Responding to Proxy Violence in International Crises[1][2]

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Introduction

The use of proxy actors in competition and conflict between states is as old as the Westphalian system itself. Yet despite the relative robustness of the literature on this subject overall, a gap remains in attempting to empirically understand the relationship between proxy use and outcomes in interstate crises. The analysis presented in this paper is the first step in a planned series of examinations into this topic, as part of a broader exploration of escalation management in crisis and conflict below the threshold of war.[3] The goal of the overall project is to better understand the dynamics of how states choose and execute strategies for achieving their goals in the so called "gray zone" between normal competition and armed conflict, and to understand what types of strategies are more and less effective at managing escalation within that space.

Exploring the use of proxies by state actors is an important component of this larger research agenda, and the first question the authors asked was whether there was an underlying relationship between the employment of proxies and the incidence of violence during a crisis? The incidence of interstate war and direct conflict between conventional forces has declined steadily since the beginning of the nuclear age (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011). In its place, operations characterized as conflict in the "gray zone" between peace and war (Votel et al, 2016), "non-obvious war" (Libicki, 2012), or most recently, as conflict in the "competitive" space between cooperation and war (2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy; 2019 U.S. National Security Strategy) are increasingly used by major powers to gain strategic security advantages by enhancing the ambiguity of the operational setting.

To explore this question, the authors developed a new subset of the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) dataset, adding variables related to proxy use and outcomes, covering 364 international crises between 1963 and 2015, i.e., from the height of the Cold War to well into the current international system. Using this expanded ICB data, we examine the empirical evidence regarding the presumed cost/risk avoidance associated with using proxies.

What quickly became apparent as the analysis progressed was that limited data availability meant certain assumptions in the literature could not yet be tested. For example, a key subject of debate in the literature on proxy use is around the utility of proxies for limiting cost to the sponsor state. Data of sufficient quality to impute the intent of states that employ proxies for empirical purposes was deemed not to exist at the moment – and would be a monumental task to collect in a methodologically rigorous fashion. Thus, the authors decided against trying to test any hypotheses related directly to state sponsor intent. The logical adjacent question to this is whether the *potential* utility of proxies for consequence minimization can be addressed, regardless of sponsor intent. The authors are developing approaches to expanding the data further to allow such an analysis, however the task ultimately was deemed to exceed the scope of this first analysis. Nevertheless, throughout

this study, there are many clear calls to proceed onward and address this, and other further questions about proxy use.

Instead, the authors chose to focus initially on the more basic question of whether proxy use is connected to the level of violence experienced in crises. The logical connection of this question to the overall research agenda of understanding escalation management in crises is clear. To achieve this, the analysis focuses on *whether a defender in a crisis is more likely to respond with violence to a violent challenge or a non-violent challenge by a proxy; and whether a defender is more likely to respond with violence to a proxy challenge than to a state actor challenge*. The findings presented here suggest that *the prevalence of non-state proxies and their propensity to use violence means that employing proxies may be linked to a higher likelihood of violence early on in a crisis.* This suggests that much more needs to be understood about the relationship between proxy involvement and both escalation management as well as overall crisis outcomes.

1.1 Defining Proxies and Proxy Conflict

One of the key features of gray zone conflict is intentional ambiguity regarding either an aggressor's intent or identity. Although use of unattributed cyber-attack, "fake news", and economic and social media manipulation have lately brought gray zone tactics into popular consciousness, one particular tactic – use of proxy actors – dates at least to the Hundred Years War and the Barbary pirates. Mumford (2013) and Libicki (2012) define a proxy as the client in a patron-client relationship in which the patron provides material support (funding, arms, training) to the proxy for the purpose of supporting the patron's interests in a conflict with a third actor defender). That is, a requirement of proxy conflict is that there exists some conflict (one-sided or two) between the patron and defender prior to the point at which the Proxy is engaged (Klare, 1981). In addition, Dunér (1981) points out the difficulty of identifying a Proxy in practice rather than concept. Rather than intent as per Mumford (2012), he argues that the observable indicator of a proxy relationship is power; namely a presumptive proxy's dependence on material assistance and the resulting leverage a patron can have over its objectives and actions.

Identifying a proxy war, or crisis, while simple in concept, can be challenging in practice. Scholars have treated it in different ways though some common elements can be identified. Loveman (2002) and Mumford (2013) for example, argue that the principal can only be indirectly involved for the conflict to qualify as a proxy conflict. Salehyan (2010) and Pfaff (2017) indicate that some degree of direct involvement on the part of the principal can occur, as long as it is mixed with support and some degree of delegation to an agent and always with the intent to limit the principal's costs and risks. Salehyan (2010) distinguishes proxy warfare from direct warfare with the concept of delegation from a patron to a proxy actor. He also includes sequence as a defining factor: a conflict does not qualify as a proxy war if its roots and onset occur prior to the involvement of the patron, the patron exerts little or no direct control or influence over its client, and the client maintains its organizational autonomy. If so, Salehyan (2010: 501) classifies it as an intervention. To be classified as a proxy conflict, the patron must play a key role in influencing and exerting control over how the conflict plays out. Most importantly, proxy actors are dependent on foreign governments for their existence, or at the very least its conflict with its opponent is "made possible" by the military support of its patron. As a result, the patron has some degree of control over its client's goals, strategies, or tactics. In other words, in the case of delegation, the client lacks a considerable degree of autonomy, in comparison to an intervention.

In the research reported here, we follow the lead of Dunér (1981), Libicki (2012), and Mumford (2013), as discussed in the sections above, defining proxy conflict by these two characteristics. (1) A state actor acts as a patron toward a client, which can be a non-state militia, a violent non-state

actor (e.g., U.S.-Contras, Iran-Hezbollah), or another state (e.g., Russia-Syria under Assad, U.S.-South Vietnam, Iran-Houthis). The patron state can provide funding, training, support (including diplomatic), protection, etc. to the client for the purposes of the patron's own security and to lower the risks or costs that the patron would incur by taking direct action. We argue that military funding in and of itself can be taken as an indication of some degree of a patron's leverage over a proxy actor, on the presumption that this aid is seen as a good by the proxy and were it to take an action harmful to a patron's interests those funds could be revoked. (2) The patron state appears to have some degree of control over the proxy's goals, strategies, or tactics, as evidenced by close consultation between patron and proxy in the near term prior to the triggering event of the crisis. In other words, the patron is not simply sending material or informational support to a client that is acting in a purely autonomous manner (Quinn and Wilkenfeld 2020). Patronage can often be difficult to prove because, in order to avoid direct retaliation, patron states frequently deny responsibility for a proxy's actions. Ideally, identification of a proxy relationship requires data regarding the extent to which a presumed proxy is actually working at the behest of, or with the direct support of a patron *in a way that it would not or could not do otherwise*. Here we used historical understandings of the patron-client relationship and the perceptions of the defender to determine if there was a proxy relationship.

Proxies may have similar, but typically not identical interests to the patron, and especially as conflicts are prolonged or situations change, these may prove difficult for the patron to control. This is because in a conflict environment involving proxies, the principal actor must take into account the relationship between its own objectives and those of the proxy actor, or actors (Fox, 2019). Indeed, the entry of proxies into a crisis complicates the state actor decision-maker calculus on escalation/de-escalation, and therefore accentuates the danger to the international system that such situations pose.[4]

Much of the literature discussing proxy use during the Cold War focuses on state proxies engaged by the U.S. and the USSR. The more recent studies of proxies in conflicts consider a wider range of proxies including non-state actors such as corporations, private contractors, militant/insurgent groups, terrorist and criminal organizations (see, e.g., Innes, 2012; Ezrow, 2017). In this study, we include under the term proxy non-state militias, violent non-state actors (VSNAs), or another state. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases recorded by the ICB over the last 25 years, proxy actors have been non-state actors, rather than state proxies.

1.2 Why use Proxies

There are two main, non-mutually exclusive reasons why a patron state might employ proxy actors: 1) to advance its strategic interest while avoiding the costs of direct action against an adversary; 2) as a supplementary force in an ongoing conflict (Thies, 2001; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 2011). However, most academic literature on this subject presumes the cost savings rationale by which a patron seeks to lower the risks or costs – for example, in terms of public opinion, financial commitments, loss of life, and importantly, the risk of conflict escalation — compared to what it would incur by taking direct action (Bryman, 2018; Mumford, 2013; Duner, 1981; Klare 1989).[5] Klare (1989) argues that in the years following WWII much of United States foreign and security policy was based on establishing formal alliances as a means to counter Soviet expansion. Once these were established, and U.S. decision makers became obsessed with Soviet

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[4] In a related paper, Wilkenfeld and Quinn (2019) discuss some of the difficulties that the involvement of proxies poses when mediation is attempted. Usually unhindered by international norms, and focused more-narrowly than state actors on a small number of specific and zero-sum interests, their presence in the mix of actors involved in a crisis can create serious difficulties for state adversaries, as well as for negotiators and mediators.

[5] Mumford (2013) provides a particularly good explanation of this thinking.

influence in the Third World, they shifted to leveraging informal and covert alliance relationships, i.e., proxies. Similarly, Luttwak (1995) attributes the "culture of restraint" in the modern concept of warfare – where use of proxies to avoid costs is a prime example – to the Cold War era, during which the U.S. and USSR suppressed direct warfare within their own spheres. When conflict did occur in areas like East Asia and the Middle East, the patron states were careful to keep it limited for fear of unintended escalation to nuclear warfare. In fact, use of proxies was an important and pricey aspect of U.S. military "train and equip" programs in the War on Terror (e.g., in Bosnia, Georgia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq).

Rather than *why* a proxy might be used, Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) address the question of *when* a patron might employ a Proxy rather than take direct action. They postulate that proxy use is more likely when the threat to the state's key national interests is not critical. On the other hand, states will be less likely to enlist a Proxy actor when national security or other vital interests are at stake. In short, the state's choice to use a non-state proxy actor will depend on the relationship between the costs associated with the direct action, and its ability to control the proxy.

While limited empirical data makes addressing many of these important theoretical questions difficult, we view the present study as a brush-clearing endeavor, where we will identify the empirical basis for the use of violence in proxy crises, as the basis for more extended research to follow.

1.3 Escalation and Proxy Violence

Much of the policy logic behind challenger states using proxies seems to emphasize the (side) benefits of maintaining the strategic ambiguity they provide as a way to limit crisis escalation. However, a growing body of research shows this ambiguity to be overestimated, and suggests that the use of proxies is likely to increase, rather than reduce, the risk of crisis escalation (see, e.g., Pfaff and Granfield, 2018; Moghadam and Wyss, 2018). Schultz (2010) empirically demonstrates that use of proxies increases conflict lethality, and calls plausible deniability a myth. Mumford (2013) shows that state expectations that proxies will help them minimize the human, financial, and audience costs of going to war are rarely if ever met. This mismatch of expectations and reality has largely to do with the different range of tools available to the non-state actors (that are being used as proxies), as well as the differences in their stakes calculus, and the relative lack of normative constraints.

For instance, Byman, Waxman, and Larson (1999) discuss the impact of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) on conflict escalation. They argue that non-state actors are more prone to escalate a conflict horizontally, i.e. to swiftly expand the range and scope of targets under attack, particularly using violence against civilian targets, and also to increase the number of stakeholders involved in the conflict. VNSAs apply this tactic because the range of vertical escalation or de-escalation tools available to them is very small, compared to state actors – very few non-state actors possess diplomatic or economic levers, and sticking to a single domain of targets - particularly military - would hopelessly disadvantage them. Similarly, Gross (2009) notes that states enjoy such a disproportionate military advantage against non-state actors, that violently attacking soft targets is almost all that a non-state actor could do, once a decision to engage has been made.

In terms of conflict stakes, Pfaff and Granfield (2018) consider them to be so high for a proxy that escalation to violence is the most likely reaction. In proxy-triggered crises the very survival of the organization or its leadership is often at stake, and any loss of territory or assets tends to have audience costs that are much more direct and dramatic, compared to those faced by the state actors involved. Thus, these authors argue that proxies swiftly escalating a crisis to violence should be

treated as the number one risk to weigh at the outset, rather than viewing it as one of the possible eventualities.

In terms of normative constraints, it has been shown that political participation is one of the most reliable ways to reduce VNSA's propensity to violence (see, e.g., Asal, Rethemeyer, and Young, 2016). However, it is not until an organization reaches a certain scale and maturity – including the ability to develop a viable political branch – that the range of tools available expands and the normative constraints and/or audience costs become sufficient to dissuade it from opting for violence as a primary tool.

In drawing heavily on the literature of general VNSA conflict behavior, our assumption is that having a patron state, which can offer financial and/or political support, would embolden them. The ICB data also supports this notion: of the 83 proxy-initiated crises from 1963 to 2015, violence was used to initiate the crisis in 72 cases or 87% (see Table 1 below).
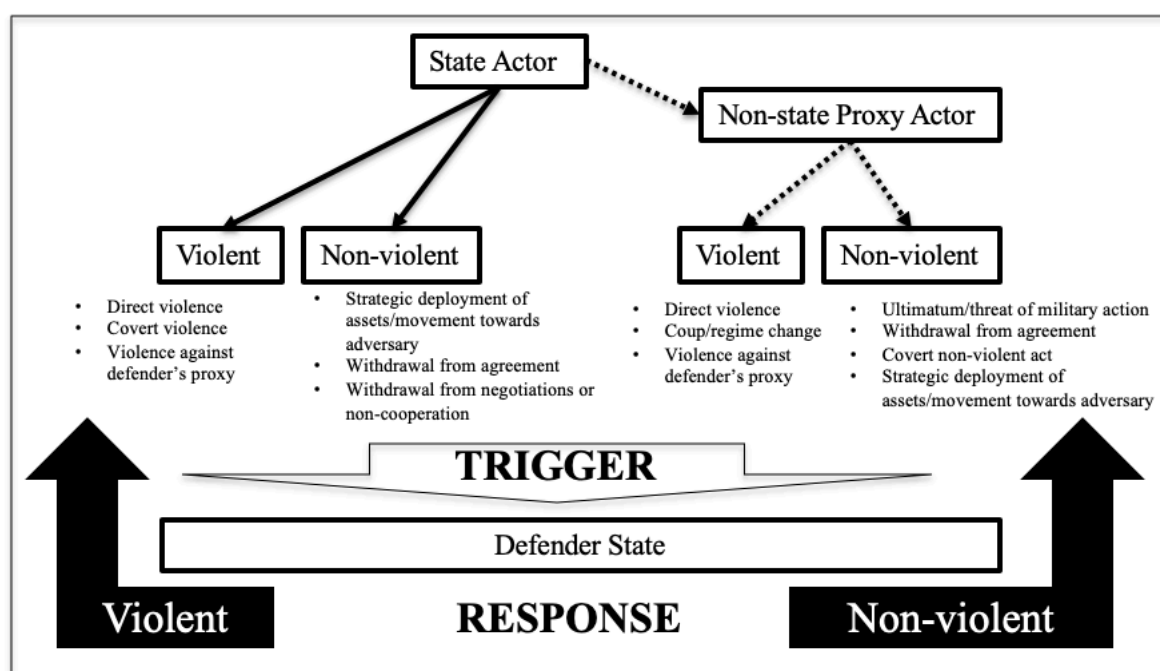

2.1 Research Design
As stated in the introduction, some more detailed and granular questions about the outcomes of proxy use – such as whether the targets of defender violence during the crisis are more likely to be just the proxy or also the state patron– require additional data collection, for which the authors are currently developing strategies. This analysis focuses exclusively on the opening moves in a crisis: the triggering act by a proxy, and the defender's response to that act - violent or non-violent.[6]

Figure 1 below offers a schematic summary of the opening crisis events we analyze. Namely, one state – the challenger – has decided to take action against another state – the defender - and engages a proxy (in most cases it is a non-state actor) to undertake that action instead of attacking the defender directly. The proxy can trigger this crisis for the defender by using either violent or non-violent means, examples of which are listed in Figure 1. The defender can then respond with violent or non-violent means. As previously noted, the violent and non-violent means available to the defender are more varied than those available to the proxy. In addition, the range of targets for defender action could be either the proxy or the challenger state, or both.

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[6] Coding is currently underway to identify the specific tools utilized by the challenger and defender in the course of their initial crisis interactions. This more nuanced information will allow us to match specific triggering acts with the types of responses chosen by defenders under varying circumstances, including gray zone versus non-gray zone contexts.

Figure 1: Attack and Response Model

2.2 Data

As noted above, the present study covers ICB crises that occurred between 1963 and 2015, thus spanning the loose bipolar Cold War period up until 1990, and then the 25 years following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the ICB dataset a crisis is considered to have occurred when a state perceives three necessary and sufficient conditions: (1) a threat to basic values (security, sovereignty, territory, national political or economic interests, etc.); (2) a finite time to respond to that threat; and (3) an increase in the likelihood of military hostilities (Brecher and Wilkenfeld, 1997).[7] Furthermore, it is important to understand the distinction between a crisis for a particular state and an international crisis, which will have at least two state actors as adversaries, and at least one of those state actors is experiencing a crisis. An international crisis may occur in the context of an ongoing protracted conflict involving the same crisis actors, or it may be a stand-alone crisis that does not recur later. It may involve military hostilities or maneuvers, or it may occur completely within the realm of diplomatic or economic interaction.

ICB records 600 foreign policy crises from 1963-2015; however, the number of cases that we analyze in this paper is actually 364 because many crises have multiple parts and actors, and not all foreign policy crisis perceivers and crisis triggering entities are defenders and challengers, respectively, according to our definitions. A foreign policy perceiver is only a defender if the actor is triggered without having already triggered a foreign policy crisis for another actor within the international crisis as a whole, i.e., without having already been a challenger. The actor that triggers the defender's crisis is the challenger. Importantly, in the case of a trigger by proxy, the patron of the proxy is the challenger. Also, a defender can end up being a challenger later in the same

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[7] Crisis "perception" is at least partially a product of a conscious narrative effort, with political and legal implications. At the same time, an actor's narration about being in a state of crisis does not necessarily mean a mirroring sentiment by the actor's adversary. Moreover, it is not uncommon for both parties in a confrontation to describe themselves as being the victim, i.e. the defender. All of this necessitates considerable caution in chronological crisis process tracing.

international crisis, but only if it triggers a foreign policy crisis for another actor that has not already been a challenger. We do this in order to make a clear empirical distinction among crisis roles, to avoid obfuscation of the relationships between actors, and to deal with a large potential source of endogeneity in the trigger-response dynamic.

The vast majority of international crises are still triggered by direct, state-to-state action: nevertheless, almost one-quarter of international crises (23%) in the ICB dataset were triggered by a state or non-state actor acting as a proxy for another state.

It is also worth noting that while in a number of cases the use of proxies occurred further down the crisis timeline, this paper is concerned only with the initial stages of a crisis - the triggering event and the defender's response to it. While we recognize that many critical events and actions occur subsequent to these early events, triggering events set the initial conditions for how a crisis may evolve, and can impact whether it will escalate. The opening moves are considered the tone setters, rich in signals, including those about potential red lines. There is also some indication (e.g. Wrights, 2017) that the early stages of a crisis are the most volatile and prone to escalation because in many cases, particularly in non-protracted conflicts, the crisis actors do not yet have clear understandings of how their actions will be perceived by the other party. ICB terms the two opening moves of an actor's foreign policy crisis as the "triggering act" of the crisis; and the "major response" to that triggering act conducted by the actor perceiving the foreign policy crisis. We refer to these two acts as the challenge act, and the defense act, respectively. Defense acts are conducted by the defender (i.e., the individual foreign policy perceiver) in response to the challenge act. Challenge acts can be conducted by the challenger, which is the direct state opponent of the defender; a proxy of the challenger; or in rare cases, another party.

3.1 Violence at the Start of Crises

Before turning to the analysis of empirical data on challenger action and defender responses, it will be useful to get a sense of the extent to which violence is employed by actors triggering crises – referred to below as challengers. Table 1 provides some summary statistics for challenges of interest. Our sample is comprised of 364 crisis challenges from 1963-2015. First, we should note that while a common perception is that international crises begin with a violent act on the part of a state actor, in fact the data reveal that 23% of crises are triggered by proxies, these latter overwhelmingly non-state actors. Furthermore, while violence is prevalent in crisis triggers, a very large proportion of crises are triggered by non-violent acts – 43%. There is a marked difference in the prevalence of violent challenges depending on the actor issuing the challenge. A large majority (86.8%) of crises triggered by proxies are violent. In contrast, in crises triggered by challengers (i.e., state actors), violence (48.4%) is actually less common than non-violence (51.6%). Taken together, these patterns reinforce the contention that understanding the roles that proxies play in interstate conflict and crises are critical as we try to unpack the most effective ways in which states should respond to crisis triggers.

Table 1: Summary of Crisis Triggers by Type of Challenge and Type of Actor

	Count	Percent of Total	Percent of Proxy Triggers	Percent of Challenger Triggers
Type of Challenge				
Non-Violent	156	42.86%	---	---
Violent	208	57.14%	---	---
Source of Challenge				
Challenger (non-proxy)	281	77.20%	---	---
Proxy	83	22.80%	---	---
Type of Challenge by Source				
Non-Violent by Challenger	145	39.84%	---	51.60%
Non-Violent by Proxy	11	3.02%	13.25%	---
Violent by Challenger	136	37.36%	---	48.40%
Violent by Proxy	72	19.78%	86.75%	---
Total	364	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

The type of defender response also differs by the type of crisis trigger (see Table 2). In general, defenders employ a non-violent response (52.8%) slightly more often than a violent one (47.2%). Consistent with predictions from international relations theory, defenders tend to exhibit matching behavior in responding to crises. Non-violence is the most common response to a non-violent challenge (71.2%), and violence is the most common response to a violent challenge (61.1%).
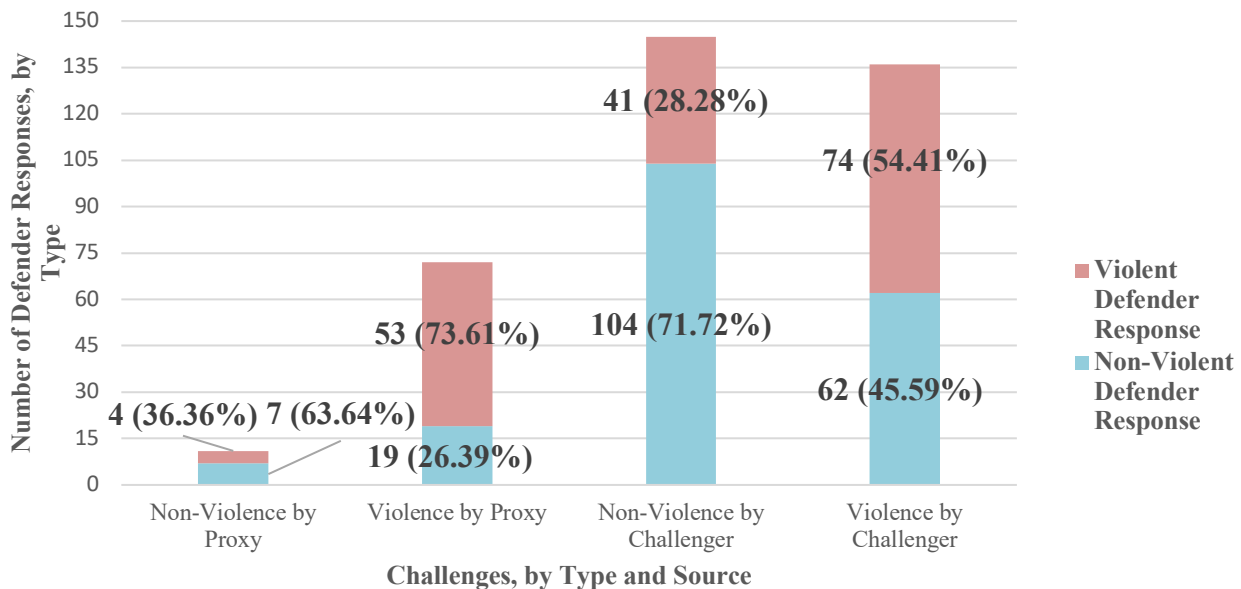
Table 2: Summary of Defender Responses – Overall and by Type of Challenge

	Count	Percent of Total	Percent of Non-Violent Challenges	Percent of Violent Challenges
Type of Response				
Non-Violent Response	192	52.75%	---	---
Violent Response	172	47.25%	---	---
Type of Response by Type of Challenge				
Non-Violent Response to Non-Violent Challenge	111	30.49%	71.15%	---
Non-Violent Response to Violent Challenge	81	22.25%	---	38.94%
Violent Response to Non-Violent Challenge	45	12.36%	28.85%	---
Violent Response to Violent Challenge	127	34.89%	---	61.06%
Total	364	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Nevertheless, the prevalence of defender matching behavior does vary depending on who is triggering the crisis. Figure 2 demonstrates that matching behavior is the most common defender response to both proxy and challenger triggers. However, defenders are more likely to respond in a violent manner to proxy-triggered crises than challenger-triggered crises. We see this in two ways. First, in response to non-violent triggers, defenders will engage in a non-matching, violent response more often when the non-violent trigger is an act by a proxy (36.3%) rather than a challenger

(28.3%). Second, while defenders will match violent proxy challenges 73.6% of the time, they match challenger violence at a lower rate (54.4%). In fact, almost half of violent challenger acts are met with non-matching, non-violent responses by defenders. These data seem to indicate greater defender hesitancy to respond violently to state actor challengers than their proxies (which are usually non-state actors).

Figure 2: Summary of Defender Responses by Type and Source of Challenge

4.1 Hypotheses

When a defender is triggered by a proxy and a crisis for the defender results, there are conflicting theoretical predictions about the scale of the defender's likely response. Here we briefly discuss these expectations, holding the use of violence constant, and comparing the scale of defender's response to being attacked by a proxy, as opposed to a direct attack by the proxy's patron state.

On the one hand, it could be contended that a lesser response ought to be sufficient. As an adversary, the proxy is less powerful (compared to both the defender and the patron state), so less power projection ought to be sufficient to prevail against such an adversary. In addition, the defender is not certain about the patron's level of control of, and commitment to, the proxy – so the defender ought to be looking to manage the initial crisis at minimal costs (military, economic, and political), without necessarily considering the signaling aspect involved in the longer-term perspectives of previous, and potential future, engagements with the patron state. Furthermore, a state has a moral high ground to lose if its response to a VNSA is considered disproportionate by the international and/or domestic public.

On the other hand, the nominal ambiguity surrounding who is behind the confrontation rarely seems to fool anyone in practice, as discussed in the literature review above, and the defender might instead be willing to take greater measures against the proxy in order to send a clear signal to the patron – in other words, escalating to deescalate.

Our first hypothesis tests whether, in fact, these propositions are likely to be reflected in the data on defender response:

H(A): Faced with a violent attack, Defenders are more likely to respond with violence when attacked by a proxy, rather than by a Challenger state.

Furthermore, the propositions discussed above also suggest that it might be in the defender's interest to respond with violence to a proxy challenge – even if that challenge is not violent. Thus, we also consider a broader hypothesis, looking at defender responses to proxies versus state actors in general:

H(B): Defenders are more likely to respond with violence when challenged by a proxy (in violent or non-violent manner), rather than by the challenger state.

5. Methodology

As already noted, for purposes of the analyses to follow, we need to assess the nature of the triggering act of the crisis, as well as the nature of the response to that triggering act. In order to test the hypotheses outlined above, we collected additional data on the initial actions of challengers and defenders in all international crises between 1963 and 2015. We created a five-category variable measuring the type of the challenge act:
   (1) Non-violent or indirect violent proxy-initiated triggering act
   (2) Non-violent or indirect violent challenger-initiated triggering act
   (3) Direct violent proxy-initiated triggering act
   (4) Direct violent challenger-initiated triggering act
   (5) Acts by neither proxies nor challengers (international organizations, non-proxy non-state actors, allies and other non-adversarial states)
The cases in category 5 were excluded from the analysis mainly because in a number of them, such as cases in which an actor is drawn into a crisis by virtue of a defense pact with another actor, there is no "challenge" in the sense of an adversarial state actor triggering a crisis for the defender.[8]
We also created a variable measuring the type of defense act. It largely mirrors the variable measuring the type of challenge act, with the addition of another category measuring cases of "no response" on the part of the defender, which is one possible response coded by ICB.

5.1 Dependent Variable

To test both hypotheses, we code a dichotomous indicator of whether or not a defender used violence in its major response to its crisis trigger (i.e., the challenge that it faced) as the dependent variable. Violence is defined to include both direct violence committed against the challenger by the defender and indirect violence committed by the defender against a proxy of the challenger or another adversarial, non-proxy state actor. To identify such cases, we use a combination of the variable measuring the defense act (discussed earlier) and a separate variable measuring violence used as part of the defense act. The latter is a four-point indicator that includes a category for no violence at the low end followed by three different violence intensity levels for cases where violence was used. Any case *not* coded "no violence" for this variable is considered violent, regardless of the intensity of said violence. Since we are only interested in cases where a defender itself uses violence, those in which the defender uses its proxy to conduct an attack were coded as non-violence for the dependent variable. Other cases coded non-violent are those in which the

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[8] Some of these excluded cases are adversarial, such as when an IO conducts an act perceived as adversarial by the defender, and the defender views a particular state participating in the act as a source of threat. We are working to extract that information from the coding notes and crisis summaries so that we can include such cases as challenges in future iterations of the analysis. This task remains to be completed.

defender used direct or indirect non-violent tactics; exclusively used its proxy to respond to the challenger regardless of form; or did not respond to the challenge at all ("no response").

5.2 Independent Variables

To assess Hypothesis A, we select only those cases where violence is used by a challenger or a proxy of a challenger in the crisis trigger. To identify such cases, we use a combination of the variable measuring the challenge act (discussed earlier) and a separate variable measuring violence used as part of the challenge act, which runs parallel to the one for defense acts described in the previous paragraph. Violence in the challenge act is defined to include both direct violence committed against the defender and indirect violence committed against a proxy of the defender or another adversarial, non-proxy state actor. This yields an *n* of 184 for this hypothesis test, after accounting for missing data on some indicators and eliminating cases that were not challenges or defense acts per our definition. To test Hypothesis A, we code a dichotomous indicator of the source of violence in the challenge act, with one category for non-proxy challenger states and one for proxies of challenger states. Proxies are either non-state or state actors.[9] In the small number of cases where proxies and challenger states both use violence in the triggering act, the case is coded as violence on the part of the challenger.[10]

To assess Hypothesis B, we select all cases where a challenger state or a proxy challenge/trigger a defender, regardless of the type of challenge that these actors issue. This yields an *n* of 322 for this hypothesis test, after accounting for missing data on some indicators and eliminating cases that were not challenges or defense acts per our definition. To test Hypothesis B, we code a dichotomous indicator of the source of the challenge act, with one category for non-proxy challenger states and one for proxies of challenger states. In the small number of cases where proxies and challenger act together in the triggering act, the case is almost always coded as an act issued by the challenger since in all of these cases except one, the challenger state was viewed as the more serious threat by the defender according to the ICB variable that measures the primary source of threat for the defender.[11]

5.3 Control Variables

We also control for a number of variables that are projected to have an influence on defender acts in response to challenges. First, we control for the regime of the defender by using POLITY2 scores from the 2017 version of the Polity project's Annual Time-Series dataset (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers, 2017). States with higher scores on the POLITY2 scale are more democratic, and those with lower scores are more autocratic. We rescaled the 21-point POLITY2 score to range from 1 to 21 (rather than its native -10 to +10). Democratic peace theory would predict that more democratic states are less likely to use violence against other democracies. However, research on the effect of defender regime in particular is sparse, and there is some evidence to contradict the base reading of democratic peace theory (see, e.g., Deck and Sheremeta 2012; Clark, and Conrad, 2007).

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[9] There are only six cases where a crisis was triggered by a violent act by a state proxy, and contingency tables indicated no relationship between type of proxy and defender violence. Defenders responded violently to all six cases triggered by state proxy violence but also responded violently to 70% of cases triggered by non-state proxy violence.

[10] There are two other special categories of cases. First, in a handful of cases, it was determined that proxies were acting independently of the challenger's wishes. The statistical results were the same regardless if we coded these cases as proxy challenges or challenger challenges, so we code them as proxy challenges in the final models. Second, there are two cases where non-proxy, non-state actors triggered a crisis for a defender. These cases were dropped from the analysis.

[11] The one exception was Taiwan Strait IV in 1995, where the proxy (Taiwan) was viewed by the defender (China) as a much bigger threat than the challenger state and patron of that proxy (U.S.).

We also control for the regime of the challenger state using the POLITY2 scale. In most cases, we code for the regime of the (non-proxy) challenger state.[12] This includes cases where the proxy of a challenger triggers the crisis and is acting under the direction of the challenger.[13] Democratic peace theory would predict that defenders are less likely to use violence against democratic challengers. However, in a previous study, we found evidence that challenger regime has a more complicated, curvilinear effect on defender responses (Murauskaite et al., 2019). For this reason, we also use an indicator of the challenger regime squared.

We also control for the degree of and direction of power disparity between the defender and challenger. We utilize data from version 5.0 of the Correlates of War project's National Material Capabilities (NMC) dataset (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey, 1972) to create a new index of power disparity between defender and challenger. We extended NMC data to 2015, using the NMC codebook and the sources identified therein to collect this data ourselves. For all six components of NMC, we subtracted the difference between the defender's values and the values of its challenger, and then we grouped those differences into quintiles. We then used an Itemized Response Theory (IRT) Graded model to create an index of power disparity between defenders and challengers.[14] Similar to challenger regime, in most cases, we code for the regime of the (non-proxy) challenger state.[15] This includes cases where the proxy of a challenger triggers the crisis and is acting under the direction of the challenger.[16] We expect stronger defenders to be more prone to use violence due to their greater capabilities to mount an attack.

One additional actor attribute variable is included in the statistical models, that being the gravity of threat perceived by the defender, a dichotomous measure drawn from the ICB dataset. The original ICB measure of gravity of threat is a seven-point indicator of perceived severity of threat. We recoded all cases where the perceived threat was unquestioningly very high—threat of grave damage or threat to existence—as one category and all other types of threats in the other category. High levels of perceived threat increase the stakes and as a result can lead defenders to respond more aggressively and escalate in countering those threats.

We also control for two attributes of the interaction between defenders and challengers, i.e., of the overall international crisis between the two sides. First, we control for whether or not the crisis is part of a protracted conflict, a dichotomous measure drawn from the ICB dataset.[17] Protracted conflicts are highly intractable and tend to be marked by a history of failed peace efforts. Using ICB data, Colaresi, Raisler, and Thompson (2007) and Brecher (1993, 2016) both find that (using 1918-1994 ICB data) crises in a protracted conflict are more violence-prone. Second, we control for whether or not a crisis is ethnicity driven, another dichotomous indicator drawn from the ICB

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[12] At present, our measure of challenger regime is imperfect, as we coded challenger regime data on the basis of the actor identified by ICB as the defender's main source of threat. In most cases, the challenger during the triggering act and the defender's main source of threat are one and the same. However, we are presently re-assessing those cases where the two actors differ to make sure that we are accurately capturing the identity of the challenger during the triggering act in the coding of challenger regime. This task remains to be completed.

[13] The only cases of proxy-issued challenges where we code for the regime of the proxy are the handful of cases in which we determined that the proxy was acting on its own.

[14] An IRT Graded Response Model is valuable because it is able to weight the component variables of an index according to which ones are most able to distinguish the observations from one another, and it is able to handle some missing data on components.

15 Similar to challenger regime, our measure of challenger power is imperfect, since we also coded challenger power data on the basis of the actor identified by ICB as the defender's main source of threat. We are presently re-evaluating cases where the defender's main source of threat differs from the challenger during the triggering act.

[16] The only cases of proxy-issued challenges where we code for the power capabilities of the proxy are the handful of cases in which we determined that the proxy was acting on its own.

[17] ICB distinguishes between two types of protracted conflict: those that are and are not part of long wars. These two kinds of cases were collapsed into a single category measuring protracted conflict.

dataset.[18] Crises in which identity plays a dominant role tend to be characterized by higher stakes, less divisible issues, and higher levels of mistrust. Adversaries in both protracted and ethnic conflicts tend to have hardened, embedded, and negative views of one another's intentions. This should increase the probability of more hostile defender actions, disproportional reactions, and escalation.

Finally, we include a variable measuring the period in which the crisis occurs, using a trichotomous indicator of whether the crisis occurred during the 1963-1989, 1990-2001, or 2002-2015 periods. We do this to control for the possibility of differences in escalation patterns attributable to differences in power and security arrangements in the international system, from a time of distributed power under still-present albeit declining bipolarity (polycentrism, 1963-1989), to a time when the U.S. was the unparalleled superpower and enforcer of international security (unipolarity, 1990-2001), and finally to a time marked by the decline in U.S. hegemony and a less centralized international security apparatus (2002-2015).

5.4 Statistical Models

We use binary logistic regression models to assess our hypotheses about defender violence.

Given that international crises typically consist of multiple actors that are experiencing foreign policy crises, it is necessary to statistically account for the interrelatedness among actors and actions. We do so in two ways: (1) By defining crisis "roles" in a more strict manner, excluding from the analysis cases in which a defender turns around and triggers a crisis for its challenger (as outlined in the Research Design section above); and (2) By reporting clustered robust standard errors rather than regular standard errors, to account for any heteroskedasticity in the models. We cluster standard errors by the international crisis as defined by the ICB variable CRISNO. There are a total of 238 clusters in the data for the analysis of Hypothesis B, and 146 for the smaller sample of violent challenges only used to test Hypothesis A.

For ease of interpretation, the results are discussed by calculating the predicted probability of observing a particular value of the dependent variable, given a specific value or values of the independent variable(s) of concern. All other variables are held constant at their individual average effects. The -margins- command in Stata was used to generate the reported probabilities.

6. Results

H(A): Faced with a violent attack, Defenders are more likely to respond with violence when attacked by a proxy, rather than by the Challenger state.

We do not find support for Hypothesis A. The direction of the relationship is as expected, but the results are not statistically significant, though they are approaching significance at a liberal 90% level ($p = 0.14$). defenders are not more likely to respond with violence when experiencing a violent challenge by a proxy rather than a violent challenge by a state actor.

We then reduced the sample further to just those cases where the defender was attacked directly to see if the results were any different. Again, there are no findings to support the hypothesis in this reduced sample. Furthermore, the relationship between the source of the violent challenge (proxy

18 ICB distinguishes between ethnic crises driven by secessionism, irredentism, and other types of ethnic issues. We collapse all three of these categories together into a single category measuring ethnic driven conflict.

vs. challenger) and violent defender response is far from the range of statistical significance in this reduced sample focused on direct violent challenges.

In fact, neither of the two statistical models used to test this hypothesis exhibited significant goodness-of-fit. The model of all violent challenges (indirect and direct combined) is close to approaching significance at a liberal 90% level ($p = 0.11$) but was still not in the realm of respectability. This tells us one of two things: 1) there is some other factor or factors not included in the model that explain differential defender responses to violent challenges, or 2) The pull to reciprocate violence is so strong for defenders that other factors that encourage defender violence have little effect.

H(B): Defenders are more likely to respond with violence when challenged by a proxy (in violent or non-violent manner), rather than by the challenger state.

We find some support for this hypothesis. Without controlling for violence in challenges, the likelihood of a violent defender response is 0.29 greater when the challenge is issued by a proxy (0.71 likelihood) rather than a non-proxy challenger (0.42 likelihood).

However, there is a notable caveat. Recall from Table 1 earlier that almost 90% of proxy challenges are violent, and there are only eleven cases in which a proxy issued a non-violent challenge in the sample. In some ways, then, proxy challenges can be seen as a quasi-subset of all violent challenges, and it becomes difficult to disentangle the effect of violence from the effect of proxy on defender responses.

Knowing that proxy has no effect on the propensity for defenders to reciprocate in response to violent challenges (see the results for H(A)), we ran another model to see if proxy has an effect on violent defender responses to *non-violent* challenges. As we expected, there is no effect. Similar to its effect in violent cases, the coefficient for proxy indicates that proxy non-violence has a greater tendency to provoke defender violence than challenger non-violence, but this relationship is also only approaching statistical significance at a liberal 90% level (p = 0.11).

Thus, we suspect that the observed positive effect of proxy challenges in all cases (violent and non-violent combined) is mimicking the effect of violence to some degree, due to the fact that almost 90% of proxy challenges are violent. In other words, violence in the challenge, not the source of the challenge (proxy vs. challenger), seems to be driving defender violence.[19]
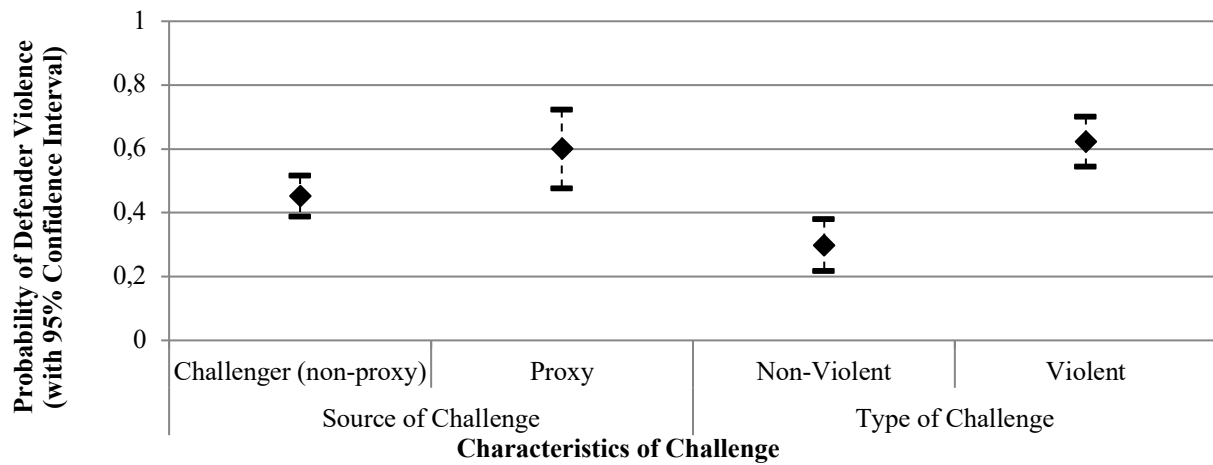
To test this in a more direct way, we conducted a final iteration of the analysis in which we assessed the effects of both challenge violence and proxy challenge on defender violence in the same model. We had initial concerns about collinearity in the model due to the inclusion of independent measures of both of these factors, since such a large majority of proxy challenge cases are violent. However, variable inflation factor diagnostics revealed surprisingly low levels of collinearity between the two measures, with VIF values slightly above one and tolerances in the 0.8 range. Hence, we feel confident employing the model.

Violence in the challenge indeed sits in the driver's seat in terms of its effect on defender violence, besting the effect of proxy challenge by more than 2-to-1 and far outstripping the effect of any other factor, for that matter. But Figure 3 indicates that proxy challenge still exhibits a mild effect on defender violence, even when controlling for challenger violence. Challenges issued by proxies

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[19] We also ran a model using a variable measuring both dimensions of challenges simultaneously, leading to four categories: 1.) Non-violent challenges by challengers; 2.) Non-violent challenges by proxies; 3.) Violent challenges by challengers; and 4.) Violent challenges by proxies. Once again, the results show that the source of the challenge—proxy vs. challenger—does not have a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of a violent defender response.

have a 0.15 greater likelihood of being countered with defender violence than challenges issued by (non-proxy) challengers (0.60 vs. 0.45 likelihood).

Figure 3: Defender Violent Response by Source of Challenge (Challenger (Non-Proxy) vs. Proxy) and Type of Challenge (Non-Violent vs. Violent)

We also tested the utility of adding the measure of proxy challenge to a model that already has the measure of type of challenge. This allows us to assess the degree to which proxy challenge does or does not add value to our understanding of what causes defender violence above and beyond what violence in the challenge contributes to that understanding. We compared the goodness of fit of the model with proxy challenge included to a model with proxy challenge excluded. When proxy challenge is included in the model, most goodness of fit measures (Wald Chi-Square, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), etc.) indicate a slight increase in explanatory value. However, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) value points to slight favorability of the model *without* proxy challenge. BIC penalizes the model to a greater degree for each additional indicator, but it also is good to consider when there is a potential "false positive," an issue of concern for the measure of proxy challenge. The differences in goodness of fit between the models are small, which speaks to the small (at best) additional value that proxy challenge provides for our understanding about why defenders use violence.

In sum, the relationship between challenges and defender violence is driven by the existence of violence in the challenge rather than by the source of the challenge (challenger or proxy). In addition, a substantial portion of the observed effect of proxy challenge on defender violence appears to be a function of the fact that a large proportion of proxy challenges are violent, a difficult cluster to untangle. At best, challenges issued by proxies have a very mild precipitating effect on defender violence on their own.

Some control variables also have an effect on violent defender responses. Namely, ethnicity has the strongest and most consistent effect on defender violence. As expected, defenders are more likely to respond with violence in ethnicity-driven crises than non-ethnicity driven crises. This is true for the full sample, and the effect is approaching statistical significance in the sub-sample of violent challenges.

The regime of the challenger also affects defender responses. The relationship takes on an inverted-U shape: defenders are more likely to use violence against challengers with a mix of authoritarian and democratic characteristics (i.e. are anocratic) than against challengers that are either highly democratic or highly autocratic. This finding is consistent with Murauskaite et al. (2019), where defenders were also more likely to escalate against anocratic challengers than highly authoritarian

or democratic ones. This effect of challenger regime does not hold in the sub-sample of violent cases only.

There is also some evidence approaching statistical significance that defenders are more likely to respond with violence when they are significantly more powerful than their challengers. The nature of this relationship is logical on its face, but the evidence only appears in the full sample and disappears in the sub-sample of violent cases only.

Finally, we find evidence approaching statistical significance that defenders were more likely to respond with violence during the period of definitive unipolarity/U.S. hegemony (1990-2001) than during the polycentric Cold War period (1963-1989) that preceded it or the looser unipolarity period that followed it (2002-2015). We offer two possible explanations here: (1) The explosion of ethnic conflict in immediate post-Cold War period, and (2) Unipolar power (U.S.) has less policing ability because it has to do most of this itself; distributed power structures are more peaceful because of a more distributed policing mechanism.

Conclusions

At the outset of this paper we have noted the trend of direct interstate war increasingly being replaced with gray zone conflict – with the use of proxies still seen by many state decision-makers as a way to minimize the potential risks and costs associated with a crisis. Against this backdrop, we have explored empirically the impact of proxy involvement and the incidence of violence during international crises. Our analysis is based on 364 ICB cases over the period of 1963 and 2015, with additional variables developed for this project on proxy use and crisis outcomes. We have focused exclusively on the opening moves of a crisis, rather than its entire development, recognizing the importance of the early signaling for the overall ability of the parties involved to subsequently manage escalation. Our in-depth analysis of the defender responses – rather than the traditional approach of focusing on the attack – offers new insights for Western democracies often faced with adversarial proxies in crises. Our analysis has produced the following key findings, paving the way for future research.

The most significant finding of this study is that the use of proxies is likely to increase the probability of violence in a crisis. Our analysis has shown that the main factor determining whether the defender will use violence is the use of violence in the crisis triggering act. In other words, a state is most likely to respond with violence when it was attacked with violence – and the incidence of violent responses to direct state challengers and proxies is similar. However, the data has also shown that when triggering a crisis proxies are much more likely to use violence – compared to their sponsor state challengers. In addition, the data indicates that the vast majority of proxies are non-state actors. Their propensity to trigger crises with violence can thus be explain through limited means and lack of constraints. Thus, because the decision to use a proxy largely means employing a violent non-state actor, and because the defenders are more likely to respond to violence with violence, the decision to use a proxy virtually guarantees that the crisis will turn violent from the outset.

This means that, contrary to popular belief, by employing a proxy the patron state decision-makers are limiting their options to manage escalation, and the extent of cost saving or risk avoidance this allows is highly debatable. The historical data analyzed here implies that the proxy's use of violence is highly likely regardless of the patron's intent - although our study did not explore the degree of the patron's control over the proxy, it is apparently more limited than assumed by the patron state.

We have also considered some of the other key crisis attributes in an attempt to explain the most common types of tools employed by defenders. We found that violent responses were more likely in ethnicity-driven crises – regardless of whether the crisis was triggered by a violent or non-violent act. In addition, we have also found some significance in the regime type of the parties involved - defenders were more likely to use violence against anocratic challengers.

Given our finding that the use of proxies means that the crisis will likely turn violent early on, decision-makers will still have to weigh the associated costs and risks against those of a possible direct state-level action, and determine whether it is worthwhile. Namely, attempting to weigh e.g., funding and training a terrorist organization to launch rockets against your adversary's city against those associated with hacking and disabling their power grid involve risks and costs of different types. Still, in order to give a more definitive conclusion on whether proxies can effectively be used as a cost-reduction strategy, additional research is needed to parse the targets of defender violence – i.e. is it more likely to be directed mostly at the proxy, mostly at the sponsor, or at both? This question forms the basis of our ongoing research.

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