



The United States Needs to Declare War on Proxies

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There has been no shortage of debate about the killing of Iranian military commander Qassem Suleimani and its effects on U.S. foreign policy toward Iran and the broader Middle East. Not nearly enough has been said about whether it can broadly serve as a model for dealing with the problems posed by proxy forces elsewhere in the world.

By killing Suleimani, the United States indicated it would no longer tolerate Iran's use of proxies to circumvent its responsibility for killing Americans and for other acts of terrorism and mass bloodshed. Washington decided to deal with the source of the terrorism, not its emissaries. The same principle should apply to the many proxy regimes established by various states—Russia most prominently—to circumvent responsibility for illegal military occupations.

Countries around the world are increasingly realizing that the most convenient way to occupy foreign territories is to set up a proxy with the ceremonial trappings of a state, including governments, parliaments, and flags. Why go through all that trouble? Because the norms of the liberal international order, which outlaw changing boundaries by force, risk leading to sanctions for the perpetrator state. Creating a proxy regime generates a convenient falsehood that obfuscates reality and helps states evade such consequences.

The most systematic user of this tactic is Russia. Since the early 1990s, it has manipulated ethnic conflicts in three different states and helped set up nominally independent entities over which it exerts control. Moscow's practice began in Moldova's Transnistria region and in two breakaway territories of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Following Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power in the early 2000s, the Kremlin's control of these territories became tighter. Putin appointed Russian military and security officials to ministerial positions in the governing structures of these territories, indicating their direct subordination to Russia. Following its 2008 war with Georgia, Russia established permanent military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and formally recognized the independence of the two territories. This allowed Moscow to create a fictive legal basis for its military presence, based on so-called interstate agreements it signed with its proxies.

But until the 2008 war, the United States and European Union treated Russia like an arbiter in these conflicts, long after it was clear it was in fact a party to them. Twice a year, for example, Western powers approved extensions to the U.N. monitoring mission in the Abkhazia conflict that included overt praise for a Russian "peacekeeping" force that in fact was part of Moscow's effort to shore up Abkhazia's separation from Georgia. Even today, only rarely do Western powers refer to these lands as what they are: occupied territories.

Moscow's tactic proved so successful in undermining the statehood of Georgia and Moldova that the Kremlin decided to use the same tactic in eastern Ukraine. And it worked: Contrast the international reaction to any of these conflicts with Moscow's invasion of Crimea. Unlike these other cases, Moscow annexed Crimea outright, thereby accepting responsibility for its actions. This led to serious sanctions that remain in force to this day. But where Moscow hid behind the fiction of a "Donetsk People's Republic," which it created from thin air, it has largely escaped those consequences.

Similarly, Armenia not only occupied a sixth of Azerbaijan's territory in the war in the early 1990s but evicted 700,000 occupants of these lands. But Armenia is subject to no sanctions whatsoever, mainly because Yerevan hides behind the fiction that it is not really a party to the conflict at all but that the "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" is. Never mind that Nagorno-Karabakh's two most prominent leaders went on to serve as Armenia's presidents for 20 years and that other senior officials rotate seamlessly between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The entity's most recent foreign minister was an Armenian diplomat for several decades, and on completion of his term in Nagorno-Karabakh, he returned to the Foreign Ministry in Yerevan. Likewise, Armenia's deputy chief of the general staff was immediately appointed to serve as the defense minister of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2015. As in Russia's case, the fiction of a proxy regime seems enough to achieve impunity. Even a considerable Armenian effort to build settlements in the occupied territories has led to a yawn in the international community.

Still, the United States has entertained the notion that Nagorno-Karabakh is somehow separate from Armenia. The U.S. Justice Department record of foreign agents in the United States lists "Nagorno Karabakh" and allows the so-called "Nagorno Karabakh Republic" to present itself as a foreign government and not listed under the Armenia filing. Several members of the U.S. Congress host meetings with the proxy representatives, often visit the region and hold direct meetings with Armenians from the occupied territory, and some even refer to Nagorno-Karabakh as a state. Few, if any, Western leaders point out the exchange of personnel between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, let alone impose any consequences for it.

Through establishing proxies, occupying states succeed to not be labeled as such. U.S. officials rarely mention Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh or Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and Transnistria the way they refer to Russia's occupation of Crimea or Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights. U.S. government-funded media broadcasts like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty use awkward wording to avoid saying directly that Armenia's forces occupy Nagorno-Karabakh: The "region has been under the control of ethnic-Armenian forces that Azerbaijan says include troops supplied by Armenia" and "Armenia-backed separatist forces," ignoring the fact that they are official units of the military of Armenia and that Armenia's press regularly reports that Armenian soldiers are killed in skirmishes in the conflict zone. The U.S. government-sponsored broadcasts also avert stating that Moscow occupies regions of Ukraine and Georgia, preferring "Moscow-backed separatists in Ukraine's eastern regions of Donetsk" and "Moscow-backed breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia."

Why this double standard? Maybe because the United States, EU, and the international system writ large are happy to have an easy way out. If accepting the fiction of a proxy helps reduce the load on their policy agenda, they appear happy to do so. The U.S. State Department does not challenge these fictions. It is a convenient non-truth that removes the issues from the State Department's policy agenda. In Europe, however, the European Court of Human Rights has established that Russia exerts "effective control" in Transnistria and that Armenia does so in Nagorno-Karabakh. The EU has yet to allow these determinations to guide its policies, but at least, key institutions have begun to question the fiction of the proxy regimes.

Why do proxies matter? Are they not just one of the many inequities in international politics that, while regrettable, are just a fact of life? There are two key reasons the United States should pay more attention to this problem. First, the fiction of proxies has directly caused greater instability in areas important to U.S. national interests. And second, they effectively serve to make conflict resolution impossible.