THE POSITION AND ROLE OF STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE 21st CENTURY

Oliver Bakreski[4]

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy – Skopje,
Institute for Security, Defence and Peace

Leta Bardjieva Miovska[5]

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy – Skopje,
Institute for Security, Defence and Peace

Abstract: According to the classical dichotomy of the realist theory of interest representation, the subjects acting on the national and international scene are defined as state and non-state actors in the context of their content and position. Until the turn of the 21st century, the state-centric model of interaction is characteristic, where states are the main actors dominating national and world politics, although they are not the sole ones.

Examples of state actors are bureaucratically organized state institutions and governing bodies, foreign policy institutions, the army, the police, intelligence agencies, etc.

The gradual rise of non-state actors, as a result of the diffusion of power and monopolistic authorities of the state, seen through the prism of recent events such as the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, the migrant crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, etc., illustrate that many contemporary challenges to international order and security inevitably involve, among others, non-state actors.

Examples of non-state actors include private military and security companies, the media, criminal organizations, terrorist groups, non-governmental organizations, as well as multinational corporations, lobby groups, organized social or ethnic group movements, and others.

Through the application of qualitative deductive methodology, analysis of case studies and through linear interpolation of quantitative data in the context of this paper, the main questions arising from this social phenomenology are elaborated: their adjunction, regulation, with special reference to their place and role in society, in the direction of their positioning and categorization of meaning, from where the main hypothesis of this paper is drawn.

Key words: state actors, non-state actors, security, influence, position, role.

Introduction

In the period from the 12th to the 19th century, *privateering* was an established state practice. In France, privateers, called *corsairs* and *filibusters* (privately owned vessels that operated against an enemy with the permission or command of a government in time of war) were used to attack the enemy's commerce. While the same, in peacetime, practiced revenge

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[4] Contact address: oliver@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

[5] Contact address:leta.bardzieva@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

and demanded compensation against the damage their ships suffered at sea (Perkovich & Levite, 2017:4).

This example represents a historical analogy to contemporary situations in which certain actors perform activities on behalf of a specific government for a designated purpose (Egloff, 2022:15).

When discussing about the emergence of non-state actors versus state actors in the contemporary context, the starting point is the end of the Cold War and the classical notion of security functions, which were monopolized by states and their formally established institutions. Since then, non-state actors have taken on more diverse roles in the form of *proxies*. In this type of setup, states play the role of sponsors and non-state actors play the role of emissaries. This pattern of interaction perpetuated most state/non-state relations during the Cold War and its early aftermath, and their evolution from limited use to an increasingly complex reality is at an acute stage (Hanegraaff & Poletti, 2023: 90).

The division between state and non-state actors in security matters is a fundamental concept in security studies and refers to the characteristics between entities that are connected to sovereign states (state actors) and those that are not directly connected to a recognized government (non-state actors) and counterpoises a bivalence that attributes to the distinction between "state" and "non-state" and applies to behaviors and benchmarks (Durkee, 2024: 87-110).

The position and role of state and non-state actors, the context and their variation in each specific case with different levels and intensity, is determined through the prism of the genesis of their emergence. (Krahmann, 2005:3-19). The origins of non-state actors are multifaceted and can be attributed to historical, social, political and technological factors. Their presence is increasingly prominent on the global stage, shaping international relations and challenging traditional notions of state-centric governance (Bakreski, Bardjieva, 2021: 379).

The concepts of transformation and reform of the state security sectors in the context of reducing their massive scale and centralist organization, gradual opening to society through the implementation of measures and mechanisms for accountability, transparency and democracy, as well as the principles of good governance and the rule of law, contributed to modification of the security landscape and its structure (Grassiani, & Ben-Ari, 2011:23).

These concepts are manifested through a series of parameters and factors, including the very possibility of non-state actors existing in a certain society and being perceived as complementary in order to contribute constructively to its construction, with an emphasis on the security domain. Pillars of this transformation of the security system are: consolidation of resources, updating of the security policy, mapping of risks and threats, coordination, building a system of security culture, professionalization, building a concept of integral security, public-private partnership in security. The results of the mentioned transformations led to the expansion of the range of actors involved in the security sphere with different interests and different structure. (OECD, 2004).

Through the presentation of local and global examples, in which different theoretical approaches are engaged to achieve a macro vision, this paper aims to present potential approaches and solutions to these issues.

By applying a systematic and coherent analysis, in this paper, the place and role of state and non-state actors in the 21st century is elaborated, whose relations can be *complementary*, *contradictory* and *dialectical* (Breuer, *et al.* 2022: 16).
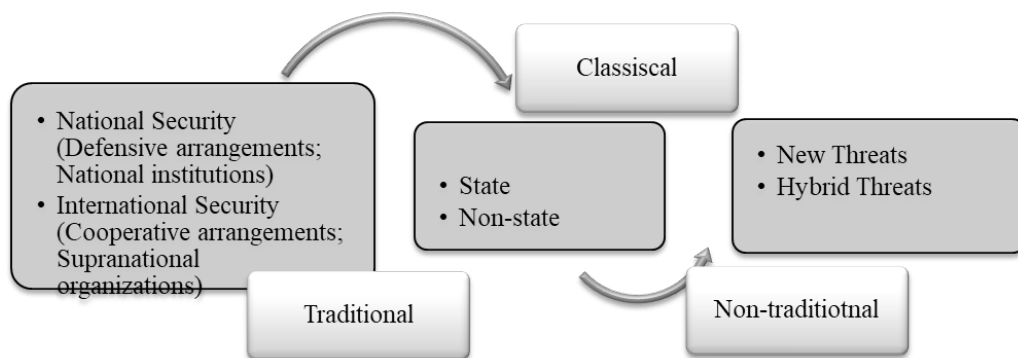

Chart 1: *Security discourse. Source: Conflicts in the Middle East and Africa: States, Non-State Actors and Unheard Voices. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2024.*

Defining fundamental notions and conceptual categorization

According to the classical dichotomy of subjects that act directly and indirectly in the domain of security function realization, two types of subjects, *state* and *non-state* actors, are differentiated. In accordance with the state-centric concepts of security, the state actors in the domain of security are the armed forces, the police, the public administration, the diplomatic corps, the intelligence-security community, as well as those institutions and government bodies whose basic purpose is to unite and coordinate the efforts of the mentioned institutions (Bakreski, 2018: 342).

Their essence is *autonomous*, that is, they have a function of self-sustainability, they act on behalf of a government body and formally adopted policies from legitimate legislative bodies, while the fundamental motivation is *nationalism.* Their capacity is measured by the ability to implement politically made decisions and to enforce control over a certain sovereign territory. (Bunker, 2003: 133)

According to contemporary trends in the field of achieving security through the engagement of national institutions and supranational organizations, in the context of current developments and the available literature, state actors in the several decades of stagnation and the rise of non-state actors are once again enthroned in the security arena, as old-new priority players (Ludvík, 2023).

State actors in security can have *external* and/or *internal* origins. External, i.e. external state actors refer to those entities that have formal support from another sovereign state to carry out any intended action in the domain of their internal affairs. Internal state actors are the military, intelligence or other state controlled and state sponsored apparatus, or stakeholders that have formal links to their country of origin (Grassiani & Ben-Ari, 2011: 7–15).

In theory, through the analysis of case studies, via the application of explicative and interpretive methods, non-state actors can be further categorized in the context of their role

in society, which can be *securing* (to contribute to the construction of security capacities) and *non-securing* (having negative implications for the security situation) such as criminal networks, cartels, warlords and local mercenaries, far-left ideological groups (*naxalism*), far-right movements, etc., with state security actors in this case tasked with suppressing non-state actors (Sen, 1971: 195–198).

In this direction, according to the current developments, another categorization has been made which refers to *para-state* actors, *sub-state actors* or *semi-state actors* (Egloff, 2022).

Para-state actors often face complex diplomatic challenges due to their unique status. They may have varying degrees of international engagement, from economic partnerships and informal relations to limited participation in international organizations.

The recognition of these entities as fully sovereign states can be influenced by political, historical and geopolitical factors, making their status a subject of ongoing debate in international politics (Tladi, 2022:64).

Sub-state actors can play a significant role in regional conflicts, diplomacy and other international affairs. Specific examples of sub-state actors, or semi-state actors, are the Palestinian authority, Taiwan, the Kurdistan Regional Government, Northern Cyprus, Western Sahara, Somaliland, etc. Semi-state actors, sometimes known as quasi-state actors, are entities that exhibit characteristics of both state and non-state actors in the realm of international relations and politics. These entities often possess some attributes of a state, such as a defined territory, population and some degree of governance, but lack full recognition as sovereign states by the international community (Duggan, 2019: 207)

A significant note is that while sub-state (parastatal) actors can have a positive impact on national security, their involvement can also raise concerns about sovereignty, accountability, and the potential for unintended consequences. Therefore, engagement and cooperation between states and these actors needs to be carefully managed to maximize positive outcomes while minimizing potential risks (Collins, 2022:424).

Non-state actors, on the other hand, have significant influence on international events, but do not have recognized government regulation and/or formal government support, although in the contemporary context, they often have government-delegated authority to carry out a range of (security) activities (Ackerman, *et al.*, 2019:21).

According to the typology from the analyzed available literature and relevant sources, non-state actors can be non-profit and for-profit, armed and unarmed, distinguished by internal or external genesis, etc. (Felbab-Brown, 2023)

Another type of positioning of non-state actors in the security context is their position, which can have a central or direct role, or an indirect role with a lesser effect of influence in the promotion of stability and peace and contribution to the state of security (Mazari, 2007:27)

In the context of determining their place, non-state actors in a given society can be positioned on two opposing perspectives. They can supplement security, but they can also challenge the current *de facto* and *de jure* security situation with a penetrative tendency in circumstances of persistent weakness of government response (Kruck & Schneiker, 2017: 29).
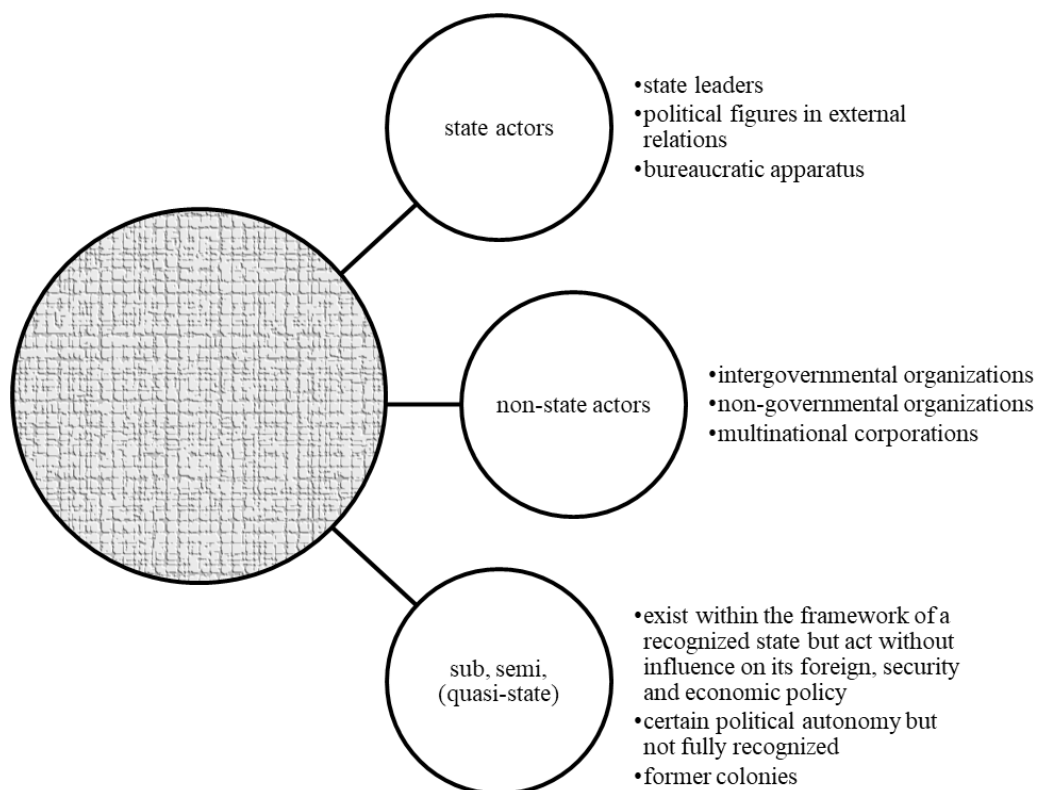
Chart 2: *Types of security actors. Source: World Politics and the Challenges for International Security, 2022.*

From a behavioral perspective, the classification attributed to an actor implies a certain expectation for his behavior in terms of regulation and management – that is, the strategies and tactics it applies in the context of social dynamics (norms, engagement, code of conduct, structure, hierarchy, organization, revision), primarily from a security perspective (Chesterman *et al.*, 2019: 121).

Finally, the state/non-state actor distinction assists diverting assessments of the structures and institutions created by these actors and through their interactions which provide regulation, goods and services —generally conceptualizing the state as a "normal" temporally and spatially limited order, as well as the feature of multilevel governance attributed to (non-)state actors (Pfeifer & Shwab: 428-451).

State actors and their influence in terms of security

Positive aspects

A state is defined as a fixed territorial entity with a given population that successfully maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and its sovereignty and authority are internationally recognized (Weber, 1946:78).

According to the classical understanding of the state, in the context of this paper, state actors take a central role in preserving state security, from the perspective of security management and top-down threat management approach. It refers to the measures and actions taken by governments to maintain law and order, protect their citizens and protect their own integrity within their borders (European Union External Action, 2024).

From a chronological aspect, it may been determined that security, in its "natural" state, is equivalent to state security, which without a doubt includes military defense, national security strategy and survival in emergency conditions and as a legitimate responsibility belongs to the state. It is also commonly noted that this is what is meant by the term "traditional security". Furthermore, it is the responsibility of governments to ensure that the country's citizens, institutions, infrastructure and resources are protected from traditional threats such as terrorism, insurgency, organized crime and local violence, as well as new security threats such as cyber-attacks and cyber-violence, hybrid threats, etc. (Hawks, 2018: 68)

The engaged literature suggests that security is essentially three-dimensional – objective (whether there is a real threat), subjective (whether and how the threat is reflected or interpreted by a certain socially organized group, i.e. institution and actor), and also intersubjective (what the threat represents and how the threat is perceived by all actors involved). (Kaldor, *et al.* 2013:157).

Non-conventional security challenges that were traditionally seen as issues of "low politics" or "soft challenges" are now recognized as "hard security" challenges, and many of the so-called "new" threats are actually very old: disease, gender-based violence, food (in) security, underdevelopment and organized crime are all traditional security threats, but today profoundly altered by globalization (European Commission, 2024).

Hence, traditional threats to the state, such as nuclear proliferation and espionage, remain high on the agenda of state actors; while so-called new and hybrid threats combine to create complex issues. These tendencies are the result of global border erosion, non-conventional sources of security threats and interact in ways that frustrate traditional conceptual definitions, maps and national policies (Giles, 2015:321).

Consequently, in summary, the conclusion is drawn that the sources of all listed threats can be categorized into *internal threats* from *non-state actors*, *external threats* from *non-state actors*, *internal threats* with *external intervention* by *state actors* and *external threats* with *intervention from within* by *state actors* (Summers & Gough, 2018: 86-106)

Namely, although the state-centric model of security management was challenged at the beginning of the 21st century, the state actors, i.e. the governments, continue to have the primacy in dealing with all the trends and currents of threats and challenges and the various sources of threats that were listed, due to their comprehensive approach and to the organization of the necessary resources, as well as the institutional capacities and the constitutional obligation to preserve order, the rule of law and guarantee the freedoms of its citizens through the engagement of government institutions, ministries, coordinated interdepartmental activities, commissions, consultations, etc. (OSCE, 2024).

As state actors, governments invest significant resources in maintaining internal security, including training and equipping law enforcement and security forces, developing advanced surveillance and intelligence-gathering technologies, and implementing policies and programs aimed at addressing the root causes of security threats. In this direction, it

is inevitable to note that states and their holistic approach in dealing with, above all, cyber threats vectored at undermining diplomatic, economic and defense-industrial complex on a given state, as one of the leading "new" threats confirms their undisputed, primary place in their deterrence (Jasper, 2015: 66).

State actors, along with many other non-state or semi-state actors, interact in a variety of ways on the international stage, including through diplomatic negotiations, military alliances, economic partnerships, and involvement in international organizations. Their actions and policies can significantly affect global peace and security. State actors play the most significant role in international security. They are entities recognized as sovereign states by the international community and have the ability to exert influence and power on the global stage (NATO, 2012).

Negative implications

Although the action of state actors in national and international security has a key role in their maintenance, it can still have negative implications, both domestically and internationally (Krahmann, 2005). Although state actors play an essential role in maintaining stability and resolving conflicts at the level of national and international security, they can also have negative impacts that contribute to insecurity and instability. In terms of their engagement, in accordance with the analysis of the available literature, some of the key negative consequences that have been recorded in the actions of state actors in security affairs during the past decades of the beginning of the 21st century are taxonomically listed (Breuer, et al., 2023: 71). State actors, that is, governments or their intelligence agencies, may engage in activities that lead to conflicts with other nations. Espionage, cyber attacks or covert operations can escalate tensions and potentially lead to *diplomatic crises* or *conflict escalation* (Mulford, 2016:89–107). *Cyber attacks* or economic espionage as part of a set of hybrid measures sponsored by a particular state actor can harm a nation's economy by stealing valuable intellectual property, disrupting critical infrastructure, or undermining economic stability, causing long-lasting negative effects on the economic growth and prosperity of a certain country (Džuverović & Stojarova: 2023: 309). State-sponsored activities that violate the sovereignty of another state's physical territory or cyberspace can strain diplomatic relations and lead to *violations of international law*. This can create an unstable international environment and undermine trust between states at the bilateral or regional level (Pericoli, 2024: 265). State actor-sponsored support for rebel groups or militias in other countries can contribute to *regional instability* and conflict. This can have ripple effects, leading to refugee crises and humanitarian disasters (Stivachtis, 2024:43-64). Overemphasis on national security can lead to *misallocation of resources*, diversion of funds and attention from pressing domestic issues such as health, education and infrastructure development (Ludvik, 2023:15). State actors engaged in a security competition can foster an *arms race*, diverting resources into developing increasingly advanced military capabilities. This not only drains the nation's finances, but also increases the risk of violent conflict (Barnidge, 2011:61).

Aggressive state actions in the name of national security can *undermine diplomatic efforts* and make it more difficult to find peaceful solutions to conflicts. Confidence-building and negotiation can become more challenging when state actors resort to covert or aggressive tactics in the domain of hybrid activities (Cingel, *et al.*, 2023).

State-sponsored actions that are perceived as aggressive or hostile can *harm a nation's reputation* on the global stage. This can lead to isolation, sanctions and loss of international influence (Obendorf, 2024:22). In the pursuit of national security, state actors may *violate civil liberties and privacy* of their citizens. Mass surveillance programs, intrusive data collection, and the erosion of individual liberties can lead to a loss of trust between the government and its citizens (Watt, 2021: 271). State actors may engage in unethical or illegal activities in the name of national security, including torture, extrajudicial killings, and suppression of dissent. These actions not only violate human rights, but also *damage the credibility* of a nation on the international stage (Fox, 2021: 1–24).

In this direction, it is significant to note that in order to maintain national security, with its features as a complex and multifaceted issue, state actors need to take action to protect their citizens and interests. However, it is crucial that governments strike a balance between security concerns and the protection of civil liberties, international norms and diplomatic efforts to avoid the negative implications outlined above (McNeilly, 2001: 181-200).

Non-state actors and their impact on international order and security

<u>Positive aspects</u>

There is a tendency in emergence of non-state actors, in whose category appear to belong those groups or individuals that work outside the jurisdiction of the government. These are organizations with enough accumulated power to influence and cause social change, although they do not belong to any established institution of a particular state (Mulford, 2016: 89–107).

At the international level, their activity is dichotomously divided into two main dynamics. The first is state-centered "great power dynamics." And the second is the pluralistic "global governance" also called *meta-governance* in which a plethora of different actors exist in parallel with states on a horizontal level, defined according to management terminology (Derks, 2012:27).

The main characteristic of the second dynamic implies that non-state actors increasingly engage and create synergy and partnership with governments and intergovernmental institutions, thus making politics and the international system much more complex than previous times and functioning in different formats (philanthropic foundations, think tanks, banks, large financial actors, technology companies, pharmaceutical companies etc.). Hence the phrase *non-human* security actors. To achieve political control of this setting, it is necessary to develop an understanding of these complex mechanisms that unfold in multiple dimensions, levels and locations (Romaniuk & Marton, 2022: 270-276).

From a quantitative perspective, the actual number of these actors has been increasing significantly over the last few decades along with the overall development of globalization. They acquire and in continuity perform many functions that until recently were performed by governments, that is, public authorities. In the context of determining their place in terms of the influence they have, non-state actors in all their emergent forms bring constitutive issues to the public agenda, lobby policy makers, provide funds for both the private and public

spheres, formulate regulatory decisions, monitor their respective international agreements, resolve disputes, etc. (Kirchner & Sperling, 2010:213).

From the aspect of qualitative analysis, from an operational point of view, non-state actors almost never act independently. They are increasingly developing forms of cooperation between international institutions and national governments to achieve various goals, through involvement in commissions, forums, various mechanisms and types of management. In practice, they find convergent bases for the development of political long-term strategic goals or tactical convergence for the realization of similar short-term goals. They all share a special relationship with the state, which significantly shapes the politics of (in)security. The relations between these actors and the state actors are complex and are in a phase of continuous shaping, which imposes the need for their additional understanding in relation to their place and the role they occupy (Gheciu & Wohlforth, 2018:24).

At the international level, one example of such cooperation is the so-called multi-stakeholder initiatives based on spontaneous cooperation (grassroots), ownership participation, power sharing, better potential for exchange of experiences and, finally, joint action. However, such constellations exist not only at the level of international institutions. Even the most traditional state-centric international organizations like NATO are engaged and trying to develop much better cooperation with NGOs (NATO, 2024).

A concrete example of this kind of cooperation can be the conduct of foreign policy through non-state actors in third countries, as a return to the Cold War tradition (O'byrne,2022). Since in all states there is a government, that is, a majority and an opposition. Both are trying to take advantage of the opportunities provided by external actors to win the game nationally. In this direction, what is called the introduction of a kind of intervening, transnational variable in the domestic balance of power, favoring either the government or the opposition, comes to the fore. Sovereignty loses its meaning in the classical sense, becoming interdependent to a certain extent (Gueldry, Gokcek & Hebron, 2019:14).

There are different mechanisms that can be identified in this kind of dynamics. One classic mechanism is the "boomerang effect" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). It is a kind of liberal understanding in which a certain minority in a non-democratic country, such as women under Taliban rule, openly seeks support from the EU or a friendly government to pressure their matric government to break down barriers that would otherwise not be possible (Wijninga, *et al.*:139–162).

An inverse, external example is that foreign non-state actors, foreign governments, foreign international organizations that rely on local actors, local opposition or local minorities can push their political agendas. As an example, the promotion of democracy in the EU through the promotion of decentralized programs can be cited (Eur-Lex, 2007).

Another practice is for governments to rely on like-minded people, foreign NGOs, foreign lobby groups, etc., to crack down on and criminalize the opposition, in order to further pressure local minorities or oppositions, such as the examples of Syria and Yemen (Sellheim & Menezes, 2022:63).

Foreign governments can also rely on local military actors, juntas, local rebel groups, militias to exploit their interests. According to cyber operations records, there are nearly 20 countries that have used such proxies for their foreign policy purposes nearly 200 times in the last decade (Takahashi, 2019:1-9).

<u>Negative implications</u>

In the context of realist security theory, the state is the primary bearer of national security activities and the main actor in international relations with an emphasis on sovereignty that is vertically dimensioned ((Last, 2024:10).

Whereas, in accordance with the traditional classification, non-state actors are divided into two categories: international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and transnational or international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Non-state actors, within the overall set of established relations and positioning, in the implementation of their agendas may find themselves in a position of direct confrontation with other non-state or state actors in the domain of *paradiplomatic* activity (Genschel & Bernhard, 2017:62-77).

These situations imply the application of activities that imply interference in areas such as espionage, hybrid operations (terrorism, cyber attacks, intrusion into electoral processes, spreading fake news), unfair market policies, extraterritorial sanctions, and even direct armed contact (Barnidge, 2011: 39).

Non-state actors are organizations or individuals that have the potential to influence the activities of state actors, but are not *a priori* allies of a state (Plundrich, 2024:6).

Non-state actors are also placed in proximity to the paradigm of asymmetric threats and hybrid threats, especially when they demonstrate violence in the way they communicate (Стратегија за градење отпорност и справување со хибридни закани. Влада на Република Северна Македонија, 2021).

A concrete example is the presence of non-state actors in the cyber domain, but also their indispensable role as proxies in wars in the physical world in the context of geopolitical and/or sectarian rivalry (Hamas, Hezbollah), or embodied as gangs, mafias, clans, militias (Muqtada Al-Sadr's Al-Mahdi Army in Iraq) etc. (Collier, 2017: 25-47).

In order to precisely determine the place and essential role of state and non-state actors, it is indispensable to point out that there is a symbiotic relationship between them. In particular, any non-state actor has an imposed obligation to register its legality within the framework of a state actor in order to establish its status and place, which is required by international law, including the principle of respect for human rights (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023).

Conclusion

It is significant to note that the distinction between state and non-state actors is not always clear. For example, some non-state actors may receive support or even sponsorship from certain states, blurring the lines between these categories. Additionally, the rise of hybrid means, where state actors use non-state proxies to achieve their goals, further complicates this division. As the global security landscape evolves, the roles and interactions of these actors continue to change, emphasizing the need for dynamic analysis and definition.

Security governance involves the coordinated management and regulation of issues by multiple and separate authorities, interventions by both state and non-state actors (depending on the issue), formal and informal arrangements, which are reciprocally structured by discourses and norms with the intention of targeting certain outcomes in the domain of national and international politics.

Over time, both state actors and non-state actors produce parallel, interconnected and interdependent political economies in which the boundaries between formal and informal, legal and illegal activities, regulation and coercion are largely blurred.

Hence, this irreversible norm implies a hybrid policy of association and integration between governmental and non-governmental actors, which additionally brings opportunities, benefits, but also risks and a high cost. In such a system, state and non-state actors need each other to advance their goals. Namely, even the largest state actors are required, conditionally speaking, to hire non-state actors.

Although states use non-state actors to achieve their strategic goals, they have a legal obligation under national legislation and international law to regulate the actions of non-state actors. The obligation of state actors implies a duty to monitor the behavior of non-state actors and to act when necessary, including through additional regulation or other forms of standardized setting.

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