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Reevaluating the involvement of the NATO in proxy wars

NATO

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Introduction

A proxy war is a type of military conflict where one or more third-party states indirectly or directly provide support for nonstate combatants with the aim of having an influence on the outcome of a conflict or further strategic interests by possibly undermining the goals of the opposition party. The third party does not participate directly in the conflict, and by partaking in proxy wars, they aim to avoid the conflict that arises from a confrontation between major powers in the process of competing for resources and furthering their influence within the respective region(s). When direct, the support can entail economic assistance, military aid and training, and occasionally military operations with replacement forces. An indirect means of support can consist of blockades, sanctions towards nations, the imposition of trade embargoes, and other strategic methods aimed towards obstructing the rival party's ambitions. These types of conflicts are distinct from conventional military conflicts due to the major powers being involved, not directly involving themselves in the conflict.

NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) is an international defense alliance of 30 countries, ranging from North America and Europe. The fundamental purpose of this organization would be to safeguard the freedom of those in the Alliance through political and/or military means. In the modern world, NATO is seen as a debatable and questionable organization, and some perceive it as a liberator and a force used to fight proxy wars on behalf of our world's superpowers. On the other hand, some question its relevance in the modern world, claiming that it is 'outdated' in its ways and practices.

Addressing this issue proves to be of significance with the rise in proxy conflicts in the contemporary world, especially due to their tendency to escalate conflicts between major global superpowers. As proxy wars increase, whether in regions such as Eastern Europe, Africa, or the Middle East, the occurrence of these geopolitical struggles raises questions in regard to the relevance of NATO and its alignment with the alliance's principles when initially established. Understanding this issue provides perspective and proves to be essential when preventing escalations and, more importantly, ensuring the prevalence of global stability, with NATO serving its purpose in regard to its defensive goals.

Definition of Key Terms

Proxy conflict

A conflict in which external indirect support by two or more foreign powers occurs, where the parties are in support of opposing sides. This type of conflict is typically conducted in order to avoid direct military involvement and engagement between both parties.

Non-State combatants

Non-state combatants are individuals or groups that act independently of a recognized authority within a state and are engaged in armed organized conflicts.

Surrogate forces

Non-state or local actors who receive training, equipment, or support from an external state. These organizations then act on behalf of that third-party state in order to achieve its strategic goals and objectives. With surrogate forces, third-party states can avoid direct military involvement.

Hybrid Warfare

A defensive/offensive strategy combining both conventional and non-conventional means of warfare in order to destabilize their opposition. This can be done through misinformation or disinformation campaigns (propagation of propaganda), cyber warfare, and irregular tactics.

Interventionism

The military or political intervention into another state.

Asymmetric Warfare

A type of conflict in which groups that are involved have substantially varying military strategies and/or capabilities.

Article 5 - Collective Defense

An attack on one NATO member state is to be considered an attack on all member states and allies.

Geopolitical Rivalry

This term refers to the fierce rivalry between nations/blocs with the aim of gaining power, influence, or strategic dominance over resources, regions, and international frameworks. The competition can manifest in the form of economic competition, indirect conflict such as but not limited to proxy wars, and military positioning. It is typically done to shape respective interests and manipulate geopolitical order in a region.

Collective defense

A type of system in which a group of nations, typically in an alliance, agree to act collectively against threats against member states.

Military alliance

An agreement between nations, where both parties commit to cooperate in regards to defense and security. Through possible joint military planning/conductions of operations, along with the sharing of resources.

Strategic interests

These are the long-term goals that states or alliances attempt to achieve and pursue to ensure their respective prosperity, security, and maintenance of influence.

Deterrence strategy

Policies aimed towards preventing further aggression through threats of retaliation.

Conflict escalation

Intensification of a conflict as a result of actions of a state, such as increasing political, military, or economic activities/actions.

Regional instability

The occurrence of political and/or social instability within a region/geographical area. This issue is typically a result of poor systems of governance or conflicts.

Humanitarian intervention

Action taken in order to prevent abuses of human rights or alleviate the suffering of individuals.

Foreign aid militarization

The term refers to aid provided with the aim of supporting military ambitions/objectives. These objectives can include funding towards financing armed groups and subsequently providing equipment to those groups.

Coalition warfare

A type of conflict involves the cooperation of multiple states, acting on the same side in a conflict or war, working towards a shared objective. However, they do not act as a part of a military alliance.

Civilian-military relations

The relationships between civilian populations and the military when it comes to the construction of security and defense policy.

Intervention legitimacy

The consideration by the international community of the lawfulness and justifiability of political or military intervention in another nation.

Asymmetric power dynamics

Circumstances in which certain parties within a conflict possess a substantially larger capability or resource availability than an opposition party in a conflict.

Geostrategic zones

Areas that hold monumental significance to holding influence, along with ensuring global stability.

Counterinsurgency

Strategies that are planned or put in place in efforts to combat insurgent groups, and promote regional stability.

Insurgent groups

People, typically through violent means, pose and propagate rebellions in attempts to oppose and fight against their respective government bodies.

Economic sanctions

Trading or financial restrictions that are imposed upon a group or nation with the aim to have an impact on its behaviors.

Intelligence operations

Activities that involve the assembly of information about opposition forces with the aim of supporting strategic and tactical objectives.

Regional alliances

A means of addressing regional hostilities by creating partnerships between countries to develop and execute political, military, and economic strategies.

General Overview

During the Cold War

NATO historically has had a deep involvement in proxy conflicts and the propagation of these conflicts. This involvement was evidently seen during the Cold War period, which was the open yet restricted rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union. This war was characteristically a Proxy war in which it was executed indirectly through politics, economics, and the distribution of propaganda on the different fronts, limitedly using weapons. During the Cold War, NATO's presence was of the essence, especially in furthering the goals of the USA when it came to their foreign policies and the embodiment of those aims. NATO during this period, through its military presence itself, played a substantial role in efforts to thwart Soviet expansion and the spread of communism. A second instance of this would be in Afghanistan during the years of 1979 - 1989, where US-led NATO members supported Mujahideen insurgents, who opposed and fought against a Soviet-backed government. Historically, NATO's involvement in proxy wars has been evidently seen to have the aim of furthering its member states's strategic interests. Their involvement was frequently done so through indirect actions/involvement in the matter, such as but not limited to intelligence services, stowing political and economic pressure, providing military aid, and training allied forces.

Post the Cold War

After the elapsing of the Cold War, the role of NATO shifted from thwarting Soviet and Communist influence to fostering dialogue and ensuring cooperation between former adversaries, along with overseeing conflicts in the European periphery. Though there was a shift in its goals,

NATO's presence in proxy wars remained prevalent. An example of this is seen once again in Afghanistan in 2001 - 2021, where NATO-led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). NATO had supported Afghani forces against the Taliban government and other insurgencies, frequently through indirect training and military aid. Another instance was in Libya, in 2011, where NATO became involved in the civil war at the time, where they had enforced a no-fly zone, along with participating in support towards rebel groups who fought against Gaddafi's regime. Though their actions were framed towards humanitarian aid missions, they were also indirectly in support of opposition NATO-allied forces/member state's tactical interests.

Contemporary conflicts

In the modern day, a noteworthy instance of NATO's involvement, or member state's involvement in proxy conflict would be the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Though NATO itself, during this conflict, has not directly sent aid in any form to Ukraine, member states, such as the US, have provided substantial aid in the form of weapons, training, and intelligence to Ukrainian operations. Their support towards Ukraine, though indirect, is aimed at withstanding Russian aggression and expansion. The involvement of NATO in this issue is well known as a proxy war but is debated when considering the extent of NATO's involvement due to it varying from traditional definitions of proxy conflicts due to varying opinions on whether its indirect actions constitute collective support under the organization's frameworks, or as independent actions committed by member states. In the context of this conflict, alongside its confusing frameworks, many also criticized NATO's involvement, claiming it intensifies the conflict, along with bringing up a risk of further tensions with Russia.

With NATO, a continuous prevalent area of discussion is its communication in regard to the actions of individual states and the accountability of NATO as a whole, especially when member states take action unilaterally. This brings up the question of where the distinction can be made between collective decisions made by the organization and the independent actions of member states. An example of this can be seen in Turkey, which has been associated with the support of groups within Libya and Syria. Involvement in this region, Turkey has been unilaterally opposed to having been involved in NATO collective decision-making.

The involvement of NATO in proxy conflicts has been multifaceted and has undergone substantial evolution over time. With the shifts in NATO, so did the world, where shifts in the geopolitics of the world followed suit. Through the ages, the shift in the global stage has also been evident. However, NATO's role in this has also been under substantial debate. Starting with its heavy

involvement during the tense Cold War period, where NATO took on an active role in efforts to counter the spread of Soviet influence and Marxist Leninist ideologies and prevent the spread of communist and socialist regimes. Then, shifting into its post-Cold War stance with its Afghan involvement in Libya. Now, in the modern world, with the organization's more passive role in its indirect involvement in Ukraine. Over the years, the involvement has stirred up heavy debate when it comes to the ethical and political implications of the strategies and tactics of the organization. It may still remain a central organizational body when it comes to addressing concerns on the global stage in terms of intercontinental stability. It does experience and recognize, however, its complexities in regard to inter-organizational communication, especially when the distinction between the actions of individual states and collective organizational decisions persists to be a point of weakness and a cause of tension.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
1949	NATO formed , and established as a defensive alliance, with the aim towards countering Soviet influence and expansion in Europe.
1950 - 1953	Korean War , no direct involvement by NATO as an organizational body, however, intervention by member states such as the United States of America, and the United Kingdom took place.
1955	Warsaw Pact , Soviet Union formed Warsaw pact, an alliance between Soviet Union, and other Eastern European Nations
1961	Berlin crisis , Escalation of the military presence of NATO during the Berlin standoff, no direct military engagement was conducted by NATO.
1962	Cuban Missile Crisis , Soviet missile discovered in Cuba, led to standoff between USA and the USSR.
1979 - 1989	Soviet-Afghan War , Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, US supported insurgencies in

	Afghanistan (Mujahideen groups) to prevent further Soviet expansion.
1991	Dissolution of the Soviet Union , Marks the end of the cold war.
1999	Nato intervenes in Kosovo , NATO launches air based campaign against Yugoslavia, at an attempt to stop and prevent further ethnic cleansing within Kosovo.
2011	Libyan Civil War , UN mandate results in NATO intervening in the Libyan Civil war, aiming to protect the civilian population from Muammar Gaddafi's forces. Later led to the fall of the Libyan government.
2014	Russian Annexation of Crimea , Many NATO member states during this period provided Ukraine with support, military and economic, in efforts to oppose Russian expansionism.
2022	Russian invasion of Ukraine , NATO as a result of the full scale invasion by Russia into Ukraine leads NATO to strengthen its support to Ukraine by providing training, and military aid.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America

The USA is one of the founding members of NATO and one of the organization's largest contributors militarily. It has also historically had a large involvement in proxy conflicts, where NATO is used as a body for operations regarding collective self-defense. In this conflict, it is likely that the stance of the USA would lean towards ensuring a future for NATO's involvement in proxy conflicts.

Russia

NATO's actions in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East have been viewed by Russia as posing direct threats to the nation's security and influence, where it has often been on the opposing side to NATO proxy conflicts. Russia would oppose the future of NATO operations in terms

of proxy wars, as it would see the organization's values and operations as opposing a Russian sphere of influence and interests.

China

China holds strategic and tactical interests in areas that have been and continue to be affected by NATO and its proxy wars. China intends to protect its interests and avoid disruptions to those interests attributed to long-lasting conflict. China's stance would advocate for reducing intervention through military means and would want to approach conflicts instead through diplomacy and organized discussions.

European Union (EU)

Many member states are members of NATO, and as an organization as a whole, the EU is a large stakeholder when it comes to operations conducted by NATO. The EU would opt for a cooperative and diplomatic method of approaching conflicts and might call for reevaluation when it comes to NATO and its involvement in proxy conflicts.

Turkey

Turkey is a NATO member state, and its tactical and strategic interests lie within both the Middle East and Eastern Europe. As such, it would like to use its position as a member state to promote its influence within regional conflicts. It would also be interested in particularly informing their concerns when it comes to ISIS and Kurdish groups. Turkey's stance as such would be more mixed, combining the need for NATO to involve itself in proxy conflicts militarily along with indulging in its own interests.

Iran

Iran plays a large role in NATO, involving proxy conflicts in areas such as Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. The nation frequently opposes the involvement of NATO in the region, as it is seen to be a hindrance in their sphere of influence. Its stance on the matter would oppose NATO's involvement in proxy conflicts and would try to call for an end to military intervention by NATO.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan, in particular, has been a focal point of NATO military involvement since 2001 with the US-led invasion and following NATO mission. Its current government, under the Taliban,

would oppose NATO's involvement and would advocate for no more interference with the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

Ukraine

Ukraine, due to its close proximity and heavy involvement with Russia, along with its troubles with Russian-backed separatists, would bring the nation to conflict regarding NATO and its involvement. Its stance would likely follow the allowing of NATO's involvement in proxy conflicts, notably considering its alliance with NATO being seen as a way of offsetting Russian aggression.

Possible Solutions

- Strengthen diplomatic processes by encouraging NATO to place emphasis on political dialogue as opposed to intervention through military means.
- Creation of internal conflict resolution frameworks, giving member states guidelines on de-escalating proxy wars and other military situations.
- Implement protocol to ensure that civilian populations experience minimal casualty.
- This means to ensure greater transparency for NATO on its involvement in proxy wars, such as UN reports, etc.
- Utilize non-NATO entities such as the African Union, the Arab League, or the UN to be jointly responsible when it comes to managing proxy conflicts.

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