least for a period of time) due in part to either these indirect, often strategic costs or the costs associated with getting drawn into more direct roles.

Might the Use of Proxy Warfare Increase Substantially in the Coming Years?

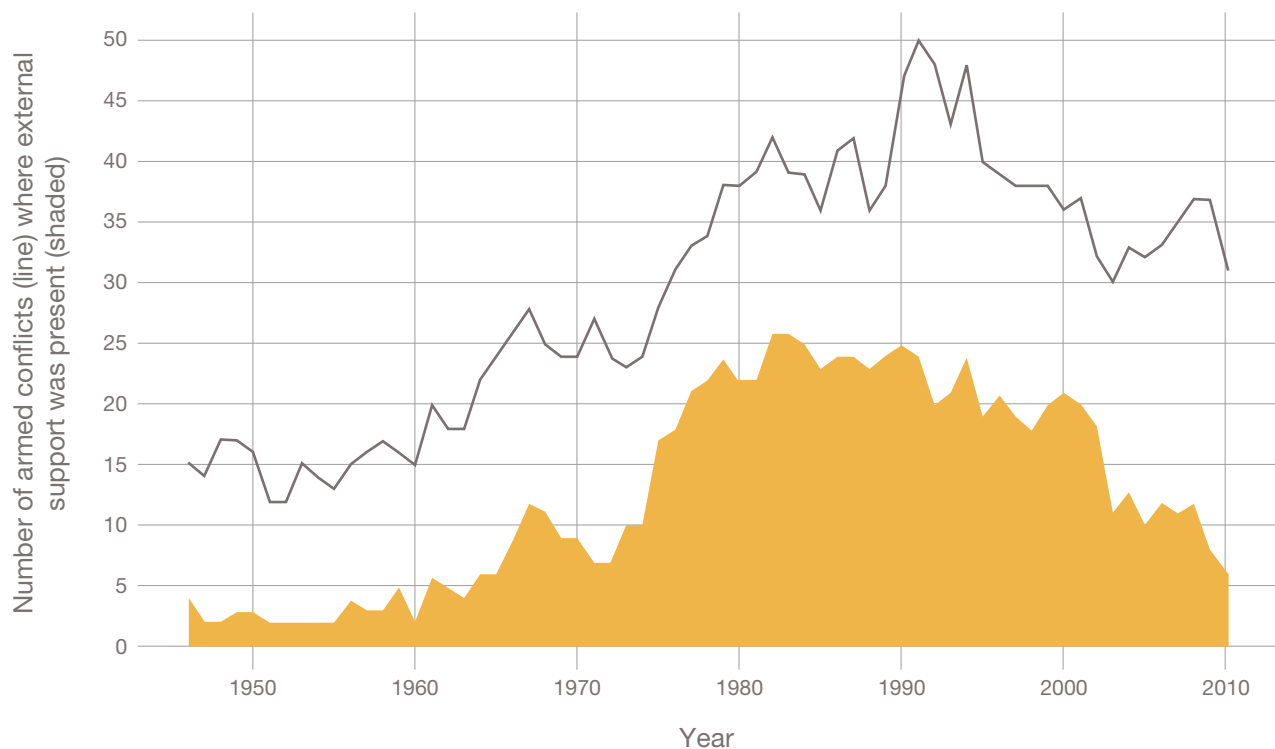
As can be seen in Figure 1, the use of proxy warfare in the modern era peaked in the late Cold War and declined substantially over the subsequent 20 years. In the post-Cold War era, proxy wars changed not only in the number of instances but also in the nature of the countries involved. During the Cold War, proxy warfare was often a tool of major powers, such as the United States, Soviet Union, and China. In the post-Cold War era, proxy wars were often used by weaker, less capable states.

Unfortunately, at the time our research was conducted (2020), systematic data on the incidence of proxy wars after 2010 were not publicly available. But, at least anecdotally, proxy warfare seems to have changed again in recent years. As the examples of ongoing wars in Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine suggest, major powers, including Russia, the United States, Iran, and others, have again been players in these and other civil wars. As might be expected from their involvement, the resources available to both insurgents and governments, including advanced weaponry and military training, appear to have similarly increased, at least based on public reporting.⁹

From a policymaker's perspective, the key question is whether the recent apparent increase in proxy wars, and especially proxy wars conducted by more-capable states, is likely to continue in the future. Our analysis suggests a complicated answer, but there are a number of reasons for concern.

With the anticipated continuing relative decline of U.S. power and influence in several regions throughout the world, and the renewed focus in many states on strategic competition, there seem to be growing risks that states will feel increasingly threatened by their rivals and take greater steps to counteract these threats in the years to come. Our case studies highlight how such an environment can often, though not always, lead to an increased interest in supporting proxy wars. Of even greater concern, geopolitical drivers of proxy warfare can often be self-reinforcing. In the past, regimes that have made widespread use of proxy wars have typically begun such campaigns out of an acute sense of

FIGURE 1
Number of Proxy Wars over Time



SOURCES: RAND Arroyo Center synthesis of Uppsala Conflict Data Program—Peace Research Institute Oslo, nonstate actor, and nonstate armed group datasets; for full details, see the companion report, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends* (Watts et al., 2023b).

vulnerability and a lack of other tools that are appropriate (are affordable, have a sufficiently low risk of escalation, and so on). Often the use of proxy warfare expands over time, however, from instances in which it appears clearly defensive (responding to specific threats that are geographically proximate) to much more aggressive, wide-ranging uses of proxy warfare. Furthermore, the use of proxy warfare has historically prompted similar behavior in adversaries and rivals, creating a spiral in which one state's use of the tool increases its use by others. There are also numerous instances of spillover effects, in which support for one local proxy leads to support for others in nearby countries (e.g., U.S. support for South Vietnam leading to involvement in wars in Laos and Cambodia or Iranian support to Lebanese Hezbollah helping to draw Iran deeper into the Syrian civil war). These factors highlight the potential risks that may accompany the apparent recent increase in proxy wars.

Ideological factors emerged in our case studies as important parts of the explanation for why states have historically pursued robust proxy warfare programs. On this front, the current environment and anticipated trends are not as grim. Neither current major U.S. competitor, China and Russia, has a particularly ideological regime, certainly not in comparison with the regimes of China and the Soviet Union during the earlier Cold War period. Neither represents a globalized ideology with a ready-made set of potential partners throughout other parts of the world (and, conversely, potential local partners lack a ready-made ideology to appeal to China or Russia for assistance). Indeed, the main professed ideological difference that China and Russia represent relative to the United States and its allies is a focus on state sovereignty and the continuity of existing governments, regardless of those governments' behavior or treatment of their people. (Russia's activities in Ukraine

since 2014 and other activities of both Russia and China justify some skepticism of how sincerely these ideologies are held.) This stated ideology may or may not increase their willingness to provide support to governments in the midst of civil conflicts, but it does not seem likely to increase their interest in providing support to VNSAs.

Our research suggests that economic motivations have often served to restrain proxy warfare by great powers in the past, as major powers concerned about international reaction or instability held back in their support to potential proxies to maintain economic growth or access to international markets. While economic concerns did not restrain Russia from aggression in Ukraine, there is reason to believe that such motivations are likely to continue to play a restraining role on the decisions of China in particular going forward, as the country continues to become increasingly integrated into the global economy and economically invested in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe through its Belt and Road Initiative. The likelihood that investments in those regions would pay off could be substantially undermined by a widespread resurgence in proxy warfare. This is not to suggest that geopolitical concerns cannot override economic concerns in particular countries or contexts, however. And China's concerns about negative economic consequences of conflict may be less pronounced with respect to some countries compared to others. If, for example, U.S. efforts to prevent or limit Chinese economic penetration of a country succeeded, perhaps most likely in U.S. allies or partners, then China's economic interest in preserving the stability of that country could then decline. Absent economic motivation for stability, geopolitical factors might motivate closer consideration of Chinese support to VNSAs in that country.

China may be an outlier among U.S. competitors in the extent to which economic considerations may be restraining its consideration of proxy support. Russia's economy largely remains focused on natural resource extraction and, indeed, is already under a host of international sanctions because of its aggression in Ukraine (including support for proxies) and does not appear to have been inhibited in its willingness to support proxies in the Middle East and elsewhere. Similarly, Iran has been under extensive

economic sanctions for decades, with no apparent reduction in its interest or willingness to support proxies in its region.

How Long Does It Take States to Develop Capabilities for Proxy Warfare?

Two current U.S. competitors, Russia and Iran, already have sophisticated proxy warfare capabilities. But if China were to reengage in this form of strategic competition, how long might it take Beijing to develop such capabilities again? To answer this question, we distinguish between how quickly a state may be able to initially create a proxy warfare capability and how long it tends to take states to refine that capability and make it more effective or robust.

The states considered in our case studies were usually able to develop at least a rudimentary capability for proxy warfare very quickly, within a couple of years, often building on the capabilities of prior efforts or regimes. Beyond this baseline capability, however, a relatively lengthy period of learning and growth to better develop proxy warfare capabilities appears to be common. Iran, which inherited a substantial proxy support infrastructure from the prior regime, still took years to build relationships and capabilities with groups such as Hezbollah. The Soviet Union took decades to progress from its early focus on coordination with potential partners through Comintern to its later, more robust Cold War capabilities, though this timeline was substantially affected by limited initial Soviet motivation to do so. The early post-1949 Chinese experience of having become highly effective at proxy support relatively quickly therefore appears to be more unusual and likely is a product of the Chinese Communist Party's lengthy experience as a rebel movement itself. For most states, while an initial capability might be stood up relatively quickly, a longer learning curve should be expected for greater proficiency.

What Are the Military Implications of Proxy Warfare?

The additional capabilities that state sponsors can provide to VNSAs have important consequences for the forces that oppose them. Our research in this area was based on four case studies, so there will be limits to its generalizability. Still, several key insights emerged. At the tactical and operational levels of war, state support to VNSAs frequently combines much of the lethality of conventional warfare with the challenges of operating against a highly dispersed enemy that has taken advantage of complex terrain and integration among civilian populations.¹⁰ At the strategic level, the increased lethality of VNSAs complicates traditional models for responding to insurgencies and other forms of irregular warfare, while the risk of escalation forecloses potential options for responding to these challenges.¹¹

There is ample evidence in our case studies of the increased lethality of nonstate actors when they are supported by states. In the First Indochina War, the Chinese-supported Vietminh defeated more than 10,000 French soldiers at Dien Bien Phu using dozens of howitzers, Katyusha rocket launchers, and anti-aircraft artillery. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian-led separatist forces (RLSF) in Ukraine used heavy weaponry to

destroy a large fraction of the armored vehicles of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and sophisticated RLSF air defense capabilities had essentially neutralized Ukrainian air power. The electronic and cyber warfare practiced by RLSF provide some indication of the level of sophistication that VNSAs today can achieve when supported by a major power. As Table 1 illustrates, the capabilities used so effectively by these VNSAs are not unique; they have been employed by a great many other groups over the years.

What Are the Military Implications of Potential Contingencies Involving Highly Capable Surrogate Forces in the Coming Years?

First, the increased lethality possessed by many state-supported VNSAs looks likely to continue into the future. The United States developed high levels of tactical proficiency in irregular warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq. But just as U.S. capabilities have improved, so have those of potential U.S. adversaries. While most of the damage that Iran inflicted on U.S. forces in Iraq came in the form of mines, the war in the Donbas shows how much more militarily sophisticated VNSAs could potentially become with access to advanced electronic warfare; cyber; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and other capabilities. While it is possible that continued improvements in commercial off-the-shelf technology could greatly enhance VNSA capabilities without state support, thus far, truly high-end military capabilities, meaning not just advanced technology but also the training and sustainment necessary to make effective and consistent use of these technologies, have been the preserve of VNSAs with state backing.¹²

Second, because of their potential for increased lethality, state-supported VNSAs can pose a major challenge for those U.S. allies and partners in which they operate. After the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan (and Vietnam before them), the United States is likely to remain hesitant to become involved again in large-scale, irregular wars. But support limited to civil assistance, intelligence, military advising, and standoff fires may not be

TABLE 1
Examples of State-Supported VNSA Military Capabilities

VNSA Capability	Examples
Short-range air defense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Houthis • Contras • Afghan mujahideen • RLSF • Vietminh
Antitank guided missile/antiarmor weapons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RLSF • Lebanese Hezbollah • Hamas • Iraqi Shiite militias
Artillery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RLSF • Vietminh
Mining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vietcong • Iraqi Shiite militias • Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army

enough to protect U.S. allies and partners against well-developed insurgencies with high levels of state backing. The VNSAs in our case studies were able to either militarily defeat or at least impose large costs on even quite capable state militaries. Weak and fragile states or those with low-quality militaries are unlikely to fare well against such adversaries.

Third, if U.S. forces become directly involved in such wars, they will require mastery of both conventional and irregular skillsets. With its sophisticated ISR capabilities and air dominance, the United States can make it extremely difficult for VNSAs to mass, which, in turn, makes it extremely difficult for them to launch conventional offensives to seize and hold territory. But through irregular operations and tactics, VNSAs can make large portions of U.S. allies and partners essentially ungovernable. Pushing back against such tactics will require some level of continued proficiency in irregular warfare.

Finally, if the United States were to become directly engaged with Russian or Chinese surrogates on a large scale, or possibly with surrogates of a nuclear-armed Iran at some point in the future, it would likely find the conflict extremely challenging. With limits on the extent to which the United States could escalate the conflict (at least at costs it would be willing to bear), it would likely face a conflict that would be both protracted and deadly. To the extent that the United States could bolster its allies' and partners' ability to fight with relatively little direct commitment of U.S. forces, it may be able to keep costs manageable. However, keeping U.S. commitments limited in order to restrain the costs of such conflicts has often been difficult in the past.

Policy Recommendations

We divide our policy recommendations between those most relevant for the entire U.S. government and national-level policymakers and those most relevant for the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the Army in particular.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

The analysis in this report highlights several strategic-level lessons for U.S. national policymakers focused on strategic competition with China and Russia, as laid out in the recent National Security and National Defense Strategies.¹³

Strategic Competition: Limiting Proxy Warfare Where Possible

The first lesson to emerge from our analysis is that proxy wars typically impose considerable costs, both on the United States (when it is a participant) and on the other countries involved. Before becoming involved in a proxy conflict, the United States should carefully assess the interests at stake and the risks.

There may well be circumstances in which adversary proxy support threatens important U.S. interests, and, thus, a military response, through an escalated level of U.S. proxy support to the affected states or through direct U.S. military intervention, is warranted. To the extent that the United States can avoid or minimize such situations without sacrificing vital national interests, however, it should do so. Seeking to establish limits or “rules of the road” in strategic competition such that leaders of other countries do not feel an acute sense of threat from the United States to the security of their states or regimes could mitigate what has historically been the key motivation for states to expand proxy warfare and could, in turn, reduce the likelihood that the United States will be drawn into such potentially costly conflicts.¹⁴ Where nonvital U.S. interests are threatened, the United States also has a wide range of nonmilitary instruments, such as economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, with which it can impose lesser costs on other major powers that employ proxy warfare without the same risks of military escalation. The war in Ukraine illustrates the limits of such tools when a U.S. competitor regards a target country as a vital national interest. These tools may nonetheless represent important leverage in more-peripheral contexts.

The United States should conduct a strategic-level assessment of key U.S. allies and partners that are potentially vulnerable to proxy warfare to identify where additional stabilization support could be provided in advance.

Attribution

One potential counter to the use of proxy warfare is the ability to publicize the role of outside powers in a conflict. States often pursue proxy relationships precisely because of their greater deniability, both internationally and at home. To the extent that the U.S. government can establish the nature and extent of these relationships publicly, it can help undercut one of the key benefits that states seek in choosing proxy warfare and potentially reduce its attractiveness and frequency. While information that the United States can collect to understand these relationships at a private or classified level can be helpful for policymakers, by itself it lacks the benefits that could accompany public attribution. Additional investments in capabilities designed to uncover such information in ways that could be publicized without compromising vital sources and methods would therefore be useful. Such investments might be either direct (such as through U.S. technical means) or indirect (such as through information-sharing with partners).

Shaping and Resilience

Recognizing that the United States may not be able to avoid or deter all instances of adversary support to VNSAs in strategically important countries, the United States can also help prepare countries that are vulnerable or likely to be targeted by such support. The United States should conduct a strategic-level assessment of key U.S. allies and partners that are potentially vulnerable to proxy warfare to identify where additional stabilization support could be provided in advance. The additional support provided by the United States to such countries could include

economic development assistance and transportation links for subnational regions with a history or potential for separatist or other grievances. It might entail diplomatic and political support for reconciliation efforts and political settlements with separatist groups that could become targets for adversary proxy support in the future. Or it could include resources dedicated to improving security governance in at-risk states, especially in states that show a willingness to undertake reforms.¹⁵ In parallel, the United States should also identify countries that could serve as safe havens or transit corridors for potential proxy groups in key U.S. allies or partners and invest in their stability and relations with the United States in advance.

No matter what policies the United States adopts to deter the use of proxy warfare and to make its partners more resilient to such indirect forms of aggression, history suggests that such wars will nonetheless occur at some level. Consequently, DoD should prepare for such contingencies in case they might threaten important U.S. national interests. Because the U.S. Army possesses many of the requisite capabilities for countering proxy warfare, it has important Title 10 responsibilities to organize, man, train, and equip units for such contingencies.

Recommendations for the Army

Countering state-supported VNSAs frequently requires proficiency in both conventional and irregular warfighting, whether the United States is fighting these forces directly or primarily working by, with, and through local partners. With the current emphasis on regaining readiness for high-intensity,

conventional wars with a peer or near-peer adversary, it is unclear whether DoD and the U.S. Army are currently taking the actions that would be necessary to preserve proficiency in both. As the case studies in this report suggest, state-supported VNSAs can exact a high price on intervening militaries that have not prepared for the unique challenges they pose.

A study such as this one cannot provide detailed guidance on how DoD or the Army should allocate scarce resources across the full range of possible contingencies. We can, however, suggest a number of measures that DoD and the U.S. Army in particular could undertake to maintain readiness for the sort of threats posed by state-supported VNSAs.¹⁶

Doctrine

The range of irregular and hybrid threats posed by state-supported VNSAs is much broader than the circumstances that gave rise to the last overhaul of doctrine in the field of irregular warfare. Doctrine should accordingly be updated, with a focus on the threats posed by hybrid actors and the requirements for partnered operations involving a small U.S. military footprint. Because threats do not remain static, the Army (and the rest of the Joint Force) will need to continue to make investments in updating their understanding of evolving threats and appropriate doctrinal responses if they believe that proxy warfare represents a sufficient threat to justify at least modest investments even as the bulk of defense spending shifts to modernization and efforts to counter more-advanced near-peer adversaries. If the Army wants to maintain its proficiency in such combat, it should resource capabilities such as those previously provided by the Asymmetric Warfare Group at Fort Meade before the Army terminated it.

Organization

The demands of combat against sophisticated, state-supported VNSAs may have implications for force structure, force design, and force mix.

First, although the current focus on readiness for high-intensity conventional combat is likely appropriate for current circumstances, it is nonetheless important for the Army and the Joint Force not to lose sight of the potential demands for the types

of forces that would be needed in large numbers for a hybrid contingency. These forces would likely include special operations forces, aviation, explosive ordnance disposal, human intelligence specialists and interrogators, military police (especially law and order detachments), and so on.

Second, hybrid warfare of the sort often conducted by state-supported VNSAs and partnered operations can also pose challenges to existing Army unit structures. Because hybrid warfare involves highly dispersed operations against capable adversaries, it may require certain capabilities, such as the integration of air and ground operations, to be pushed into lower echelons than is currently the case. In partnered operations, doctrinal units are commonly broken apart and used in nondoctrinal ways. Neither of these challenges (or potentially others) necessarily dictate changes to force design. But the Army may, at least, need to develop mechanisms to facilitate rapid adaptation of doctrinal units.

Finally, in the more hazardous environments common in wars against state-supported VNSAs, the United States may not be able to rely on meeting many of its support demands from contracted labor, as it has in recent operations. Because the bulk of support functions within the Army reside outside of the active component, this may have implications for force mix.

Training

To the extent that the Army wants to retain capability for these sorts of contingencies, training should similarly be adapted for the unique demands that they impose. The requirements for combat against such adversaries are different than they are for high-end conventional militaries. Unless leaders are forced to prepare for these sorts of contingencies—especially by making them a part of capstone training events, such as Combat Training Center exercises—they risk losing familiarity with the broader spectrum of military operations. Such training will be required whether the United States is engaged in combat directly or simply advising partners on how to conduct operations.

Leader Development and Education

Given the complexity of combating well-supported VNSAs, leaders must be able to adapt quickly to a wide variety of demands. For the Army to be successful in such environments, professional military education would have to remain broad based, including courses focused on irregular and hybrid warfare and military operations among local populations. Of course, practical experience is also important for developing the range of skills that leaders will require in hybrid environments. DoD's current focus on the competition space short of armed conflict has the potential to provide such experiences to emerging leaders. But to take full advantage of this potential, the Army (and other services) would need to make such assignments "career-enhancing," with opportunities for promotion out of such assignments as attractive as the opportunities available to leaders who have focused more narrowly on high-intensity conventional warfare. The Security Force Assistance Brigades are one high-profile initiative that might serve as a litmus test for the Army's commitment to preparing for the full spectrum of operations.

Personnel

Military operations conducted among civilian populations inevitably benefit from knowledge of the local society. The Army and other services could expand the number of billets for personnel with regional expertise, such as foreign area officers and some

intelligence specialists. Alternatively, given resource constraints, the Army could reallocate its existing level of personnel with a focus on U.S. allies and partners that are most at risk of being targeted for proxy warfare.

Final Thoughts

None of the military preparations that the United States might undertake for proxy conflicts are silver bullets. Such conflicts are extremely complex and carry the risk of imposing costs far out of line with the U.S. interests at stake. As much as the United States has an interest in obtaining competitive advantage against rivals such as China, Russia, and Iran, it also has an interest in managing that competition at the lowest cost consistent with American national security requirements. If it can do so without compromising vital or important national interests, the United States should attempt to defuse potential escalating spirals of proxy warfare. Where its competitors have no interest in reaching any sort of accommodation with the United States, it should work through local partners to the extent possible to limit costs. But diplomacy and partnered military operations may not suffice to achieve U.S. objectives in all cases. To hedge against such contingencies, the United States should consider making at least modest investments in the capabilities necessary to fight state-supported VNSAs directly, should it be forced to do so.

Notes

¹ Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-2, 2023b; and Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Military Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-3, 2023a.

² While new adversaries could always emerge, U.S. concerns over adversary use of proxy warfare in the years to come are likely to continue to involve these same actors. Weaker states were intentionally excluded, and thus the qualitative insights in these chapters may not be applicable to instances of proxy warfare involving states with much more limited or localized capabilities.

³ These cases were chosen to provide insight into the military implications of proxy warfare for the United States and, in particular, the U.S. Army. The cases were not chosen to be representative of the full range of state-supported VNSAs. Rather, the cases were selected to represent the sorts of VNSAs that might be most likely to pose military challenges to the U.S. Army (and, more broadly, all four U.S. services). In social science terms, the cases were selected because they represented extreme values on the primary explanatory factor of interest—the state-provided military capabilities of the VNSAs (and, by extension, their ability to wage a highly challenging form of proxy warfare). While these cases are not representative of the full range of instances of state-supported VNSAs, they are likely reasonably representative of the sorts of cases in which a substantial number of U.S. ground forces might become involved.

⁴ Our assessment of the primary drivers of proxy warfare derives from a combination of statistical analysis of several decades of proxy warfare and from case studies of the use of proxy warfare by China, Iran, Russia, and the United States. For full details of this analysis, see the companion report, Watts et al., 2023b. The analysis in that companion report began with an overview of scholarly writings on the topic; see especially Belgin San-Akca and Zeev Maoz, “Rivalry and State Support of Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs), 1946–2001,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4, December 2012; Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan, and David E. Cunningham, “Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups,” *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2011; Idean Salehyan, “The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2010; Ryan Grauer and Dominic Tierney, “The Arsenal of Insurrection: Explaining Rising Support for Rebels,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2018; Michael G. Findley and Tze Kwang Teo, “Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4, 2006; Andrew Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 158, No. 2, 2013; Kenneth A. Schultz, “The Enforcement Problem in Coercive Bargaining: Interstate Conflict over Rebel Support in Civil Wars,” *International Organization*, Vol. 64, Spring 2010; Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*, New York:

Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 37; Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*, Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019, pp. 46–52; and Alex Marshall, “From Civil War to Proxy War: Past History and Current Dilemmas,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016.

⁵ Our research extends upon and supports prior work by Jeff D. Colgan and Jessica L. P. Weeks (Jeff D. Colgan and Jessica L. P. Weeks, “Revolution, Personalist Dictatorships, and International Conflict,” *International Organization*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 2015).

⁶ For a macrohistorical analysis of this claim, see John M. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change 1510–2010*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010.

⁷ There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization. See, for instance, Charles King, “The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia’s Unrecognized States,” *World Politics*, Vol. 53, July 2001; and Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2019.

⁸ See, for instance, Daniel Byman and Sarah E. Kreps, “Agents of Destruction? Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2010; and Seyom Brown, “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016.

⁹ On Russian support for proxy warfare in Ukraine, see, for instance, Adam Cech and Jakub Janda, “Caught in the Act: Proof of Russian Military Intervention in Ukraine,” Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, July 2015; Jonathan Ferguson and N. R. Jenzen-Jones, *Raising Red Flags: An Examination of Arms & Munitions in the Ongoing Conflict in Ukraine, 2014*, Australia: Armament Research Services (ARES), November 18, 2014; Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyakova, and Damon Wilson, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Russia’s War in Ukraine,” The Atlantic Council, October 15, 2015, p. 8; and Joseph Trevithick, “U.S. and NATO Special Ops Just Fought a Fake Guerrilla War in West Virginia,” *The Drive*, April 6, 2017. For details of Iranian support to the Houthis in Yemen, see, for instance, “Al-Huthiyyun: Al-Haqiqa Al-Askriya wa Masadir Al-Da’im [The Houthis: The Military Reality and Sources of Support],” Istanbul: Strategic Fiker Center for Studies, May 18, 2015; Asa Fitch, “How Yemen’s Houthis Are Ramping Up Their Weapons Capability; Saudi Forces Have Intercepted More Than 100 Missiles Since 2015,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2018; Dhia Muhsin, “Houthi Use of Drones Delivers Potent Message in Yemen War,” *IJSS Blog*, August 27, 2019; “New Houthi Weapon Emerges: A Drone Boat,” *Defense News*, February 19, 2017; “Suicide Drones: Houthi Strategic Weapon,” Abaad Studies and Research Center, January 2019; and Farzin Nadimi and Michael Knights, “Iran’s Support to Houthi Air Defenses in Yemen,” The Washington Institute, April 4, 2018.

¹⁰ For broader discussions of this argument, see, for instance, David E. Johnson, *Military Capabilities for Hybrid War: Insights from the Israel Defense Forces in Lebanon and Gaza*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-285-A, 2010; David E. Johnson, *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1085-A/AF, 2011; and John J. McCuen, “Hybrid Wars,” *Military Review*, March–April 2008, p. 113. See also Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and

Challenges,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2009; Christopher O. Bowers, “Identifying Emerging Hybrid Adversaries,” *Parameters*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Spring 2012; and Benjamin Locks, “Bad Guys Know What Works: Asymmetric Warfare and the Third Offset,” *War on the Rocks*, June 23, 2015.

¹¹ Over the years, academics have suggested two main hypotheses to explain why democracies such as the United States seem to have trouble committing to counterinsurgency over the long term: the casualty-sensitivity hypothesis (i.e., that such countries are averse to taking substantial numbers of casualties in pursuit of less-critical national interests) and the counterinsurgency-aversion hypothesis (i.e., that such countries are either dismayed by the nature of such “dirty wars” or do not perceive a clear path to victory in such conflicts). More-recent scholarship suggests that it is the combination of these two factors that is particularly problematic, and hybrid wars pose particularly acute challenges based on both factors. See Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 4, August 1998; and Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3, December 2005.

¹² Johnson, 2010; Johnson, 2011.

¹³ This report was written before the release of the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance or the 2022 National Defense Strategy, while the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy were still operative. The recommendations in this and the companion reports, however, remain applicable.

¹⁴ For a debate about what such U.S. adaptation might look like, see, for instance, the debate between Paul Sanders of the Center for the National Interest and Steven Pifer of the Brookings Institution hosted by Russia Matters (Paul Sanders, “U.S. Embrace of Great Power Competition Also Means Contending with Spheres of Influence,” *Russia Matters*, February 13, 2020; and Steven Pifer, “Contending with—Not Accepting—Spheres of Influence,” *Russia Matters*, March 5, 2020).

¹⁵ On the potential for U.S. security sector assistance—especially programs focused on education and training—to build partner resilience to political destabilization, see Michael J. McNerney, Angela O’Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Derek Eaton, Caroline Baxter, Colin P. Clarke, Emma Cutrufello, Michael McGee, Heather Peterson, Leslie Adrienne Payne, and Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-350-A, 2014.

¹⁶ Estimating the costs of such measures was beyond the scope of this research, as was determining the optimal capability portfolio for an Army that must be prepared for a wide range of contingencies. Consequently, in this section, we simply provide examples of the types of measures that the Army could undertake to better prepare for threats from state-supported VNSAs. For a summary of a more in-depth analysis of a similar question, see Stephen Watts, J. Michael Polich, and Derek Eaton, “Rapid Regeneration of Irregular Warfare Capacity,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 78, 3rd Quarter 2015.

References

- Bowers, Christopher O., "Identifying Emerging Hybrid Adversaries," *Parameters*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Spring 2012.
- Brown, Seyom, "Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016, pp. 243–257.
- Byman, Daniel, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Byman, Daniel, and Sarah E. Kreps, "Agents of Destruction? Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2010, pp. 1–18.
- Cech, Adam, and Jakub Janda, "Caught in the Act: Proof of Russian Military Intervention in Ukraine," Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, July 2015.
- Czuperski, Maksymilian, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyakova, and Damon Wilson, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Russia's War in Ukraine," *The Atlantic Council*, October 15, 2015.
- Colgan, Jeff D., and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "Revolution, Personalist Dictatorships, and International Conflict," *International Organization*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 2015, pp. 163–194.
- Ferguson, Jonathan, and N. R. Jenzen-Jones, *Raising Red Flags: An Examination of Arms & Munitions in the Ongoing Conflict in Ukraine, 2014*, Australia: Armament Research Services (ARES), November 18, 2014.
- Findley, Michael G., and Tze Kwang Teo, "Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4, 2006.
- Fitch, Asa, "How Yemen's Houthis Are Ramping Up Their Weapons Capability; Saudi Forces Have Intercepted More Than 100 Missiles Since 2015," *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2018.
- Gelpi, Christopher, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3, December 2005, pp. 7–46.
- Gleditsch, Kristian Skrede, Idean Salehyan, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2011.
- Grauer, Ryan, and Dominic Tierney, "The Arsenal of Insurrection: Explaining Rising Support for Rebels," *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2018.
- Groh, Tyrone L., *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*, Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019.
- Hoffman, Frank G., "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2009.
- "Al-Huthiyun: Al-Haqiqa Al-'Askriya wa Masadir Al-Da'm [The Houthis: The Military Reality and Sources of Support]," Istanbul: Strategic Fiker Center for Studies, May 18, 2015.
- Jentleson, Bruce W., and Rebecca L. Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 4, August 1998, pp. 395–417.
- Johnson, David E., *Military Capabilities for Hybrid War: Insights from the Israel Defense Forces in Lebanon and Gaza*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-285-A, 2010. As of September 24, 2022: https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP285.html
- Johnson, David E., *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1085-A/AF, 2011. As of September 24, 2022: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1085.html>
- King, Charles, "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States," *World Politics*, Vol. 53, July 2001, pp. 524–552.
- Locks, Benjamin, "Bad Guys Know What Works: Asymmetric Warfare and the Third Offset," *War on the Rocks*, June 23, 2015.
- Marshall, Alex, "From Civil War to Proxy War: Past History and Current Dilemmas," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016.
- Marten, Kimberly, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2019, pp. 181–204.
- McCuen, John J., "Hybrid Wars," *Military Review*, March–April 2008.
- McNerney, Michael J., Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Derek Eaton, Caroline Baxter, Colin P. Clarke, Emma Cutrufello, Michael McGee, Heather Peterson, Leslie Adrienne Payne, and Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-350-A, 2014. As of September 24, 2022: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR350.html
- Muhsin, Dhia, "Houthi Use of Drones Delivers Potent Message in Yemen War," *IJSS Blog*, August 27, 2019.
- Mumford, Andrew, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 158, No. 2, 2013.
- Nadimi, Farzin, and Michael Knights, "Iran's Support to Houthi Air Defenses in Yemen," *The Washington Institute*, April 4, 2018.
- "New Houthi Weapon Emerges: A Drone Boat," *Defense News*, February 19, 2017.
- Owen, John M., IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change 1510–2010*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Pifer, Steven, "Contending with—Not Accepting—Spheres of Influence," *Russia Matters*, March 5, 2020.
- Salehyan, Idean, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2010, pp. 493–515.
- San-Akca, Belgin and Zeev Maoz, "Rivalry and State Support of Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs), 1946–2001," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4, December 2012, pp. 720–734.
- Sanders, Paul, "U.S. Embrace of Great Power Competition Also Means Contending with Spheres of Influence," *Russia Matters*, February 13, 2020.
- Schultz, Kenneth A., "The Enforcement Problem in Coercive Bargaining: Interstate Conflict over Rebel Support in Civil Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 64, Spring 2010, pp. 281–312.
- "Suicide Drones: Houthi Strategic Weapon," *Abaad Studies and Research Center*, January 2019.
- Trevithick, Joseph, "U.S. and NATO Special Ops Just Fought a Fake Guerrilla War in West Virginia," *The Drive*, April 6, 2017.

Watts, Stephen, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik E. Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane M. Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Military Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-3, 2023a. As of January 31, 2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR-A307-3.html

Watts, Stephen, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik E. Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane M. Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-2, 2023b. As of January 31, 2023: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR-A307-2.html

Watts, Stephen, J. Michael Polich, and Derek Eaton, "Rapid Regeneration of Irregular Warfare Capacity," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 78, 3rd Quarter 2015, pp. 32–39.



The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

Research Integrity

Our mission to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis is enabled through our core values of quality and objectivity and our unwavering commitment to the highest level of integrity and ethical behavior. To help ensure our research and analysis are rigorous, objective, and nonpartisan, we subject our research publications to a robust and exacting quality-assurance process; avoid both the appearance and reality of financial and other conflicts of interest through staff training, project screening, and a policy of mandatory disclosure; and pursue transparency in our research engagements through our commitment to the open publication of our research findings and recommendations, disclosure of the source of funding of published research, and policies to ensure intellectual independence. For more information, visit www.rand.org/about/research-integrity.

RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This publication and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited; linking directly to its webpage on rand.org is encouraged. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research products for commercial purposes. For information on reprint and reuse permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.

For more information on this publication, visit www.rand.org/t/RR-A307-1.

© 2023 RAND Corporation

www.rand.org

About This Report

The research reported here was completed in July 2021, followed by security review by the sponsor and the U.S. Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, with final sign-off in June 2022.

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *State Support to Violent Non-State Actors: Assessing Risks to U.S. Overseas Contingency Operations*, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army. The purpose of the project was to provide insight into the determinants of state support for violent nonstate actors, assess the risks that third-party support poses to U.S. overseas contingency operations, and analyze policy options available to the United States to counter such foreign support.

This research was conducted within RAND Arroyo Center's Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program. RAND Arroyo Center, part of the RAND Corporation, is a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the United States Army.

RAND operates under a "Federal-Wide Assurance" (FWA00003425) and complies with the *Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects Under United States Law* (45 CFR 46), also known as "the Common Rule," as well as with the implementation guidance set forth in U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Instruction 3216.02. As applicable, this compliance includes reviews and approvals by RAND's Institutional Review Board (the Human Subjects Protection Committee) and by the U.S. Army. The views of sources utilized in this study are solely their own and do not represent the official policy or position of DoD or the U.S. Government.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank MG Christopher McPadden, former Director, Army Strategy, Plans and Policy, G-3/5, U.S. Army, for sponsoring this study. We would also like to thank Mark Calvo, COL Jason Charland, MAJ Jenny Gunderson, and MAJ Constance Quinlan for their support and helpful feedback throughout the research. Within RAND, we benefited from the comments and insights of Dave Johnson and Jennifer Kavanagh. Idean Salehyan of the University of North Texas and Shawn Cochran of RAND provided invaluable reviews that greatly improved the final document. Finally, we are grateful to LTC Scott Akerley, LTC Jason Davis, CPT Taylor Allen, SGM Paul Langley, and Chris Anderson from the Asymmetric Warfare Group for taking the time to provide us their insights.