**Proxy Forces**

*Definition*

Direct or indirect use of non-state and parastate groups to carry out militarized intimidation or control territory to exert influence or achieve specific security or political outcomes.

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**Examples of Gray Zone Threat vs. U.S. Interests**

Proxy forces threaten U.S. national security interests

- Iran’s use of proxy forces to build influence or destabilize key areas of the Middle East (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen), including partner institutions, and limit operational access
- Russia’s use of proxies in Ukraine undermined Ukrainian institutions and enabled annexation of Crimea
- China’s use of commercial fishing vessels challenge international maritime access

**U.S. Government Responses**

The Players: Department of Defense (DoD) (and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)), Intelligence Community (IC), Department of State (DoS), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Treasury

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deterrence &amp; Resilience</th>
<th>Intelligence &amp; Investigation</th>
<th>Cost Imposition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DoS and DoD engage regional leaders to reassure partners and promote security cooperation</td>
<td>DoD and the IC monitor and analyze the nature of proxy forces and track their connections to terrorism and illicit finance</td>
<td>DoD, the IC, and select foreign partners collaborate on overt and covert operations to undermine competitor proxy forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoS and USAID provide international development and stabilization assistance to buttress institutional resilience in allied and partner countries</td>
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<td>DoS and Treasury sanction proxies complicit in terrorism, illicit finance, and human rights abuses</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoD engages allies and partners in military exercises and training to deter competitor proxy forces and build partner capacity</td>
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**U.S. Government Assessment**

**Bureaucratic Structure**
- Few opportunities for interagency coordination on countering proxy forces
- Gaps in regulation and evaluation structures within U.S. agencies

**Policy Positions**
- Weakened international coalitions and partnerships damage coordinated operations
- The U.S. government does not produce strong narratives to discourage cooperation with adversarial proxies
• U.S. policies toward partner security forces calibrated for principled engagement (e.g., Leahy Law restrictions), which rivals do not abide by

Operational Limitations
• Weakened alliances and partnerships and varying security clearance access levels prevent adequate information sharing between U.S. intelligence, allies, partners, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or civil society organizations

Ineffective Tools and Tactics
• Targeted sanctions and naming and shaming may curtail some activities competitors’ proxy forces but are not sufficient in degrading them

Authorities and Purview
• Iran and Russia have comparative advantage in proliferating proxy partnerships; no clear delineation over whether efforts to build/counter proxies should be under DoD or intelligence community (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)) authorities and hence, which agency should lead long-term proxy strategy and operational development

Recommendations
Authorities and Resourcing
• Accelerate the implementation of the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC ) to broaden toolset for increasing capacity and resilience of allied, partner, and third-party countries
• Clarify proxy warfare authorities (DoD vs CIA)
• Incorporate stabilization resourcing into DoD irregular warfare planning and doctrine

Policies
• Impose costs on adversaries by:
  · exposing support for proxy groups, front companies, and their financial activities;
  · sanctioning proxy entities as complicit or affiliated;
  · building credible non-state alternatives to proxies;
  · supporting political rivals who share U.S. interests; and
  · building resiliency by strengthening the capacity of national governments

Tools
• Divide and undermine local support for proxy activities using information operations and diplomatic activities to cleave relationships between state sponsors and proxies
• Buttress international finance, development, and stabilization assistance for regional countries’ institutions threatened by gray zone competitors
• Conduct exercises, including with allies and partners, to demonstrate freedom of access and capability

Read the full report here. For related CSIS gray zone analysis visit: csis.org/grayzone.