

Escalation Management in Gray Zone Crises: The Proxy Factor

Minerva Research Initiative

Strategic Multilayer Assessment Presentation

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1. Research Question

How does the use of proxies impact crisis escalation?

Defender perspective

No study of intent

Limited data – brush clearing effort

2. Defining Proxy Conflict

A state acts as a patron toward a client, which can be a non-state militia, a violent non-state actor or another state. For for patron's own security and to lower the risks or costs that the patron would incur by taking direct action, the patron provides:

- Funding
- Training
- Support (including diplomatic)
- Protection, etc.

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.

Patronage can often be difficult to prove because, in order to avoid direct retaliation, patron states frequently deny responsibility for a proxy's actions

3. Theory: Why Use Proxies

- 1) As a supplementary force in an ongoing conflict
- 2) To advance patron's strategic interest while expecting to avoiding the costs or risks of direct action against an adversary:
 - Public opinion
 - Financial commitments
 - Loss of life
 - Conflict escalation

Especially when the interests at stake are non-vital

4. Theory: Proxies and Escalation

Most proxies are violent non-state actors (VNSA)

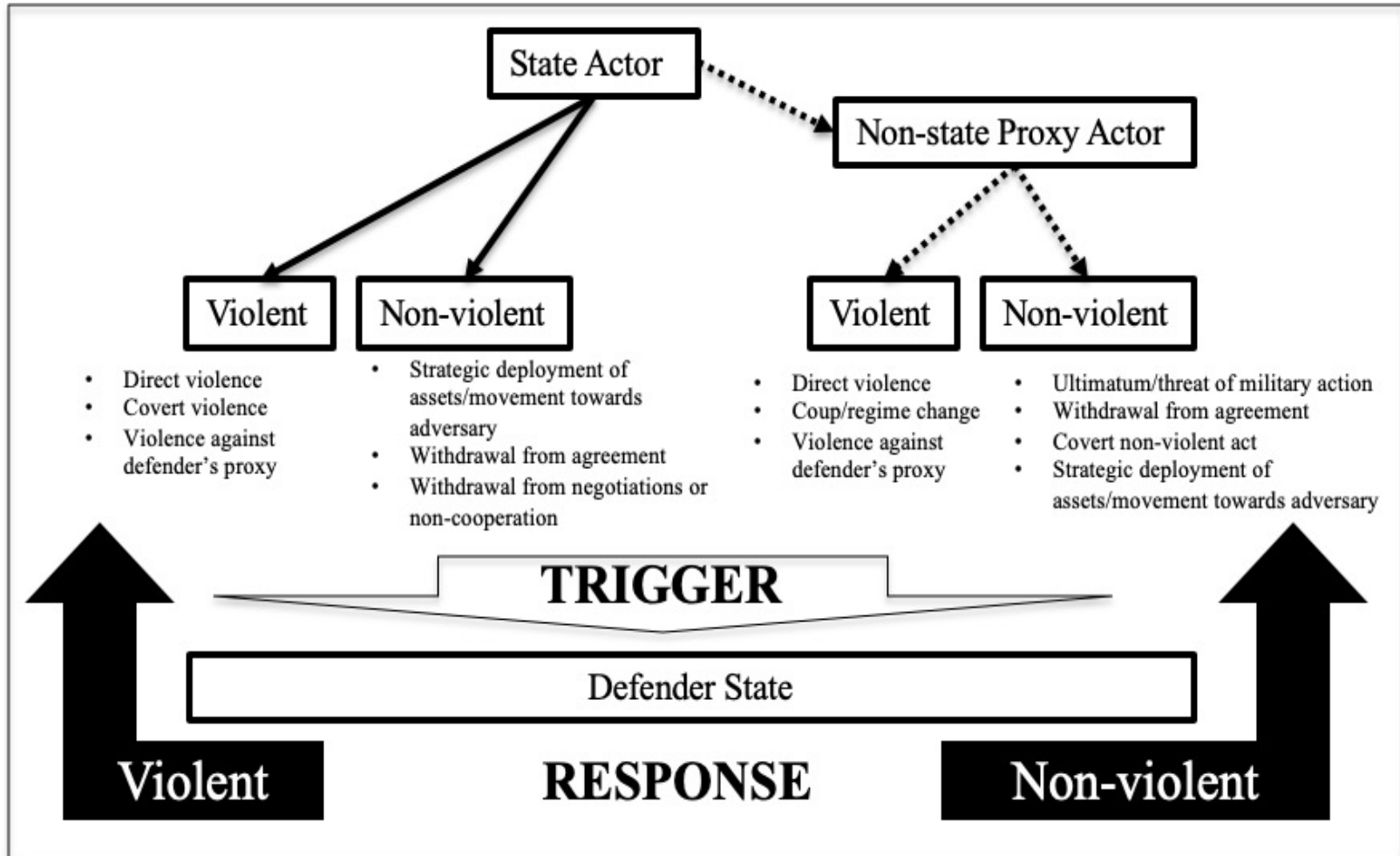
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- VNSA prone to horizontal escalation due to limited capabilities and power asymmetry
- VNSA survival at stake
- VNSA fewer normative constraints

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Use of proxies could exacerbate escalation risks

5. Research Design



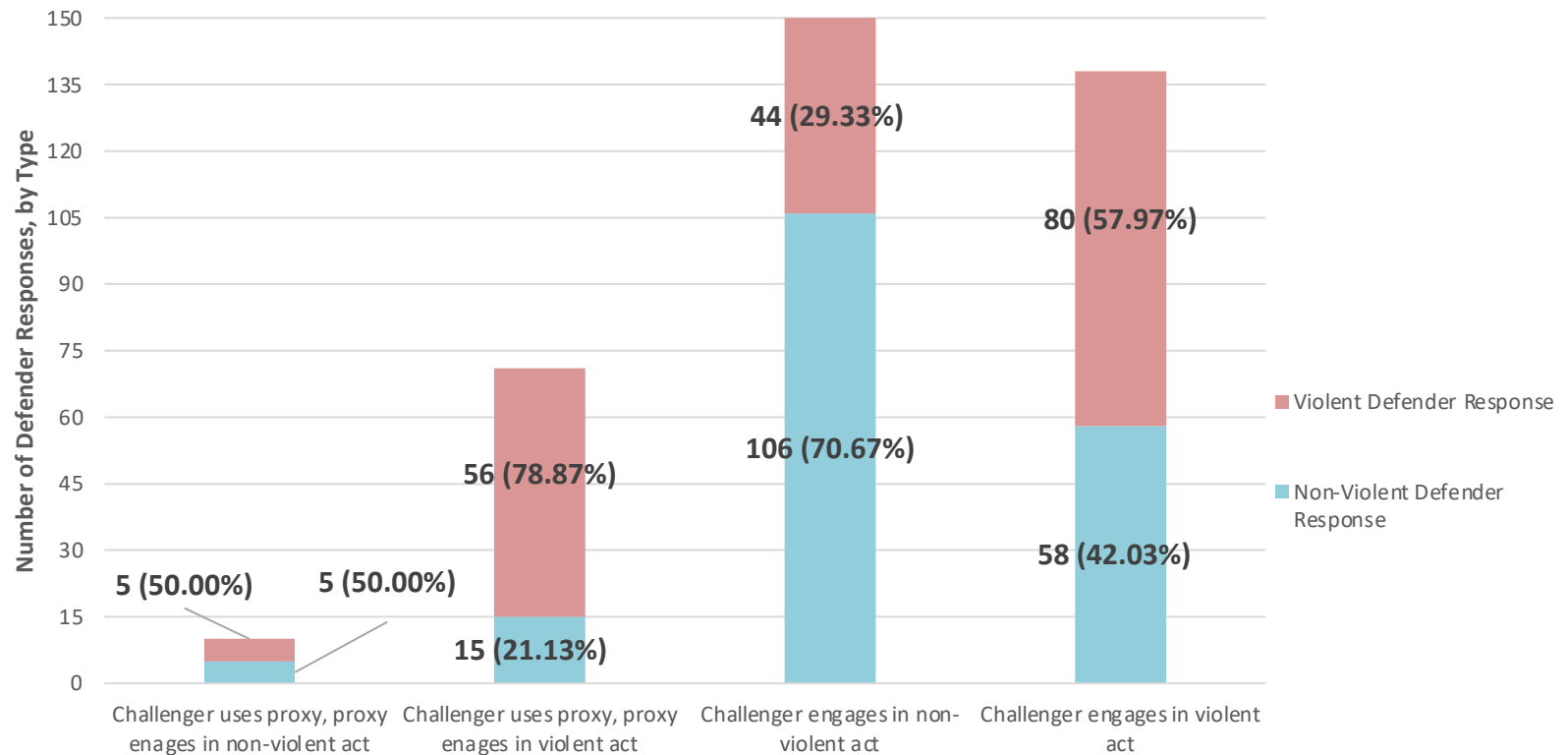
6. Data and Methods

- ICB crises between 1963 and 2015 (n=369)
- Challenger/proxy vs. Defender
- Opening moves: crisis trigger vs. Defender response
- Defender's overall response target(s)
- DV: Defender violence
- IV: all challenges vs. violent challenges
- CV: regime type, power disparity, state capacity, gravity of threat, protracted conflict, ethnicity

Crisis Triggers by Type and Challenge of Challenge

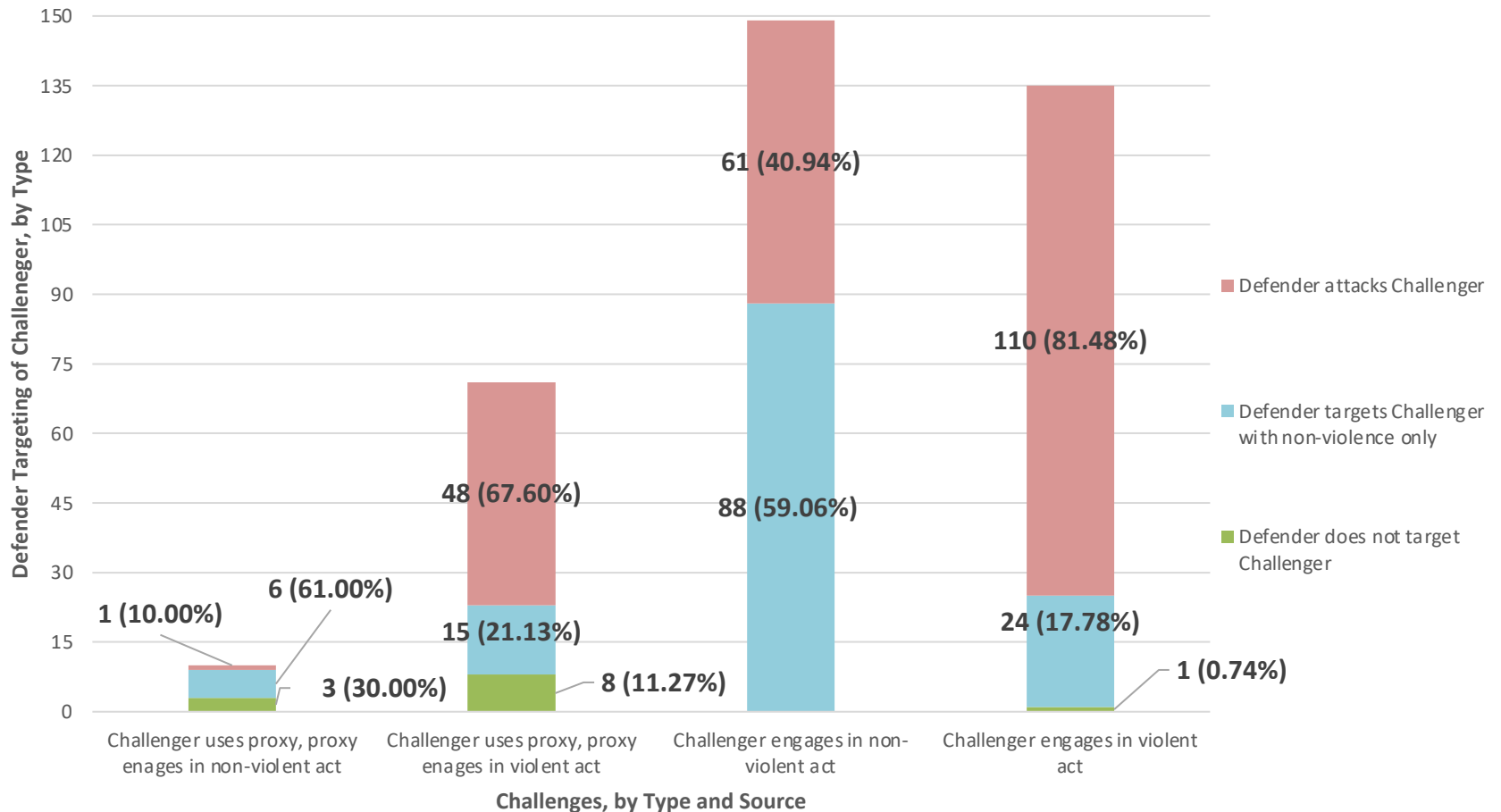
	Count	Percent of Total (n=369)
Type of Challenge		
Non-Violent	160	43.36%
Violent	209	56.64%
Source of Challenge		
Challenger (non-proxy) acts itself	288	78.05%
Challenger using proxy	81	21.95%
Type of Challenge by Source of Challenge		
Challenger engages in non-violent act	150	40.65%
Challenger uses proxy, proxy engages in non-violent act	10	2.71%
Challenger engages in violent act	138	37.40%
Challenger uses proxy, proxy engages in violent act	71	19.24%
Total	369	100.00%

Defender Responses – Overall and by Type of Challenge



Challenges, by Type and Source

Defender Targeting of Challenger During Crises, by Type and Source of Challenge



7.1 Results

H(A): Defenders in crises are more likely to respond with violence when a Challenger uses a proxy rather than confronting the Defender directly, irrespective of whether or not the challenge involves violence.

Supported: The probability of a Defender responding with violence is 0.2220 higher when a Challenger uses a proxy rather than confronting the Defender

7.2 Results

H(B): When a crisis is triggered by a violent challenge (direct, indirect, or covert), Defenders are more likely to respond with violence when the agent of violence is a Challenger's proxy, rather than the Challenger itself.

Supported: The probability of Defenders responding with violence is 0.1787 higher when a violent crisis is triggered by a Challenger's proxy rather than by the Challenger itself

7.3 Results

H(C): When a Challenger initiates a violent crisis using a proxy, rather than targeting the Defender directly, it is less likely to become the target of a violent attack perpetrated by the Defender.

Inconclusive: Some indication that Challengers are less likely to be attacked by Defenders at some point during the crisis when they employ a proxy to carry out a violent challenge than if they carry out a violent challenge themselves ($p = 0.04$). However, the statistical model is not sufficiently fit ($p = 0.06$).

8. Conclusions

- Defender is more likely to respond to violence when challenged by a proxy – regardless of whether the initial challenge was violent or not.
- State capacity plays a significant role: Defenders are more likely to use violence against Challengers with weak state capacity, and particularly when Defenders enjoy strong state capacity (regardless of the relative difference in power between the Challenger and the Defender).
- Use of violence is more likely in ethnicity driven crises – likely involving higher stakes to all parties.
- Overall, this suggests that the use of proxies is likely to increase the probability of violence in a crisis.

Thank you

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