

Proxy Warfare: The Strategy that Lets Small Powers Challenge Superpowers

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Introduction

The modern Indo-Pacific has become the centre of geopolitics in the twenty-first century, where there is a basic change of the solid hub-and-spoke relations of the Cold War to the fragmented and polycentric world. Although this is a classic story of security where the region was viewed in the past as a competition between the United States and China, it has of late been modified to high stakes, with the smaller states ceasing to be seen as mere chess pieces, but as strategies, clear economists.

Power is no longer established through traditional military power but continuously through the power over the strategic resources, production chains, and economic bottlenecks. Middle powers have adapted to such an environment by the simple changes of partnership to flexible

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coalitions and variable geometry partnerships instead of hard and fast alliances.² This repositioning allows them to leverage their independence and leverage to the utmost, and they should not be pressured to take sides in the escalating rivalry between the United States and China. With this emerging multipolarity and contestation in international governance, decisions made by these rising middle powers become more and more decisive towards world affairs; they are becoming the stabilizers or destabilizers of the new international order.

This change is characterized by the advanced use of proxy warfare, namely, the professionalisation of maritime militias to the introduction of algorithmic warfare, which enabled the allowance of secondary powers to manipulate the great power conflicts to gain local autonomy and dictate the conditions of war.³ Its development can be seen as evidence of a world in which the influence of the superpowers is no longer growing, making the middle-level powers more active in their regions, making them choose not to be allied to one of the hegemonies. This is not just a shift in the process of distributing material abilities but a paradigm shift in the logic of intervention in which the weak traditionally use relational power and technological equalizers to tether the strong traditionally.⁴ The traditional order of proxy warfare is being challenged by the methods of the small and middle powers using the strategic agency to control competition between Washington and Beijing, employing maritime gray-zone operations and a technology force multiplier to master regional autonomy and prevent superpower encroachment.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical concepts of the contemporary conflict within the Indo-Pacific demand a stiff break from the reductionist theories of the twentieth century. The traditional Principal-Agent theory, which assumes that a high-ranking principal, through option B delegation to a low-ranking agent, is involved in the management of risk and cost reduction, is becoming inadequate in explaining the mosaic of the modern interventions.⁵ Agency slack and slippage in the present day context has often marred the relationship between a sponsor and its proxy where an agent applies agency strategies or domestic strategies which are not in line with the

² Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (2013): 40–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733>.

³ Stephen Watts et al., *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Military Implications*, March 13, 2023, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/trecms/AD1195547/>.

⁴ Tahir Mahmood Azad et al., "UNDERSTANDING GRAY ZONE WARFARE FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES," *World Affairs* 186, no. 1 (2023): 81–104, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200221141101>.

⁵ Abbas Farasoo, "Rethinking Proxy War Theory in IR: A Critical Analysis of Principal–Agent Theory," *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2021): 1835–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab050>.

intent of the principal. The adverse selection also makes it more difficult to form such contracts because before principals make the commitment to acquire resources, they in most cases have insufficient information about the trustworthiness or long term intentions of their agents. This conflict of interest forms what researchers refer to as the Frankenstein problem that is a danger that a government may produce a being that can eventually get out of control thus awakening unforeseen eruptions, or even working against the provider.

A more refined viewpoint, according to Strategic Position Analysis is the fact that the systemic position of actors, which is a position of material capabilities, geography, and the main security issues, is the key determinant of the policy bundle of military, diplomatic, and proxy resources used by the actor in question.⁶ To states that happen to be placed close to the maritime chokepoints, their geographical location gives them an unfair advantage to lure superpowers into their local wrangles, and this opportunity is commonly referred to as the tail wagging the dog. In this situation, radical or startling behavior of a proxy will lead to colossal belief changes in the sponsor, compelling the superpower to draw increased involvement to secure its strategic image or address its regional needs. Besides, the emergence of Global Wealth Chains and Global Value Chains has resulted in asymmetrical geographies, wherein value production and wealth protection, the state and non-state actors can utilize numerous legal jurisdictions and shelter themselves against superpower pressure. This disintegration of the global economy allows minor and intermediate powers to engage in strategic diversification, ensuring that they have relationships with several competitors in order to have the greatest amount of autonomous room to act.

The Maritime Gray-Zone Operations

The most obvious indication of this theoretical change is the appearance of maritime gray-zone operations where the distinction between civil activity and government-directed coercion is no longer distinct, but a gray smear. This construction of its fishing fleet into the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), a state-operated force of civilian fishermen, organized under local commands of the People's Liberation Army and officially led by the Central Military Commission, is an example of such operationalization of its fishing fleet by China into a military force.⁷ The latter is carried out through the application of tactical ambiguity and

⁶ Kyle Atwell, "Irregular Warfare Podcast: Proxy Warfare, Theory and Practice - Modern War Institute," June 30, 2023, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/proxy-warfare-theory-and-practice/>.

⁷ Peter A. Dutton, "Conceptualizing China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations," in *Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Routledge, 2022).

lack of military insignia to ensure plausible deniability and, at the same time, execute salami slicing activities to change the status quo in disputed waters. The maritime militia escalates the degree of escalation against its rivals by exploiting a loophole in the law of naval warfare that conventionally shields coastal fishing ships on the assumption that they are part of an en masse.⁸

These operations in terms of scale and longevity have grown exponentially over the last few years. They are usually designed for coercive purposes, altered vessels, or constructed specifically to ram others with a reinforced hull, equipped with high-powered water cannons. Their functional business goal is specifically linked to intelligence and reconnaissance, to monitor the naval activity of the foreign vessels and communicate the information to cover the intelligence gaps in surveillance of the Chinese army.⁹ This relentless force is the reason why Beijing exudes sea power along interior lines, whereby the emphasis is on authority over disputable reefs without any political and material expenses of a direct military battle.

The Philippines has reacted to this coercion by avoiding the equidistant policies followed by the past administrators and through an external deterrence of a strong pro-American pivot and increased access to military bases. The core of this reaction is the Transparency Initiative, an action campaign of communication, which captures and reports coercive actions of China in the sea by using onboard cameras and media reports in documenting needless acts of China by hiding the vessel and water cannon usage. This aggressive openness will seek to induce reputational costs to China and, at the same time, enhance the domestic resolve and reinforce the international relations.¹⁰ By internationalizing the South China Sea dispute to the extent of internationalizing, the Philippines can exert relational power over combating the great powers to incorporate certain local security-related issues, such that the Philippines can utilize its alliance status with Washington as a shield against getting coerced in the sea, as well as safeguarding its territorial integrity within its exclusive economic zone.

The Unmanned Revolution and the Operation Spider Web

The use of the unmanned revolution on the military affairs has fundamentally changed the aspect of power and consequence and has broadly served as a technical leveling to the small

⁸ Valter Coralluzzo and Fabio De Nino, *Maritime Coercion and Gray Zone Conflicts* (Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, 2025), 117–39, https://doi.org/10.36250/01237_08.

⁹ Rizal Sukma, “Do Not Be a Proxy”: Indonesia, ASEAN and the Sino-US Rivalry - ProQuest,” 2024, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/519fe487d10037d14d4b165a1f9f6a82/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=26098>.

¹⁰ Ahmad Syarif, “The China–Iran Partnership and the Limits of Beijing’s Non-Interference Alliance Model,” accessed April 7, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/the-china-iran-partnership-and-the-limits-of-beijings-non-interference-alliance-model/>.

states. Small powers can attack strategic nerve centers with some degree of accuracy previously only limited to huge industrial bases through bottom-up innovation, where the dual-use technology and open-source software are used to re-purpose them. The spread of cheap, expendable loitering weapons and one-way drones eliminates the human aspect of the direct threat hence eradicating the political aspect of casualties in the military.¹¹ Since the price of the strategy of force deployment goes close to zero, the desire of the strategic entrepreneur to apply asymmetric weapons intensifies and turns conflict into an instrument of constant administration and not as an instrument of the last resort.

An example of this tendency is the fact that the Ukrainian deep-infiltration operation, Operation Spider Web, was a covert drone attack by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) on the territory of Russia.¹² This synchronized attack was against the aviation resources of the long-range Russian Air Force on 5 bases of Belaya, Dyagilevo, Ivanovo Severny, Olenya, and also Ukrainka from 117 drones that were loaded, transported in, and launched using trucks. It was another masterpiece of deception and surprise that was reportedly planned over a year and supervised personally by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.¹³ The Ukrainian agents sneak in modular launchers and explosive payloads into Russia by smuggling them through secret logistical networks, in purpose-built wooden containers with a view to making the drones look like normal cargo loads in the back of flatbed trucks. It was emphasized that the civilian objects and individuals are instrumentalized in the asymmetric warfare of modern times, as unsuspecting civilian truck drivers were hired to transport these drones within the country.

The drones that were used followed the Operation Spider Web, were Ukrainian-built Osa quadcopters with a payload capacity of a little bit above 3.2 kilograms of explosives.¹⁴ The technologies were based on off the shelf technology and open source software, as it utilized dead reckoning in the navigation, this way being resistant to jamming of satellite signals. The drone operators in Ukraine accessed the drones through the Russian civilian mobile telecommunications networks where digital communication and high-resolution video were performed using the SIM cards. Artificial intelligence was used with an important supporting

¹¹ Amos C. Fox, "Comparative Proxy Strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Comparative Strategy* 42, no. 5 (2023): 605–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2023.2236488>.

¹² Ari Sacher, "Operation Spider Web: A Drone Attack Reshaping Modern Warfare," USIEA, June 9, 2025, <https://www.usieducation.org/post/operation-spider-web>.

¹³ Atwell, "Irregular Warfare Podcast"; L. Holger and L. Mitchell, *Proxy Battlespaces: A New Perspective on Ukraine's Use of Special Operations Forces in Syria, Sudan, and Mali*, January 13, 2026, <https://interpopulum.org/proxy-battlespaces-a-new-perspective-on-ukraines-use-of-special-operations-forces-in-syria-sudan-and-mali/>.

¹⁴ Holger and Mitchell, *Proxy Battlespaces*.

role as it replaced the flight stability and the target recognition by means of signals loss; AI was trained on the movie bombers that were at the museum where it was trained to identify strategic position which was vulnerable like fuel tanks in the wings correctly. Ukraine alleged to have struck forty-one of the Russian military aircrafts such as Tu-160, Tu-95, and Tu-22M strategic bombers and A-50 airborne early warning and control aircrafts.¹⁵ This operation proved that Ukraine had the capability to conduct a multi-theater deep-strike operation way beyond its borders, and at only a small cost, which indicated the new era of warfare that was not dependent on the overwhelming traditional air power.

Regime Change and Asymmetric Response: Operation Epic Fury

The intensification of the situation in the Middle East came to a final solution on February 28, 2026, with the beginning of operation Epic Fury.¹⁶ Epic fury was a massive pre-emptive war orchestrated by the United States and Israel to destroy the security apparatuses of the Iranian regime and eliminate the existential threats like Midnight Hammer; however, the scale of the war was very big. The campaign was aimed at counterbalancing the production of the Iranian offensive missiles and the Iranian navy, as well as their nuclear infrastructure. The first wave consisted of attacks on the government buildings in Tehran, which were the presidential palace and ministries of intelligence and defense, where the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other leading political and operative officials were killed accordingly.

Iran retaliated with known operation Truth promise 4 with the launch of massive missile and drone attacks on targets in the region, such as the headquarters of the United Navy Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, as well as military bases in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁷ The Iranian regime has used its mosaic doctrine of defense in keeping its operations on track even after the enormous assumption of its traditional command structures. This, in the cyber domain, was to become an expanse of distributed proxy factions of the hacktivist personalities who proceeded to carry out retaliatory actions in the face of a failure in the home internet linkages.

¹⁵ Sacher, "Operation Spider Web."

¹⁶ The White House, "Operation Epic Fury: Decisive American Power to Crush Iran's Terror Regime," *The White House*, March 12, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/releases/2026/03/operation-epic-fury-decisive-american-power-to-crush-irans-terror-regime/>.

¹⁷ Can Kasapoglu, "Operation Epic Fury Situation Report | Battlefield Effects and Early Strategic Signals | Hudson Institute," March 16, 2026, <https://www.hudson.org/missile-defense/operation-epic-fury-situation-report-battlefield-effects-strategic-outcomes-can-kasapoglu>.

Strategic Agency of South-East Asian States

The actions of the great power rift through the eyes of the Indo-Pacific small powers, like Vietnam and Thailand, are represented through the diverse approaches of these two nations to the dynamics of the economic superpower relationship in the region. The Bamboo Diplomacy, which has greatly developed roots, a robust trunk, and flexible branches, defines the foreign policy of strategic independence and non-alignment as is the case with Vietnam.¹⁸ This principle orders the maneuverability of tactics, resistance to principles of sovereignty in regard to territorial integrity, and his multilateral network of relationships as a means of protecting sovereign interests. Hanoi has not entered into military alliances with other countries and has not hosted foreign military bases, but instead adopts a multidimensional policy in order to strike a balance between the United States, Russia, and China. As a good example of demonstrating its form of soft balancing, Vietnam enhanced its relations with the United States to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and, at the same time, signed numerous cooperation agreements with Beijing in the fields of supply chains and joint patrols at sea.¹⁹

Likewise, Thailand has also been autonomous due to the multi-vector diplomacy and economic flexibility. Through taking advantage of the Belt and Road Initiative of China and without necessarily engaging in subservient politics to Washington, Bangkok holds onto an expressly unchallenged neutrality strategy under the geostatistic limitations and the desire of the home agency. Thailand is still one of the key players in the region that operates with the help of military support and exercises with the United States, as it forms the basis of its comprehensive deterrence stance with roots deep in the economic corridors of China.²⁰ These states multiply their portfolios of partnerships through variable geometry coalition and minilateral platform to make sure that they never develop a crippling dependency among hegemonies. The increase in the significance of internal strength and exploitation of strategic diversification is an indication of this tendency because it tries to find a way through a divided global system in which a middle power can no longer be perceived as having a viable alternative to taking sides.

The CRINK Alignment and Stability Calculations

The new CRINK alliance, comprising China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, further intensifies the division of the Indo-Pacific, picking up the theaters of Europe and the regions because of

¹⁸ Sukma, "Do Not Be a Proxy."

¹⁹ Coralluzzo and De Ninno, *Maritime Coercion and Gray Zone Conflicts*.

²⁰ Dutton, "Conceptualizing China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations"; Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*, 2012, 1–100.

the active cooperation of military forces.²¹ This clustering is what can be termed the Axis of Upheaval, an informal coalition but a more integrated group of dictatorial forces that collaborate in a manner in which they are diminishing Western leverage. The Russia-North Korea alliance, which is based on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in 2024, has become the most operationally developed alliance, which includes the delivery of ballistic missiles, ammunition in the artillery, and thousands of North Korean soldiers to the Ukrainian front.²² Chinese assistance resources have, in their turn, enhanced the survivable nuclear capability of North Korea and its ability to develop military forces to form a force multiplier, putting a limit on the forbearance exercised by the United States and its allies in various theaters.

The process of energy cooperation, as well as the dual-use technology, has been a subject of economic cooperation between the CRINK countries, particularly after the West sanctioned Russia.²³ China has significantly risen in imports of Russian and Iranian oil, which serves as an important source of finance to its military activities, as well as ensuring itself of an energy supply. This convergence of two nuclear-armed states, which do not commit themselves to no-first-use policies, Russia and North Korea, and the active policy of China towards the increase of its forces, enhances the risks of escalation and, in fact, is the active sabotage of the world sanctions regimes.²⁴ The connection of these theaters implies that the Korean Peninsula is not a contingency any longer, that is included in a larger set of strategies of cross-theater deterrence that determines the calculations of Beijing on what it should think in case of a Taiwan crisis.

Way Forward: Future Stability in the Indo-Pacific

The status of Indo-Pacific stability will be based on the decision of these rising powers, whether to employ their expanding agency to pursue inclusive cooperation, or to base on competitive fragmentation. With the superpowers at a phase of plateau and an increase in the material capacity of the middle powers, it is time to enter into a period of continuous instability in the international system in which the old crisis management tools are not necessarily applicable on

²¹ Christopher Lee Blane Ben, "A CRINK in the Armor of Deterrence: The Axis of Upheaval in the Indo-Pacific," *Small Wars Journal* by Arizona State University, February 5, 2026, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2026/02/05/a-crink-in-the-armor-of-deterrence/>.

²² CSIS, "A New CRINK Axis of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea? | CSIS," 2025, <https://www.csis.org/special-initiatives/CRINK-Axis>.

²³ Brian Hart et al., *CRINK in 10 Charts*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crink-10-charts>.

²⁴ acwalina, "The CRINK: Inside the New Bloc Supporting Russia's War against Ukraine," *Atlantic Council*, October 23, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/russia-tomorrow/the-crink-inside-the-new-bloc-supporting-russias-war-against-ukraine/>.

this new international system.²⁵ The small and middle powers have found new advanced methods of dictating the terms to the mighty and have turned into a strategic entrepreneur, utilizing the innovative use of the proxy wars, the grey zone, and the multiplier of technological forces. The definition of a ceasefire and war has become indistinct depiction of a long-term low-intensity collision where actual sabotage and cyber subversion have become the standards set by statecraft.²⁶ The possibility of the international community being a big bump in a world where the weak have learned to ride tigers to escape the dangers of an out-and-out confrontation, is imminent without a unifying theory and doctrine about this environment that is dominated by proxies, which is likely to have a severe backlash in strategy-making and the subsequent long-lasting condition of global turmoil.

²⁵ Azad et al., “UNDERSTANDING GRAY ZONE WARFARE FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES”; Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict.”

²⁶ Michael Raska, *Strategic Competition and Future Conflicts in the Indo-Pacific Region*, n.d.