**“Proxy War”: Motivations and Operations**

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【Abstract】The occurrence of "proxy wars" is closely related to the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons. "Sponsors", especially nuclear powers, hope or can protect or realize their geopolitical interests through their "proxies" without resorting to direct military conflict. The reason for the frequent occurrence of "proxy wars" is their high "cost-effectiveness". As a policy tool, "sponsors" mainly maintain and realize their own national interests by providing "proxies" with manpower, military equipment, financial assistance and other non-military means. The current Ukrainian crisis is a "proxy war".

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"Proxy war" refers to "a third party indirectly participating in instigating a conflict between two other actors for its own benefit and providing military, organizational, resource, political and other support to one of the conflicting parties"①, or as the famous American political scientist Carl Deutsch said, "'Proxy war' refers to a conflict between two countries, where these two countries attempt to use the resources of a third country and the military operations taking place within its territory to achieve their own interests, and the pretext for launching such a war is to resolve the internal conflict of the third country."② The essence of "proxy war" is a strategic tool for major powers to maintain or seek hegemony. As a special form of conflict, "proxy war" has its own motivation logic and specific operating methods. The internal conflict in Ukraine that has lasted for many years and the current Ukrainian crisis are "proxy wars."

**Participants, motivations, and risks of “proxy wars”**

Relationship types of "proxy wars". The relationship patterns between "sponsors" and "agents" in "proxy wars" are generally divided into four categories. The first category is the agency relationship between a "sponsor country" and another country. The characteristic of this agency relationship is that the "sponsor country" is generally a superpower with resource and ideological advantages, such as the agency relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba during the Cold War. The second category is the agency relationship between a country and a non-state actor (such as terrorist organizations, insurgent groups, and private military companies). This agency relationship is not only applicable to superpowers, but also to other countries. For example, Iran has successfully implemented an agency strategy and supported the Badr Armed Forces under the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq to oppose the Saddam regime. The third type of relationship is the reverse interactive relationship model between "sponsors" and "agents", that is, after reaching a certain strength, "agents" often take actions without coordination with "sponsors". There is a similar situation with the Lebanese Shiite political party Hezbollah. The organization originated in Lebanon and was later used as an "agent" by Syria and Iran. By acting as an "agent", Hezbollah has gained a firm foothold on the stage of the Middle East and its relationship with the "sponsor" has changed from "agent" to autonomous actor. The fourth type is the agency relationship between non-state actors, which is not uncommon in today's world. For example, the terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, which has long been funded by al-Qaeda, is an example.

The logic of the motivation of "proxy wars". On the one hand, in contemporary times, the frequent occurrence of "proxy wars" is directly related to the emergence of nuclear weapons. The emergence of nuclear weapons has completely subverted the style of traditional warfare. The devastating consequences of nuclear weapons on the conflicting parties have made direct conflicts between nuclear powers almost impossible; on the other hand, the contradictions between the great powers have not diminished at all, so the world's great powers "have emerged as an alternative strategy to protect their national interests and achieve ideological advantages - the less risky "proxy wars" instigated or led by the great powers"③, and have actually become the most common form of conflict. During the Cold War, the United States or the Soviet Union supported a local force or group to gain a more advantageous position on the global chessboard. During this period, "proxy wars" were a standard form of conflict. Whether in Angola, Nicaragua or Afghanistan, such examples abound. After the end of the Cold War, "proxy wars" have also increased: the Syrian war, the Libyan civil war, and the current Ukrainian crisis, and so on.

The basic motivation for the occurrence of "proxy wars" is that geopolitical opponents or other actors in world politics ("sponsors") hope or can protect or realize their geopolitical interests through their "proxies" without resorting to direct military conflicts between countries. "Proxies" need to obtain continuous military, technical and political support from "sponsors" to improve the chances of winning the war, or at least to ensure that the positions are not lost. For example, Russian air defense weapons can offset part of the advantage of the Ukrainian government forces over the anti-government forces in eastern Ukraine; the Yemeni Houthi armed forces can attack and threaten the Saudi capital Riyadh with Iranian ballistic missiles; the United States has helped the Syrian Kurdish armed forces to drive the extremist organization "Islamic State" out of most of eastern Syria through high-intensity and intensive air strikes in Syria, which is a task that the organization cannot accomplish alone. Geopolitical opponents fight each other on the territory of a third country through "proxies", generally with multiple purposes: not only to weaken the military strength of the geopolitical enemy militarily, but also to consume its national strength economically, while also seeking to create internal problems for it and even shake its ruling foundation and undermine its international reputation.

Since World War II, the main reasons why "proxy wars" have been "thriving" are:

First, "proxy wars" are relatively cheap, low-cost, and highly efficient. "'Proxy wars' seem to be a cheap, practically cost-free way to wage war." ④ Proxies make it possible to intervene at the lowest cost. In a speech, the 34th President of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, praised "proxy wars" as "the cheapest way to achieve national goals" and "the cheapest insurance," meaning that this method can reduce fiscal expenditures and control political risks compared to direct military intervention. As a war strategy that can obtain higher returns with lower investment, "proxy wars" have become a preferred tool for major powers to strategically compete and intervene in regional affairs.

Secondly, military expenditure and personnel losses are small. Since systemic financial and economic crises always periodically bring heavy damage to the world economy, some countries have to limit military spending, thus weakening their momentum to directly participate in large-scale wars. Direct military confrontation between countries, or direct military intervention in conflicts between or within other countries, is costly, so adopting the strategy of "proxy war" naturally becomes a wise choice. Philip Bobbitt, a famous American political scientist and jurist, pointed out: "In the future, local armed forces will increasingly become "agents" for global and regional powers to instigate armed conflicts. This method will become an efficient alternative for these countries to mobilize regular troops and pay large military expenditures. For the United States, launching a "proxy war" can not only save money, but also avoid sacrificing American soldiers, including Army service members."⑤

Finally, public opinion factors. At present, public opinion is increasingly sensitive to the casualties and huge expenses caused by involvement in large-scale conflicts, especially the ordinary people in Western countries are increasingly unwilling to bear any suffering and losses caused by war. A study by Georgetown University in the United States found that since the Vietnam War, the "pain threshold" of acceptable losses in military operations by the American people has dropped by more than 6 times. Correspondingly, "proxy wars" are becoming more and more accepted by the people. In addition, "proxy wars" are unlikely to trigger a strong nationalist reaction that often accompanies foreign intervention. At the same time, they can also use high-sounding reasons to cover up the true intention of participating in "proxy wars" to a certain extent, avoiding being accused of illegally interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and incurring sanctions and retaliation from the international community. In other words, the "proxy" conflict strategy allows the "sponsor" to achieve its goals on foreign territory while avoiding damaging its own international image and reputation, and all consequences and responsibilities can fall on the shoulders of the "agent". Of course, for some countries, other specific factors such as ideological factors and domestic political factors are also the motivation for creating "proxy wars". For example, the reason why many Arab governments often support Yasser Arafat or other Palestinian leaders is to enhance their Arab nationalist credibility among the people.

"Proxy wars" pose some risks to both "sponsors" and "agents". For "sponsors", despite the asymmetry of power, "agents" almost always act according to their own interests and logic, and sometimes even act like "unbridled wild horses" and go against the original intentions of the "sponsors". For example, after the "9.11" incident, the United States asked the Northern Alliance, an Afghan ally mainly composed of ethnic minorities, to not occupy Kabul, but the Northern Alliance still occupied Kabul. For "agents", at best, they can expect to obtain resources and assistance from "sponsors" for a certain period of time, but they generally cannot expect such assistance to last for a long time; in addition, even after achieving "autonomy", "agents" are likely to be unable to get rid of their dependence on their previous "sponsors". For example, the "proxy wars" during the Cold War made many new countries (especially African countries) develop a vicious dependence on the United States as a "sponsor", so that they still have to rely on the United States in the military, political and economic fields.

**How “Proxy Wars” Work as a Policy Tool**

From the perspective of the source, "proxy wars" are mostly the spillover of the evolution of civil wars. Proxy actions are accompanied by domestic separatist movements. External actors intervene in the internal conflicts of the target country under the pretext of "controlling chaos" and cause them to escalate into civil wars. Of the 30 "proxy wars" that occurred during the Cold War, 18 evolved from civil wars, accounting for as much as 60%. ⑥ From the Laotian Civil War, the Lebanese Civil War, the Greek Civil War and the Nicaraguan Civil War during the Cold War, to the Bosnian Civil War and the Congo (Kinshasa) Civil War after the end of the Cold War, to the current internal conflict in Ukraine that has lasted for many years and even the Ukrainian crisis, this is the case.

In terms of instrumentality, "proxy wars" are actually a policy tool for major powers to maintain and realize their own national interests. Analysis of various "proxy wars" shows that the means adopted by third parties to intervene in "proxy wars" are very wide-ranging, but in general, they mainly provide "proxy" with manpower, military equipment, financial assistance and other non-military means.

Providing human resources. In terms of providing human resources, the "sponsor"'s participation in "proxy wars" mainly includes two aspects: first, providing combatants to the "proxy" to directly participate in military operations. These personnel can be the "sponsor's" army, the army of allies, or mercenaries from private military sectors; second, sending military technical experts to the "proxy" to guide military operations in combat areas.

Material assistance. An effective way to achieve goals through "proxy wars" is to provide weapons and ammunition to the conflicting parties rather than directly participate in the conflict. This is most evident in the ongoing Ukrainian crisis. While the United States has repeatedly stated that it will not send a single soldier to intervene in the Ukrainian crisis, it has gathered its allies to provide Ukraine with rounds of weapons and military assistance, turning this crisis into a protracted war of attrition.

Financial support. The main forms of financial assistance are: direct non-repayable donations, loans for the purchase of weapons, and funding for military infrastructure construction. Experts estimate that between 1955 and 1980, the total amount of financial assistance provided by the Soviet Union to third world countries (excluding Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea) was close to US$51 billion; in 1962, the US Pentagon allocated US$17.2 million for military assistance to six countries, namely Vietnam, Iran, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama and the Philippines; and during the Afghan War from 1979 to 1989, the United States provided more than US$3 billion in financial support to the Afghan "Mujahideen" organization⑦.

Information and intelligence support. In the context of modern information warfare, relying on modern high-precision weapon systems and combat platforms, supplemented by "no-dead-angle" satellite monitoring and radar systems, all-weather monitoring of battlefield situations, and timely and accurate grasp of enemy military deployment and dispatch can almost play a decisive role in mastering the initiative in war and achieving victory over the enemy with maximum efficiency. Because of this, people have seen that in "proxy wars", while "sponsors" provide weapons and other material assistance to "proxys", they also pay more and more attention to information and intelligence sharing with "proxys". The United States' approach in the Ukrainian crisis is very typical.

Moral and spiritual support. The "sponsors" often use the propaganda tools at their disposal to shape the "agent" into a "victim" image, and at the same time exaggerate the "moral stains" of the enemy to motivate the "agent" to persist in fighting from a psychological and spiritual level.

**The current Ukrainian crisis is a "proxy war"**

As we all know, after independence, Ukraine is located at the geographical intersection of Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. It is a geopolitical fulcrum country on the Eurasian chessboard. Its geostrategic position is extremely important. It is the last barrier for Russia to resist the squeeze of NATO's eastward expansion strategy after the Cold War. Its diplomatic strategic choice determines the balance of power in the entire Eurasian continent to a considerable extent. The famous American geostrategic theorist Brzezinski claimed that Russia would not be able to become an empire without Ukraine, and "an empire without Ukraine can only be a more 'Asianized Russia farther away from Europe'". ⑧ If Ukraine can be included in Russia's strategic orbit, then Russia can obtain a large buffer zone and achieve "attack when advancing and defense when retreating"; and if Ukraine joins the Western camp, it will become the West's frontier position to contain Russia. Therefore, for Russia, its primary interest is to include Ukraine in its own strategic orbit and shape it into the last line of defense against NATO's eastward expansion. In other words, whether it can hold Ukraine, especially to prevent it from becoming a tool used by Western countries to balance Russia - this is a major strategic issue related to Russia's geopolitical ecology.

Before the outbreak of the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004, the successive governments of Ukraine after independence basically pursued a relatively balanced foreign policy between the East and the West, neither "leaning" to Russia nor leaning too much to the West. However, the Yushchenko government that came to power after the "Orange Revolution" completely broke this balance and launched a radical westward strategy of "abandoning Russia and being pro-European": pursuing integration into the EU in terms of economy, joining NATO as a strategic goal in terms of military, and carrying out a "de-Russification" movement domestically. Against this background, Russia and Ukraine quickly changed from "brothers" to "rivals" in fact. Although Yanukovych, who came to power after the new round of presidential elections in Ukraine in the spring of 2010, once made major adjustments to Russia's policy and made Russia-Ukraine relations show a trend of improvement, the good times did not last long. Taking the opportunity of Ukraine's announcement in November 2013 to suspend the signing of the "Association Agreement" with the EU, Ukraine then experienced an unprecedented large-scale political protest wave in history. With the instigation of the United States and Europe, the domestic situation in Ukraine spiraled out of control, and Yanukovych was removed from the presidency by the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (parliament) and forced to flee abroad. The Poroshenko government that came to power later, under the influence of Ukrainian nationalist forces, not only "picked up" the "pro-Western and anti-Russian" strategy of former President Yushchenko, but was even more radical than the former in terms of specific policies and actions. In this situation, Russia took strong action in 2014 to curb Ukraine's strategic westward expansion: Russia signed an agreement with Crimea to join Russia, and supported the eastern region of Ukraine in a protracted domestic conflict with the Kiev authorities.

After the end of the Cold War, although Russia introduced the so-called "separation of powers" system from the West in politics, carried out market-oriented economic reforms in economy, and abandoned the communist ideology at the guiding ideology level, in the eyes of the United States and the West, Russia is still a country with "more autocracy than democracy", especially after Putin launched a series of measures to rectify the national power system, which further aggravated the United States and the West's perception of Russia. In addition, from the perspective of military security, Russia after "transition" is still a threat in the eyes of the United States and the West, rather than a "constructive factor". The United States and the West believe that Russia's imperial complex is deeply rooted, Great Russian chauvinism is extremely strong, and Russia's grand imperial ambitions are a threat to the West and the entire international community. It is based on such a cognition and judgment that after the end of the Cold War, the United States and the West took a series of major steps to eliminate the so-called "Russian threat" once and for all: instigating "color revolutions" in the "post-Soviet space" to weaken Russia's influence from the "internal border", continuing NATO's eastward expansion to squeeze Russia's strategic space from the outside, and at the same time, attacking Russia's "democracy and human rights" issues and exerting strong public opinion pressure on it. At present, NATO's military outposts have been approaching Russia's western border through its continued eastward expansion. In response to Russia's demands for NATO to provide security guarantees and promise not to accept Ukraine as a member, NATO has sternly rejected them. All of this is what people often call the "historical context" of the Ukrainian crisis.

Since the new round of Ukrainian crisis broke out in the spring of 2021, the domestic conflict in Ukraine has further escalated. The competition for Ukraine between the West, led by the United States, and Russia has intensified. The military exercises in which both sides compete to show their "muscles" have also been one wave higher than the other. On the evening of February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an order recognizing the "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic" in eastern Ukraine, and on February 24 announced the launch of a special military operation in the Donbas region, directly intervening militarily in the Ukrainian civil war. Originally a "proxy war" with Russia as a "sponsor" - the Ukrainian civil war, has "transformed" into a "proxy war" against Russia by the United States and the West. Whether from the perspective of the United States and the West's position and consideration goals on the Ukrainian crisis (the so-called "completely destroying Russia's ability to wage war abroad"), or from the perspective of the United States and the West's all-round and unprecedented assistance to Ukraine, the current Ukrainian crisis is a "proxy war." Although it was the Ukrainian army that clashed with Russia on the battlefield, in fact, the instigators and leaders behind Ukraine were undoubtedly the United States and Western countries. As the largest "proxy war" since the end of the Cold War, "the United States is using a variety of means including military, political diplomacy, economics and finance, psychology and public opinion to try to weaken Russia's international status and suppress Russia in all aspects, even at the cost of putting the world on the brink of nuclear conflict." ⑨

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【Notes】

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