The Syrian Civil War: A Proxy War in the 21st Century
A Senior Research Thesis
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The Syrian Civil War is one of the most devastating conflicts of the 21st century and the cause of the worst humanitarian crisis in recent history. It stems between the ruling Al-Assad Regime and a series of opposition rebel groups. The Assad Regime has had the backing of this historical ally, the Russian Federation. Rebel forces have had the continued backing from a collation between western nations, led by the United States. The purpose of this thesis is to determine if the Syrian Civil War was a proxy war between the United States and Russia, and to determine what it means for the future of US-Russia relations. Since the end of the Second World War and the rise of the nuclear deterrent, war by proxy has become a common strategy used by larger powers. If the Syrian Civil War is truly a proxy war between the United States and Russia, it brings to question the validity of the end of the Cold War. By comparing it to previous Cold War-era proxy wars, we can derive the features that make up a proxy war and apply them to the Syrian Civil War. This thesis uses several precious proxy wars as case studies. These include the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Afghan-Soviet War. While each of these was a very different war, they each share a handful of similarities that make them Proxy Wars. They involved more powerful “patron” states using smaller “sponsor” states as proxies over a long-term conflict. This must happen while the “patrons” avoid direct conflict with each other.
Upon deriving the definition of a proxy war, we see the Syrian Civil War fits the description. The idea of the United States and Russia currently waging a proxy war brings into question the validity of the end of the Cold War and the effectiveness of the defeat of the Soviet Union. It raises the question: Is a resurgent Russia the reality we face and how should we respond to it?
The history of Syria is one that dates back to the Neolithic period. Much of its early history is rooted in bloodshed and battle by various foreign empires such as the Hittite Empire, Egyptian Empire, Assyrian Empire, Persian Empire, and the Greek Macedonian Empire. In the mid-7th century, the Umayyad dynasty, placed the capital of the empire in Damascus and made Arabic the official language. In 1516, the Ottoman Empire invaded and incorporated Syria into its empire. Under the Ottomans, the people of Syria experience a period of peaceful coexistence. During the First World War, the Ottomans joined the war on the side of Germany. Upon the loss, the Ottoman empire crumbled and lost control of its territories. The control of Syria went to France. Despite several revolts, Syrian would only receive independence from French rule upon the fall of France in 1940 during the Second World War. In 1956, Syria signed a pact for weapons with the Soviet Union. This established relations between the two states. A series of coups from 1961 to 1970 ended with Hafez Al-Assad, the former Minister of War, as president of Syria. Hafez al-Assad died on 10 June 2000 with his son, Bashar Al-Assad, succeeding him as he ran for president unopposed. His election would lead to intense political and social resentment. It would come to a head ten years later with the start of the Syrian Civil War sparked by the Arab Springs movement.

The Syrian Civil War is currently a multi-faction civil conflict being fought between the ba’athist Syrian Arab Republic and several opposition groups. The Syrian Arab Republic is led
by President Bashar Al-Assad and his regime. This convoluted conflict has its roots in the Arab
Springs democratic movement, a nonviolent movement for democratic reform throughout
several North African and Middle-Eastern countries. It eventually transformed into a fully
fledged armed rebellion when police fired on protesters on March 15th, 2011. Today, the Syrian
Civil War has led to the deaths of 470,000 individuals and to the birth of the worst humanitarian
crisis of the modern age. To better comprehend the war, it is important that we understand the
people and factions fighting it. Firstly, the current Syrian regime is led by President Bashar
Al-Assad. It aims to reunify Syria under his rule, which has been accused of serious human
rights abuses. It is resisted by the Syrian rebel opposition, a series of rebel groups that formed the
Syrian National Coalition and a few anti-government factions. As it is made up of a few distinct
anti-government factions, the rebels also come from several different backgrounds. The
opposition was created with the idea of making democratic reform in the nation. Finally, there
exist the DFNS, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, a region situated in northern Syria
that claims autonomy. They state that they do not want full independence, instead they want a
federalized system where they can act autonomously without fully being independent. They have
had tense but mostly working relations with the regime. The destruction bred by the chaotic war
between the Al-Assad government and the rebel forces created the perfect opportunity for certain
groups to use to their advantage. One of these opportunistic groups was known as ISIS (Islamic
State of Iraq and Syria). While the rebels are entrenched against the government army, ISIS used
tactics relying on intimidation and complete domination to take significant parts of Syrian territory.
(Laub, 2018) All of these warring factions seek to achieve their own ambitions. The current
regime wants to retake the country and place it back under the authoritarian hand of President Al-Assad. The Al-Assad regime was born with Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president, who participated in a series of military coups that allowed him to seize total control of Syria. His regime has had accusations of human rights abuses against its own citizens thrown against it. The majority of the Syrian rebel opposition desire to reshape Syria into a secular and democratic state. Born out of the Arab Spring movement, a series of nonviolent demonstrations pursuing democratic change due to the oppressive regimes in the middle eastern region and low standards of life of the majority of the population. The movement started in Tunisia before spreading to other nations including Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. These demonstrators were eventually met with lethal force by pro-government groups which caused these peaceful demonstrations to transform into violent armed rebellion. It started the beginning of full-fledged revolutions and civil armed conflicts throughout the entire region such as the Syrian Civil War, Iraqi insurgency and the following civil war, the Egyptian Crisis, coup and subsequent unrest and insurgency, the Libyan Civil War, and the Yemeni Crisis and following civil war. Pushed by increasing pressure from within and the increasing use of social media to gain information of the outside world, the majority of these conflicts have been continuous since their beginning. Finally, the goals of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. They have the short-term goal of creating a Salafist Islamic Caliphate and the long-term dream of putting the entire world under their rule, because of this they were a threat to every other group involved. (Habets, 2016)

The involvement of global superpowers has the potential to bring massive consequences depending on the outcome of the civil conflict. These powerful countries desire to further their
own agendas through participation in the Syrian Civil War. Russian support for al-Assad comes from the close relationship between both countries during the cold war era. They might also be searching for a new ally within the region after the demise of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Not simply this, but Russia might have also wanted to provide a demonstration to the majority of the world. By placing themselves in this conflict, the Russian military is allowed to demonstrate its might and Russia can depict itself as a significant participant on the world stage. Lastly, it should be noted that Syria’s relatively nearby position to Russia may also be a factor when deciding in a Russian response to the war. Syria is positioned relatively near to Russia so having a potential U.S ally in their proximity would be something that Russian leaders would likely try to avoid. By maintaining Syria as a Russian ally and keeping close relations with it, they now have secured another ally near their southern border. One with access to ports that have access to the Mediterranean sea.

The desire of the United States is the exact opposite. To prevent any further committing of human right violations and prevent Russia from obtaining a new ally within the region. United States allies, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, also want to see Bashar al-Assad out of office for such reasons. Some have even said that the US reaction almost like a continuation of the containment policy we had during the cold war. Replacing the al-Assad regime with a government that is, hopefully, more willing to cooperate with the United States. If the United States could insert a pro-American government, it would prevent Russia from obtaining access to the Mediterranean Sea and place another US ally on Russia’s southern side. The United States-led coalition also seeks to eradicate the Islamic State. (Marshall, 2016)
The United States has sent support to the opposition in the past before halting doing so. Most of those resources have instead gone to Kurdish forces combating the Islamic State. Because of the halting of this support and recent developments showing the fight turning in favor of the regime, the United States should switch its attitude. Most agree that the fight will be won by the al-Assad government, and indirectly Vladimir Putin.

This civil war appears at first to solely have a regional impact, upon a closer inspection it can be seen that this war is influenced by powers outside the immediate region. The al-Assad regime is supported by outside groups, like the countries of Iran and Iraq. The most significant supporter of al-Assad is Russia, who has made itself a significant ally of Syria since 1956. They have granted the regime modern weapons and Russian military advisers. On 30th of September 2015, Russia started granting direct military support for the regime forces consisting primarily of air power against most enemies of the Syrian regime. With this, Russia has granted hundreds of tonnes of banknotes to the country in order to maintain the Syrian economy and prevent an economic collapse. The rebel opposition groups are supported by a coalition consisting of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, and the Arab League. The United States, up until July 2017, granted financial support, new equipment and training to the rebels. Since July 2017, the programs granting assistance to the anti-government rebels have been seen as a failure and most of that support has instead gone to Kurdish forces combating ISIS. The Islamic State is seen as a potential threat to almost everyone else involved in the conflict. Because of this they are targeted as enemy combatants by almost all other armed groups in the area. (Cfr.org, 2018)

As the United States supports the opposition forces and Russia supports the Al-Assad regime, the
two superpowers are positioned against each other in a fashion resembling that of the cold war over three decades ago. The Syrian civil war is heavily resemblant of the cold-war era proxy wars and with recent events, such as President Trump’s withdrawal of US troops in Syria, attention should be paid to this conflict.

**Proxy Wars**

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has often used a different method of warfare—Proxy War. Proxy war prevents major state-on-state conflict while bringing tension and conflict to other parts of the world. The Syrian Civil War, a civil conflict between the Syrian regime and various rebel groups, is thought to have been the most recent United States proxy war in recent memory. (McGovern, 2019) While the Syrian regime was supported by Russia, the rebels were largely supported by western powers. Before we dive into the details of the Syrian Civil War, it is important to understable what exactly comprises a proxy war and why exactly they have become so common in the last few decades.

It is important to realize that proxy wars are not simply regional struggles that tend to mirror larger ideological struggles waged by powerful superpowers, nor are they considered “covert action” simply due to a lack of open warfare. A proxy war is an intentional, indirect form of engagement that superpowers tend to utilize in order to prevent open conflict between each other. Proxy wars usually involve a patron-client relationship between state or actors. (Mumford, 2013) Usually, State “A” will hire proxies in State “B” in order to conduct subversive operations in order to further the interest of State “A”. A proxy war between superpowers begins when another superpower also hires proxies within State “B” in order to further their own interest
within the region. Usually this interest of incompatible, leading to indirect conflict. Conflicts that
the United States has been involved in that could be considered proxy wars including the Korean
War, the Vietnam War, the Afgan Civil War, and the Syrian Civil War.

On April 4th 2017, the town of Khan Shaykhun in the Idlib Province of Syria was
attacked by the heavy chemical airstrike. At the time the town was under the control of Tahrir
al-Sham, also known as the Al-Nusra Front. The spread of toxic gas killed over 87 people and
injured more than 557. The attack was the worst chemical attack in the syrian conflict since the
2013 Ghouta chemical attack, which killed over 221 people. The United States, United
Kingdom, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France, Israel, and Syrian Opposition blame the attack on the
Government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The Assad Regime claimed this attack to be
false and simply a fabrication made to provide a reason for U.S aggression toward them. The
Assad government's strongest supporter, the Russian Government, stated that while it was a
Syrian aircraft, the resulting gas spread was only due to the airstrike hitting a rebel warehouse
which likely housed chemical weapons filled with sarin gas. As such weapons and their use is
completely banned by the United Nations and the international community, the majority of the
world took this as a great offence. As a response to such a violation of international code, the
United States responded with a barrage of 59 Tomahawk Guided Cruise Missiles to strike the
origin place of the bomber, the Shayrat Air Base in Syria. The direct attack on Syria from the
United States has increased tensions throughout the entire region. This remains especially true
for relations between the U.S and Russia. Russia has gone far enough as to say that such an
attack was an “illegitimate action by the United States”. This ultimately depict just how much a
conflict, in what many consider to be a remote corner of the world, can change the interaction dynamics between some of the most powerful and influential nations in the world and the consequences that proxy war can have.

Proxy wars became commonplace with the rise of bipolarity between the United States and the Soviet Union after the end of the Second World War. After just finishing the most catastrophic conflict in world history, the public desire to enter another large conflict was extremely low. Combined with the possible risk of a nuclear outbreak, as the Soviets had obtained the atomic bomb by 1949, the risk of conventional war was not appealing in the eyes of the public and lawmakers. (Grosstien, 1980) Despite this, the need to advance and protect our interests and ideology was still needed. Proxy war became the clearest alternative for attaining a strategic advantage, Despite this, Proxy war comes with risks of its own, such as when the interest of the patron and the proxy diverge. (Brown, 2016) This divide in interest and future goals can lead to further future conflict.

As the use of proxy war was primarily common place during the Cold War, the use of the Syrian Civil War as a proxy between the United States and Russia brings into question the validity of the “end” of the Cold War. If the Syrian Civil War is actually a cold-war era style, it could spell massive implications for future international relations. Confrontational relations between a resurgent Russia and the United States could change the global balance of power and plunge us into a continuation of the cold war. Before we begin to consider the effects indirect conflict between these two giants may have on the world, we need to verify that the Syrian Civil War is actually a true proxy war in the same vein as those that were fought during the Cold War.
In order to do this, we must reflect and analyze on the proxy wars the United States has been involved in the past. These include the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Afghan Civil War. Once we analyze these and determine what exactly constitutes a proxy war, we can determine if the Syrian Civil War fits the requirements. In order to do this, I will be analyzing the similarities and differences of each of these conflicts to create and support a definition of a proxy war.

**Case Study I: Korean War**

The Korean War was an armed conflict between North Korea and South Korea. It began on the 25th of June 1950 due to North Korea invading South Korea after a series of skirmishes on the border. North Korea was backed and supported by China and the Soviet Union, while South Korea was backed by the United Nations (led by the United States). Due to the start of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States split Korea into two separate sovereign sovereign states in 1948 at the infamous 38th parallel. The north was established into a socialist state under Kim Il-sung, while the south was formed into a capitalist state under the leadership of Syngman Rhee. The governments of both sides refused to accept the other as legitimate or the border as permanent. This difference in claims would create the tension needed to set the stage for future conflict.

The nation of Korea has a long history dating back to the first millennium when the Kingdom of Goryeo unified Korea into a single state. In the 13th century, Korea experienced the mongol invasion which weakened the kingdom. In 1392, the Joseon kingdom was established.
Under Joseon, the Korean alphabet was established and Confucianism became increasingly relevant. The Korean Empire was proclaimed in 1889 and lasted until 1910. After the Sino-Japanese war, Korea was annexed by Japan despite Korean efforts to modernize. This occupation lasted until the end of the Second World War. In 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union accepted the surrender of Japanese forces on the Korean peninsula. The north was left under Soviet control while the south was left under United States control. This situation would set the stage for the conflict that would soon follow as the Soviet Union and the United States could not compromise on the reunification of Korea.

Armed conflict erupted when North Korean military forces advanced into South Korea on 25 June 1950. The stood supported by China and the Soviet Union. In response to this, the United Nation Security Council authorized the creation of the United Nation Command. This was done in order to deploy forces in response to what was seen as an invasion of South Korea by the north. While 21 countries would contribute to the United Nations’ force backing South Korea, the United States would make up about 80% of the personnel.

During the first two months of the war, the South Korean Army was rapidly pushed back to the Pusan Perimeter and stood on the verge of defeat. In September 1950, the United Nations launched a counter-offensive from Incheon. From there United Nations forces launched a counter-offensive and invaded North Korea in October 1950. The counter-offensive quickly pushed toward the Yalu River, which is the border with China. As the assault pushed toward chinese territory, Chinese forces crossed the border and entered the fray. The sudden intervention by the chinese caused the United Nations’ forces to retreat to the 38th parallel by late december.
The frontline would remain near the 38th parallel as the war became one of attrition. While the ground conflict remained stuck at a stalemate, the war in the air was always in our favor. North Korea became the subject of one of the largest bombing campaigns in United States history. Soviet pilots would fly in covert operations in support of their new communist allies.

On July 27th 1953, fighting in the Korean War came to a close with the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement. With the signing of the agreement came the creation of the Korean Demilitarized Zone and the exchange of prisoners. The newly created Korean DMZ provided a buffer area designed for the separation of the north and south. Despite the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, there was never a formal treaty ending the Korean War. Due to this, the two Koreas are technically still at war. This was the topic of discussion in April of 2018, when leaders from both countries met at the DMZ to work on a treaty that would formally end the conflict.

The Korean War was one of the most destructive conflicts of the modern era. It caused over three million fatalities and the total destruction of almost every major city on the Korean peninsula. Thousands of massacres occurred on both sides as South Korea killed thousands of suspected communist and North Korea tortured and starved thousands of prisoners of war. Despite the destruction and carnage that the war caused, it could have been much worse. The United States, at the time, actively considered using atomic weapons on North Korean and Chinese military targets. This consideration went as far as four Mark 4 Nuclear Bombs being ordered to an Air Force Bombing group by order of President Truman. While atomic weapons
were obviously never used during the Korean War, the potential for conflict escalation was always a possibility.

Kim Il-Sung began seeking soviet support in March 1949. While Stalin initially was hesitant to lend his support to North Korea, he eventually relented. Mao Zedong had secured China under communist rule, the United States had recently withdrawn troops from Korea, and the first Soviet atomic bomb had been detonated. These advances gave Stalin the confidence he needed to pursue a more aggressive approach in Asia. He gave Kim permission to attack the south, promised Mao economic and military aid, and ensured Mao was ready to provide Kim Il-Sung with the reinforcements he may need. Once these pieces were in place, the march to war rapidly sped up.

Generals from the Soviet Union with combat experience from the Second World War were sent to North Korea in order to advise and plan the invasion. After the end of the Chinese Civil War, two ethnically korean divisions within the Chinese People’s Liberation Army were dispatched to Korea. These veteran troops brought with them their experience and training, as well as their weapons and equipment. The seasoned veteran troops and equipment provided by China along with the artillery and vehicles supplied by the Soviet Union gave North Korea a significant military advantage over the south. The south had been armed with limited small arms by the United States.

The United States was unprepared for the sudden invasion of South Korea as attention was focused on defending against a potential Soviet invasion in Europe. While the Truman administration was initially hesitant to go to war, Korea’s proximity to Japan convinced them
otherwise. This was largely because Japan was seen as a counter to a communist China and the Soviet Union. Another consideration that the Truman administration had to consider was the potential reaction that the Soviet Union would have to the possibility of United States intervention. Ultimately, President Truman believed that if communist aggression went unchecked, it would encourage further aggression elsewhere.

The United Nations Security Council unanimously voted to condemn North Korea’s invasion on June 25, 1950. This passed under UN Security Council Resolution 82. Two days later, UN Security Council Resolution 83 passed. It recommended that member states support South Korea in its struggle against the North. Shortly after, United States sea and air forces began assisting South Korea. Despite the unanimous decision to support South Korea, the Soviet Union protested the decision. As they had chosen to boycott the meeting due to other issues, they had not been counted in the voting process. Once the Soviet Union confirmed that they would not directly involve themselves in the fighting, the Truman administration fully committed the United States military and its ground forces to the Korean peninsula.

*Using Korea as a Proxy*

The Korean War is our first example of a proper proxy war in the post-world war era. As we previously defined proxy war, we know that it requires a few points. Firstly, it requires that larger countries act as patrons to smaller “client” countries who then act as proxies. Secondly, that these larger, more powerful, countries cannot directly come into conflict with each other. Lastly,
it requires that these large “patron” nations maintain direct, long-term relationships with the smaller “client” nations.

The United States, prior to the start of the Korean War, supplied South Korea with an assortment of small arms. In addition to this, the United States had been training the Republic of Korea and its military by establishing the United States Korean Military Advisory Group. In comparison, China supplied ethnically-korean troops from its army. These battle-hardened troops brought their experience, weapons, and equipment to North Korea. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union supplied the North Korean with aircraft, tanks, and heavy artillery. The Soviet Union also established the Soviet Advisory Group in North Korea to oversee the planning of the war and the training of the military. Chinese manpower combined with Soviet technology and knowledge further increased North Korea’s military superiority over the south. Both the North and South acted as clients to larger powers. North Korea was client to both China and the Soviet Union, while the South would maintain a client-patron relationship with the United States.

The United States would eventually throw the full might of its military at North Korea. Despite having its ground forces directly engaged, it would still remain a proxy war. The Soviets had not directly engaged themselves and the reinforcements that the Chinese had sent were officially part of North Korea’s KPA. The United States had not yet come into direct armed conflict with another major power. Furthermore, the United States was not officially supporting the South Korean government themselves. Rather, they stood in support of a United Nation force sent to drive back the North Korean invasion by order of UN Resolution 83. Thus, North Korea was actually in conflict with UN Command rather than the United States itself. In October 1950,
the People’s Republic of China crossed an army over the border into North Korea. After much deliberation, they decided to directly engage the Republic of Korea and the United Nations Command. The Soviet Union continued to supply equipment in order to prevent becoming directly engaged. The United Nations’ rapid offensive was halted upon coming into contact with the Chinese army on October 25th. United States forces would directly confront Chinese forces on November 1st. China would justify their intervention as a response to US aggression disguised as UN intervention. China’s bold decision to direct engage the US military emboldened the Soviet Union to provide air support and further their aid of China. While the Chinese had directly come into conflict with the United States, the Soviet Union continued to utilize both China and North Korea as proxies in their efforts against the United States. The Soviet Union would never come into direct confrontation with the United States in the course of the Korean War.

The United States first began its relationship with South Korea in 1950. This began with its support of South Korea in the Korean War. The United States assisted with the creation of the modern South Korean state. Since then, South Korea has served as one of the United States’ principal allies in Asia. Under the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, the United States military has maintained a presence in Korea. This agreement served several purposes. The first is the isolation and containment of the Soviet Union and its communist system. The second was the deterring of a second North Korean invasion. The third was the prevention of South Korean adventurism. While certain issues between the United States and South Korea remain, such as trade disagreements, South Korea has experienced major economic and military growth. China
was equally instrumental in the creation of the modern North Korean state. China is usually considered to be North Korea’s closest ally. Despite this, they have not always had the easiest of relationships. North Korea’s pursuit of a nuclear weapons program, impoundment of chinese fishing vessels, and a few other incidents have strained relations over the past sixty years. North Korean relations with the Soviet Union, and now Russia, have also fluctuated throughout the years. The Soviet Union played a part in the creation of the modern North Korean state and afterward became its most important economic partner. Recently relations became strained after North Korea’s series of weapon tests. Russia would support a UN Resolution to place sanctions on North Korea due to their emplacement of nuclear weapons. Russia shares an eleven mile border with North Korea. These “patron” nations have all had significant influence on their respective “client” nations from the time near their inception.

The United States, China, and the Soviet Union all acted as patron states while North and South Korea fulfilled their role as client states. In doing so, they acted as proxies for these larger world powers as the communist bloc grappled with the United States for the future of the world order. Soviet and United States forces never came into direct conflict keeping the conflict between them based on the use of proxies. Both the Soviet Union and the United States have maintained deep ties to their respective client states since their creation. As the Korean War fulfills our requirements to be recognized as a proxy war, we should seek similarities it holds to the Syrian Civil War.

During the Korean War, the United States and the Soviet Union acted as patrons to South and North Korea respectively. In comparison, the United States utilized the syrian rebels as
clients. Russia used the Al-assad regime as their principal client state. In a similar manner as in the Korean War, the patron states provided the clients with military advising, supplies, and air support. There were also a few differences between the two conflicts. The first was a lack of mass ground support. The second was that the United States supported a rebel faction rather than an actual state. As neither power ever deployed significant amounts of ground units in Syria they never came into intentional direct conflict with one another. In the Korean War, neither country came into direct conflict with each other as well. Despite this, the United States did deploy significant amounts of ground troops in support of South Korea. Russia’s dedication to the Syrian regime dates back to the cold war. Syria allied themselves with the Soviet Union in order to oppose the western powers. In return Syria received millions in aid and had thousands of its military officers study in Russia.

Case Study II: Vietnam War

The Vietnam war began on November 1st 1955 and ended on April 30th 1975 with the fall of Saigon. While the war was officially fought between North and South Vietnam, it is widely considered a proxy war. The communist North Vietnam was primarily supported by the Soviet Union and China while South Vietnam was mainly supported by the United States and South Korea. The conflict is sometimes called the Second Indochina War. This is to distinguish the conflict's roots in the First Indochina War which ended in 1954.

The history of the Vietnamese state start in 257BC with the rise of the Hồng Bàng dynasty as it’s known as the first vietnamese states. In 111BC the Chinese Han dynasty come to
dominate Vietnam. It would remain under Chinese rule for the next thousand years. In 938, Vietnam would achieve independence. After the 16th century, Vietnam was plagued with civil strife and political infighting. In 1802, the Nguyen dynasty would unify Vietnam under the last imperial dynasty. By 1884, the country had come under French rule. During this time western education systems and the spread of Catholicism where met by a series of guerrilla uprisings. The French suppressed these and ignored increased demands for self governance. A sustained nationalist movement would occur calling for independence. In 1940, the Japanese empire would invade Vietnam and exploit its resources for its military use. After the end of the Second World War, Vietnam was returned to France. When the First Indo-China War began in 1946, the French, having been weakened by German Occupation, lost control of Vietnam. The Vietnamese state was split on the 17th parallel. The State of Vietnam ceased to exist and was replaced by the Republic of Vietnam in the south Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north. These events left Vietnam primed for the conflict that would unfold.

The main combatants involved the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the United States armed forces, while the other side consists of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Viet Cong (VC), a South Vietnamese communist guerrilla force. In the 19th century, Indochina was a French colony. The Viet-Minh was created during World War Two to combat Japan, with the support of France, the United States, and China. When the communist Viet-Minh forced France to withdraw from the country after the Second World War, the United States assumed the role of primary support for the South Vietnamese state. The Second Indochina War, referred to as the “Vietnam War” within the United States began in 1955 due to
Viet Cong attacks on South Vietnam. As the South Vietnamese fought back, the United States increased the number of military advisors it sent to Vietnam. In 1959 there were approximately 1,000 US military advisors in South Vietnam. By 1964, there were over 23,000. In August, the Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred, in which a U.S. destroyer was alleged to have clashed with North Vietnamese fast attack craft. Due to this, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This allowed President Lyndon B. Johnson to deploy troops to South Vietnam. Troop levels increased to 184,000 and continued to increase every year. Despite this, little progress was made. The US and South Vietnam strategy for victory consisted of primarily the use of air superiority and overwhelming firepower. This was achieved via the use of artillery, airstrikes, and heavy-armed ground forces.

Following 1969, President Nixon began the process of sidelining American forces and expanding South Vietnamese forces. This would continue until the adoption of the Paris Peace Accords passed by congress 1973. This ensured that all US forces withdrew from korea. Shortly after, the Paris Peace Accords were broken and North Vietnam continued its assault on the south. The Spring 1975 Offensive brought the fall of Saigon, the reunification of Vietnam under communist rule, and the end of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War had countless aftereffects on the region and beyond. The United States dropped over 7 million bombs on the region during the course of the war. This was more than ten times the amount the United States dropped on Korea during the Korean War. Laos Would become the most heavily bombed country in history. On July 2nd, 1976, North and South Vietnam would merge to become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. While the speculation that
the North Vietnam forces would massacre the South Vietnamese civilians never came true, many of them were sent to “reeducation” camps. There they experienced torture, starvation, disease, and hard labor. After the war, South Vietnam was left in a dire state. According to Nobel Prize Winner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, South Vietnam was facing “360,000 people mutilated, a million widows, 500,000 prostitutes, 500,000 drug addicts, a million tuberculous and more than a million soldiers of the old regime, impossible to completely rehabilitate into a new society”. Cambodia would fall under the reign of Pol Pot. He would cause the death of about 2 million cambodians in one of the bloodiest genocides in history. After the war, the relations between Vietnam and Cambodia would degrade into open conflict over a series of events. This would start the Cambodian-Vietnamese War. China, who supported Cambodia, would invade Vietnam as a response. This would spark the beginning of the Sino-Vietnamese war. The United States dropped millions of bombs within the region that left their mark. Within Laos, about 80 million bombs were left undetonated throughout the countryside. They cause large amounts of land to be impossible to utilize and 50 laotians to die each year from the undetonated explosives. The conflicts displaced over 3 million refugees throughout the indochina region. 1.2 million of these refugees resettled in the United States. Over 500,000 fled to Canada, Australia, and France. China opened its doors to about 250,000 refugees. Many of those who fled were among the intellectuals, technicians, and officials in the region.

The United States also felt the effect of the Vietnam war. The experience shaped the american perception of military intervention in international conflicts. President Ronald Regan used the term “Vietnam Syndrome” to describe the newfound hesitation of the american public
to intervene further abroad. In 1978, polls reflected that 72% of Americans believed that the war was immoral and wrong. This negative reaction to the Vietnam War would diminish as time went on. A decade later 66% would see the war as immoral or wrong. This would further decrease to 34% by the year 2000. The United States also had to internalize the failure we encountered in Vietnam. Some claim that the United States’ failure in Vietnam was mainly due to the failure of U.S political leadership. The Vietnam war was wide defined by tactical successes, but a strategic failure. We learned that success in such a conflict depended on correctly analysing the nature of the particular conflict, understanding the enemy's strategy, and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of allies. The long, brutal conflict in Vietnam left the United States humbled and with new knowledge about conflict intervention. Others point to the deficiencies of United States military doctrine, which used overwhelming airpower as a key toward victory. This proved to be far from functional. United States’ air bombing did very little to stop the North Vietnamese goal of unification. Instead it worked to unite North Vietnam and rally international support for the North Vietnamese. The United States is estimated to have spent about $168 billion on the war. Over 3 million Americans served in the Vietnam War and about half of them would see combat. By the end of the war, 58,220 American service members had been killed, over 150,000 had been wounded in action, and 21,000 had been permanently disabled. It is believed that about 830,000 Vietnam veterans suffered a degree of posttraumatic stress disorder. About 125,000 Americans crossed into Canada in order to escape the draft and 50,000 soldiers would desert. Army doctrine relied on waging a war of attrition. This was highly criticized as a pointless waste of American lives that would not achieve the desired outcome. The
use of chemical defoliants by the United States would be one of the most controversial topics of
the war. These chemicals were used to defoliate large parts of the vietnamese countryside in
order to prevent the vietcong from concealing their weapons and encampments. The chemicals
caused continued changes to the landscape, a rise in birth defects, and a poisoning of the food
chain. The use of Agent Orange, a certain chemical used during the war, led to Vietnamese
victims suing several chemical manufacturers. The use of these chemicals didn't simply affect the
vietnamese. The U.S. Veterans Administration has listed cancer, myeloma, type-2 diabetes,
lymphomas, soft-tissue sarcoma, chloracne, porphyria cutanea tarda, peripheral neuropathy and
spina bifida in children of veterans exposed to Agent Orange. The Vietnam war left many
casualties in its path but the exact number has remained debated. 791,000–1,141,000 war-related
deaths have been suggested for all of Vietnam, both military and civilians. South Vietnam had
about 430,000 civilians die in the war while North Vietnam had 65,000 civilians die. South
Vietnam suffered about 254,256 military dead while North Vietnam had 950,765 military dead.

Using Vietnam as a Proxy

While the Vietnam war was officially a civil conflict within a sovereign country, many
powerful countries had a vested interest in seeing a specific outcome. Because of this, the
Vietnam War was riddled with outside influence and interference. Among the most significant
outside countries that involved themselves were the United States, China, the Soviet Union, and
South Korea. These countries utilized the Vietnam conflict was part of a larger world conflict
between the Communist Bloc and Capitalist nations.
Beginning in 1950, China diplomatically recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Initially they provided Vietnam with heavy weapons and military advisors during their conflict for independence from France. When the United States began to intervene, China’s support for North Vietnam included financial aid and the deployment of hundreds of thousands of military personnel placed in support roles. Mao Zedong would eventually agree to supply Hanoi with 90,000 firearms without charge. In addition to this, they sent anti-aircraft units and engineering battalions to North Vietnam. China also provided five million tons of food to North Vietnam. The total aid sent by China to North Vietnam would total about $20 billion by the end of the war.

The Soviet Union would also be a major provider for North Vietnam. The Soviet Union utilized intelligence ships to identify American bombers before providing the North Vietnamese with the direction and speed of these bombers. This allowed North Vietnam to predict the intended target and avoid potential casualties. In addition to intelligence, the Soviet Union also provided medical supplies, arms, tanks, planes, helicopters, artillery, anti-aircraft missiles and other military equipment to North Vietnam. Soviet anti-aircraft crews would shoot down several American F-4. The Soviet Union would station up to 3000 troops in North Vietnam and over a dozen of them would die in the conflict. The Soviet Union would also supply a sizable amount of hardware: 2,000 tanks, 1,700 APCs, 7,000 artillery guns, over 5,000 anti-aircraft guns, 158 surface-to-air missile launchers, 120 helicopters. Soviet officers would also advise and observe the fighting while Soviet military schools began teaching North Vietnamese soldiers. The infamous Soviet KGB would also come to the aid of North Vietnam. They assisted in enhancing
the signals intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities of North Vietnam. This allowed North Vietnam to conduct successful espionage of United States operations and strategy.

After the French withdrew from the region, the United States assumed the military and economic support of South Vietnam. Under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, United States involvement would increase dramatically. In the five years between 1959 and 1964, the amount of United States military advisors would increase from about a thousand to 23,000. President Lyndon B. Johnson would order the deployment of combat troops for the first time in response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident and, eventually, increase troop counts in Vietnam to 184,000. The establishment of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) would symbolize the complete support of the United States. The CIA used the Special Activities Division to train indigenous forces to combat the North Vietnamese. They also established the Phoenix Program: A program that used torture and other coercive methods to identify and neutralize suspected members of the Viet Cong.

After the survival of their democratic state, South Korea became eager to attempt to help Vietnam resist communism as they had done a decade earlier. After President Johnson permitted the Republic of Korea to deploy troops to assist South Vietnam, the Koreans would establish the Republic of Korea Field Command. A total of about 320,000 South Korean troops were deployed to Vietnam by the end of the war. While they formed the second most numerous amount of foreign troops in Vietnam, their effectiveness was largely questioned. Their reluctance to perform offensive operations and limited defensive capabilities brought into question their
usefulness. They were known to systematically commit atrocities and prompt civilians out of population centers. This conduct only served to encourage Viet Cong and grow their numbers.

In the same fashion as both the Syrian Civil War and the Korean War, the Vietnam War was fought by opposing factions supported, directly and indirectly, by more powerful outside powers. These powers provided resources, personnel, and economic aid to support their chosen faction. This was done to advance a larger agenda pushed by outside powers, that being the ideological struggle between western capitalist democracies and eastern communist dictatorships. Despite the similarities that made these three conflicts proxy wars, they were very different conflicts. During the Korean War, the United States entered the conflict as part of the United Nations coalition rather than as an independent endeavor as in the Vietnam War while in the Syrian Civil War, the United States did not directly engage the opposition with convention ground forces. It is also important to note that while the Chinese directly engage in the Korean War, they remained primarily in support roles during the Vietnam War.

**Case Study III: Soviet-Afghan War**

The Soviet-Afghan War was fought over nine years, from December 1979 to February 1989, between the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and a collective of insurgent groups called the Mujahideen. Approximately 562,000 civilians died in the conflict and millions more became displaced as they fled Afghanistan. The majority of these refugees would flee to Pakistan and Iran. The Mujahideen would wage a guerilla war against the communist Afghan government, and eventually the Soviet army.
Afghanistan is the location of some of the earliest human settlements in the world. Since ancient times, countless cultures and civilizations have crossed and interacted across the region. In 1219, the Mongols overran the region and annihilated several cities. In 1709, Afghanistan was made independent with the defeat of Gurgin Khan. In 1838, the British marched into Afghanistan and installed a new ruler after the First Anglo-Afghan War. After the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, Afghanistan officially declared itself a fully independent state. In 1973, Daoud Khan, the prime minister of Afghanistan launched a coup and declared himself the first president of Afghanistan. This abolished the traditional monarchy. The communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in the Saur Revolution from President Daoud. The reforms that the PDPA would seek to pass would be met by resistance, and eventually open revolt.

The conflict has its origins in the communist takeover of the Afghan government. They led a series of unpopular modernization reforms and suppressed opposition. This led to the rise of anti-government armed groups and eventually nation-wide open rebellion. The president of Afghanistan was then killed on September 1979 by his second-in-command in a coup. The Soviet government decided to intervene and began deploying its army into Afghanistan. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution protesting the soviet intervention, only the Soviet allies supported the invasion. The United States’ Central Intelligence Agency would play a significant role in providing training and weapons for the afghan insurgents. The Soviet Union would utilize its army by occupying cities and controlling routes of communication. The mujahideen would control the vast majority of the countryside and use the territory to wage a guerrilla war. Soviet
strategy relied on the use of overwhelming firepower to deal with the rebels, sometimes destroying entire villages to deny rebels shelter.

The intervention of Soviet forces was permitted by a treaty that the Afghan government had secured in December 1978. A few months later they began to request Soviet military support to fight the rebels. The Soviet government was not eager to directly involve themselves initially, so they began their support by selling several Mi-24 helicopters to the Afghan government and increased the amount of military advisors to the country to around 3000. The Afghan government would request further support in April 1979. In response to this, the Soviet Union deployed tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to guard the government. They then deployed an airborne division to act as bodyguards for the Afghan President. The Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin, would launch a coup against Afghan President Nur Muhammad Taraki, killing him in the process. The Soviet Union frowned on this, as they believed it only would further destabilize the region. In response, the Soviets established a committee to report on Amin. This committee progressively decided that having Amin in power was not beneficial for Soviet interest in Afghanistan. As Amin’s loyalty toward the Soviet Union grew into question, it was ultimately decided to dispose of his. On December 27, 1979, the Soviets launch their plan to overthrow Amin’s government. They occupied government and military buildings, crippled the communications hub, assaulted the Tajbeg Palace and killed President Amin. By the next morning, the operation was complete. The Soviets had taken control of Afghanistan and began deploying a massive force into Afghanistan.
The international response to this brutal intervention was one of horror. Foreign ministers from throughout the Islamic world adopted a resolution which condemned the intervention and demanded that the Soviets withdraw from Afghanistan. The United Nations General Assembly also condemned the intervention. The mujahideen were then seen as freedom fighters seeking independence from a foreign invader. Several countries came to the aid of the mujahideen, with the United States and Saudi Arabia providing the greatest amount of financial support. The United States then geared its efforts to counter Soviet influence in the area. The State Department and National Security Council developed a list of economic sanctions to place on the Soviet Union. This ensured that the actions taken by the Soviets would cost them severely. The Central Intelligence Agency then proceeded to find ways to support the mujahideen in any way possible. They would supply the mujahideen with billions of dollars worth in arms and training. It would prove to be one of the longest and most costly CIA covert operations in United States history. It is estimated that at least three billion dollars were spent in support of the mujahideen.

The defeat of the Soviet forces is credited to several factors. The first is that the Soviet army was trained and equipped for large-scale conventional warfare against a conventional army. The mujahideen was not a conventional army, instead they relied on guerrilla tactics. They used the rough terrain of Afghanistan to quick strike and merge back into the terrain. The second reason was the use of large-scale offensives by the Soviets. In keeping with this strategy, they killed many civilians and would not hold ground. The third reason for Soviet failure in Afghanistan was the poor performance of unmotivated soldiers as many of these were conscripts.
The Soviet-Afghan war came to a conclusion with the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1988. By the end of the war, Afghan civilian deaths numbered anywhere from half-million to two million. Millions more had flew from the country. Irrigation systems and agricultural infrastructure was heavily damaged by Soviet attack. The defeat of the Soviet Union during the war also helped to contribute to its weakening and collapse. It undermined the invincible image of the Soviet army and brought into question the ability of the USSR to enforce its interest via military means. The Afghan Civil War did not end with the withdrawal of Soviet forces. The afghan government would continue fighting the mujahideen until 1992. The withdrawal of Soviet forces encouraged some of the more radical rebels to continue and spread their violent jihad in afghanistan and surrounding countries. Many rebels who had learned newfound skills in during the campaign against the soviets in Afghanistan went and became insurgents and terrorists in other countries. As the withdrawal of Soviet troops was soon followed by the fall of the Soviet Union, many of the rebels became convinced that the cause was just. The radicalization of several islamic groups followed soon after. The United States would feel the consequences of supporting the mujahideen during the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and, more heavily, during the September 11th attacks. Al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization with member who had been part of the mujahideen, bombed two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, and nearly sank the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000 prior to the infamous 9/11 attacks. Intervention in the MIiddle East as part of the cold war left the region primed for future conflict and internal strife.

*Using Afghanistan as a Proxy*
The intervention, and eventual takeover of the Afghan government, done by the Soviet Union was hardly considered proxy war on their part. It rather was more alike to a full-scale invasion. The force that entered Afghanistan, in addition to the 103rd Guards Airborne Division, was under command of the 40th Army and consisted of the 108th and 5th Guards Motor Rifle Divisions, the 860th Separate Motor Rifle Regiment, the 56th Separate Airborne Assault Brigade, and the 36th Mixed Air Corps. The 201st and 68th Motor Rifle Divisions also entered the country, along with other smaller units. This initial force totalled at about 1,800 tanks, 2,000 armored vehicles, and 100,000 personnel. The Soviet Union had intended to use the overwhelming force of the Red Army to crush any opposition. However, the large-scale assaults that had driven back the German Wehrmacht decades earlier would not prove to be so successful in combating the hit-and-run attacks of the Mujahideen.

The Mujahideen can trace their formation revolt caused by attempting to enforce modernization reforms on a traditional Islamic society. These reforms initiated civil unrest, to which the government responded violently. This suppression helped to further fuel the fires of rebellion. The United States saw this as an opportunity to counter Soviet ambitions in the region and began to use Pakistani government contacts to meet with rebel leaders. Eventually aid was promised to the rebels. The United States strategy for countering the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was to create a conflict comparable to the Vietnam War and then “bleed” the Soviets. The use of the CIA in supporting the mujahideen was significant. After 1980, the CIA began directly supplying the mujahideen with arms and, through the Pakistani Secret Service, began training them.
The approach taken by the United States to counter Soviet influence in the area was far more subtle than in previous wars. During the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the United States had committed ground forces to battle the expansion of communism. During the Soviet-Afghan War, we relied on the use of a proxy to stem the Soviets. Despite this, it was arguably the most successful attempt at combating communist aggression. The Soviet army was bled until it was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan. The choice to not directly interfere may have been done due to disillusionment from the Vietnam War or simply to avoid any potential contact with the Soviets. The strategy to train and supply a proxy while avoiding direct engagement is similar to the strategy the United States utilized in Syria. Russia also seems to have learned from this experience as well, as they have developed their own proxy in Syria in the form of the Al-Assad regime. While it differs from the previous conflicts in many ways, the Soviet-Afghan War still never saw direct engagement between the United States and the Soviet Union.

**Syrian Civil War**

After reviewing the aspects that make a proxy war, it becomes fairly clear that the Syrian Civil War could be considered a proxy war. The similarities it shares with the cold-war era proxy wars is striking. Firstly, it is a smaller, regional, conflict being used by larger powers to further their agenda. Secondly, it was a long-term effort that has taken years to develop. Lastly, the “patron” powers never engaged in direct combat. When speaking of the United States and Russia, it shares all of these aspects with the conflicts covered in this thesis. In the Korean War, China did directly engage United States forces although the Soviet Union did not. The Soviet Union used North Korea as a proxy in an attempt to spread communism, while the United States
(under the guise of the UN) used South Korea to spread its capitalist ideology. During the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union sought to use North Vietnam as its proxy in order to further the expansion of communism in the region, while the United States actively deploy ground forces to directly engage the North Vietnamese in support of the south. While the United States deployed its forces in to support South Vietnam, the Soviet Union did not. While the Soviet Union supported North Vietnam through several other ways, they did not directly come into combat with United States forces. During the Soviet-Afghan War, the situation of the Vietnam War was essentially reversed. The Soviets deployed ground forces to combat the Mujahideen, while the United States supplied the mujahideen with arms and training. The Soviets fought at the side of the Afghan army while the United States used the Mujahideen as a proxy in order to hold back the Soviets. In the current Syrian Conflict, the United States had been using the rebel opposition as a proxy to gain influence in the region. Russia has been using the current Al-Assad regime as a proxy to further their influence in the region. The modern Syrian conflict shares many characteristics with the proxy wars of the Cold War era.

Despite the similarities to other proxy wars, the Syrian Civil War also has several key differences. Firstly, it is a conflict between the United States and the Russian Federation. This is opposed to the earlier proxy wars that were waged between the United States and the Soviet Union. It is important to recognize the differences between these two states. The Soviet Union was a union of fifteen different republics into a single state. It was a one-party communist state with a highly centralized government and economy. The modern Russian state emerged in 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia is a federal, semi-presidential republic known for its
authoritarian rule, business oligarchs and sham elections. Currently the president of Russia is Vladimir Putin. Putin was Soviet KGB foreign intelligence officer of 16 years. Under President Putin, Russia has experienced an erosion of its democratic systems. While the difference between the Soviet Union and modern Russia should be noted, it may not matter as much as some may believe.

The second major difference is the directness of the conflict itself. Both the United States and Russia have troops on the ground. These troops have acted mainly in support positions, training their respective allies and calling for fire from air support. Despite the placement of troops in indirect combat support roles, situations have balanced on the line of escalation. An example includes Russia’s use of Wagner Group. Wagner Group is, officially, a private military company that has taken part in several conflicts in support of Russia. Wagner Group has been accused of being a Russian paramilitary unit under the Russian Ministry of Defence, operating when full deniability is required. This is believed due to the vast majority of Wagner’s contractors being former Russian military, their consistent support of Russian strategic goals, and the founder being a former Spetsnaz brigade commander. During the Battle of Khasham, the United States military acted in support of the Kurdish SDF by provided air support. As US aircraft launched a series of airstrikes, several contractors from Wagner Group were reported to have been killed. Exact estimates varied from fifteen to over a hundred. Several other skirmishes between U.S-led forces and Russian mercenaries are reported to have occurred. This type of situation stands on the edge of the definition of a proxy war. Forces that are directly affiliated with their respective states have essentially come into direct conflict.
Looking to the Future

The Cold War was an era of fear and tension defined by McCarthyism, containment policy, and a looming arms-race. The generally accepted idea is that this dark era of American history ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many Americans were led to believe that the Russian threat would cease to exist afterward. The use of the Syrian Civil War as a proxy war by Russia to counter US interest seems to suggest differently. The recovery of Russia’s economy and their reinvestment into modernizing their military provides evidence of the threat a resurgent Russia poses. With the recent withdrawal of US troops from Syria, Russia has successfully shown that it is once again capable of countering US interests abroad. This brings into question the effectiveness of the “end” of the Cold War and how to deal with this adversary in the future.

Some may argue that the end of the Cold War was a victory as the Soviet Union “collapsed”. The American population must remember that the successor to the Soviet Union, the modern Russian Federation, is under the authoritarian rule of a former Soviet KGB Agent. While assets are now private, the vast majority of these businesses have fallen into oligarch hands. As these oligarchs strive to stay in the president’s good graces, the companies they own fall to government influence once again. Once we look past the facade of Russia’s sham elections and crony capitalism, it becomes apparent that the reformation of the Soviet Union into modern Russia was nothing more than a setback. This setback caused a lull in the 90’s that we celebrate as a period of global United States Hegemony. Since then Russia has regathered its strength to confront the United States and its allies. Russia’s military annexation of the
Ukrakinan Crimea and their interference in the Syrian Civil War provide evidence that Russia is ready to reemerge on the world stage and go against the will of western powers. The reality of a resurgent Russia and the reemergence of the Cold War is a reality that the United States must be ready to face.

**Countering the Russian Threat**

The first step in countering the Russian threat is acknowledging that there is one. Unless the United States and its allies are clear that the current situation is barely different than the situation prior to 1991. The next step is to ensure that we are prepared for future Russian interference. Since the Syrian Civil War was a proxy war, we need to be prepared for similar conflicts in the future. We can start by reaffirming our commitment to our allies and to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO will need to be strong and stand together in the future, if we seek to counter the growing strength of Russia. We also need to begin seeking new ways to counter the growth of the Russians. Today, the national controversy of potential Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election depicts the emerging new avenues of warfare. Electronic and psychological operations must be as important to our strategy of countering Russia as standard combat operations. Lastly, we need to focus on a strategy of asset denial to stun the growth of Russian strength. This needs to include the denial of new allies and new resources. Recently, this aspect has been missing from our strategy. The failure of the United States in Syria has further allowed Russia Access to allies and resources. As Turkey strengthens its relationship with Russia and Syria remains under the control of the Al-Assad regime, Russia gains further influence in the region as well as access to Syrian oil fields.
While we must consider every avenue to counter Russia, we must not forget the mistakes of the past or the potential consequences our actions could have. UN intervention during the Korean War led to the separation of the peninsula along the 38th Parallel and the tension that exists on the Korean peninsula today. United States involvement in Vietnam lead to the death of over 50,000 US service members and a rise of anti-interventionist sentiment within the United States. The United States support of the Mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan War assisted in the creation of Al-Qaeda, one of the largest terror organizations in the world and the culprits of the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11. The Syrian Civil War itself was the cause of the biggest refugee crisis in modern history and allowed for the growth of ISIS in the region. If we are forced to counter Russia’s ambition in the future again via the use of proxy war, special consideration should be taken to assess the risk and potential outcomes in order to prevent any unintended consequences.

**Conclusion**

The Syrian Civil War is, on the surface, a multi-sided civil war between the Syrian government led by Bashar Al-Assad and various opposition forces. Upon a closer examination, it becomes clear that the civil conflict is the front for a much larger world struggle between the United States and the Russian Federation. Upon comparison with previous proxy conflicts between the former Soviet Union and the United States, the use of the Syrian conflict as a proxy war becomes apparent. Using the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Afghan Civil War as case studies, one can derive the definition of a proxy war:

1. Larger “Patron” states must support smaller “Sponsor” states in the conflict
2. These larger “Patron” states must not fall into direct conflict against each other

3. The conflict must continue for an extended period of time (Not an isolated event)

As the Syrian Civil War fits this definition, it is potentially a proxy war between Russia and the United States. This conclusion brings into question the end of the cold war. With the recent withdrawal of US forces within Syria, Russia has confirmed its renewed ability to counter the United States and project its own power abroad. The Syrian Civil War provides us with a cautionary tale warning us of the growing strength of Russia and evidence as to why addition efforts should be made to counter Russia. These efforts need to begin with the following:

1. Acknowledgement of the resurgence of Russia and the threat Putin poses
2. A reaffirmation of our continued support to our allies and alliances (NATO)
3. Use of emerging technologies and strategies to counter Russia however possible
4. Prioritizing the strategy of asset denial in order to stun Russian strength

Utilizing these methods, the growth of Russia can be stopped and western dominance can be preserved. The halt of Russia can allow democratic revolutions like the Syrian Civil War, which was born from the Arab Springs Movement, to occur unimpeded by Russia’s support of authorianism. While all efforts must be made to counter Russia, we should always consider that our actions may have unintended lasting consequences in the future. Past United States intervention has promoted the birth of terror organisations, cost American lives, and left unresolved disputes.

As long as Valdimir Putin seeks to up-end the established world order, the Syrian Civil War will not be the last conflict of its kind. Recent United States withdrawal from Syria and the
Al-Assad regime remaining in power has only proved to the world that the Russian Federation is now strong enough to counter the United States as we try to pursue our interests overseas. We must recognize this new threat then seek methods to counter the growing Russian threat. In order to do so we should analyze the proxy war of the past and the present. This will help us prepare for the future, as Russia continues to become stronger and bolder. The annexation of Crimea and the Syrian Civil War are the beginning of the continuation of the Cold War and the future generations of the United States will have to contend with the reality that Russian aggression will continue to produce many more such conflicts into the future.

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