

Territorial Revanchism in the Multipolar World

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Abstract

The study postulates how Territorial Revanchism will affect the Great Powers' conduct—Russian and Chinese territorial pivot in their backyard to gain control over the territories they claimed to be their historic part, while persuading other middle powers—Iran and Turkey, to follow suit, pursuing aggressive territorial revanchist policies in their backyard. As their current strategic approaches are evident how Russia and China are gradually bent on regaining their control in Ukraine and South China Sea respectively, presenting them two principles territorial revanchist Great Powers in this age of multipolarity. As far as the middle and regional powers—Turkey and Iran, are concerned to pursue their territorial revanchist ambitions, they are not powerful enough to shape the geopolitics in their favour. Instead, they are trying to challenge it purposefully to further their own interests. Given the rise of proxies in the battle zone and their utilization by some revanchist powers, this tendency may foster anarchy and chaos in the global politics. How Territorial Revanchism has challenged the existing alliance politics, ushering an era of multipolarity in the international system, is another concept to be explored in this study.

Key Words: Geopolitical, Territories, Territorial Revanchism, South China, International System.

1. Introduction

By definition, Revanchism is a state's foreign policy approach to regain control over the areas that were earlier parts of it and now are out of its direct control (Snegovaya & Laniszka, 2024). It is contingent to geopolitical and ideological reasons the one state aspires to take targeted territory mainly by using force (Snegovaya & Laniszka, 2024). Derived from the French word “Revanche”, Territorial Revanchism traces its foundation from the Kingdom of Prussia's control of French territories after the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 and the resultant French nationalist sentiments of

revenge that followed, to take back those territories—ultimately fueling global conflicts as the nations witnessed in the World Wars (Jay, 1986).

This study argues that American ‘unipolar movement was not the ending point of Territorial Revanchism, as commonly it claims in the liberal discourse. Rather, it further galvanized this process which ultimately encouraged other nations to pursue their territorial revanchist ambitions through this old, albeit, hawkish approach. By focusing on development in the recent era, this study will only cover the territorial revanchist behaviour of some major states in general and the Great Powers in particular, since 9/11. It also describes that competition among revanchists will be influenced more, in part, by their hardcore old geopolitical aspirations, while the intent of ideological promotion will take less ground, if not a total denial in the future. By definition, Revanchism is a vast concept in the global context involving even irredentism—an ethnic and cultural rejuvenation the one state pursues under the wider revanchist system, but focus of this study, therefore, is oriented only on how purely Territorial Revanchism has influenced the behaviour of Great Powers in this age of multipolarity.

As majority of Great Powers were Empires in their heydays, their current Territorial Revanchism traces its origin back to the old Empire’s geopolitical design they were powerful enough, at least, in territorial terms. And this study will keep this aspect into consideration.

For example, Russian attack on Ukraine is contingent to securing more land swaths in its western borders in a time of NATO’s eastward expansion than to promote any political ideology (Romano, 2014). Thus, Russian attack on Ukraine in 2021 and its continuing westward expansion to regain control of Donbas—the majority Russian speaking region in eastern Ukraine, has rejuvenated its classical Territorial Revanchism (Herbst, 2016).

In a nutshell, from the Chinese geopolitical pivot to take back Taiwan and other areas to the Russian attack on Ukraine and to the Turkish new Ottomanism in its older Ottoman controlled territories, at least, in Syria, Territorial Revanchism has a dominant role to shape the conflict behaviour among nations (Storm, 2025).

The middle powers may follow suit aimed at recovering what they claimed to be their territorial loss they suffered in the past (Wastindge, 2019). As Syria was one of the core parts of Ottoman Empire in its heydays, recent Turkish sponsored Jihadi militant’s coup of overthrowing Assad regime in December 2024 has reinforced this claim that the era of new Ottomanism for its revanchist territorial agenda is also unfolding (Tol, 2024). Iran being a regional power, its territorial expansion is also an existential phenomenon, given its older revanchist territorial ambitions in Iraq, wanting to restore its influence and power there (Mirza & Mushtaq, 2021). Current American geopolitical maximalist pivot in its backyard—from considering Canada of its fifty-one state to the direct control of Greenland and even the Trump’s decision of taking back the administration of Panama Canal, these recent case studies would not be analyzed through the prism of Territorial Revanchism, since the US is not a revanchist power (Bandow, 2025).

When it comes to the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh—a de jure region of Azerbaijan which was not under its control till 2020, the Azeris could

not admit whether did they deploy the Syrian mercenaries thanks to the Turkish support—a claim they have long denied, weakening the case study of Azerbaijan's territorial control, at least, under the proxy-led Territorial Revanchism (Synovitz, 2020). Central question underlying this new surge in applying Territorial Revanchism as an analytical approach is whether this phenomenon is resurgent or not?

2. Role of Territorial Revanchism in Shaping Great Powers Geopolitics

The conduct of Sino-Russian Territorial Revanchism will be analyzed here to understand how they are pursuing aggressive geopolitical policies to regain control over the areas which were in their control in the past. And how these Great Powers and their policies impacted not only on global system, but also at regional level, shaping the behaviour of other middle powers to pursue their own Territorial Revanchism in their backyard, is a question of most importance.

2.1. Russian Territorial Revanchism in Ukraine and the Former Soviet Republics

Vladimir Putin, the current President of Russia, reiterated once about the demise of the Soviet Union as the great and historic geopolitical catastrophe of the century, it is fostering an idea that the era of Russian Territorial Revanchism is here (Putin, 2005). Since then, Russian Federation has been oriented towards regaining control over the areas it termed as legitimate Russian security interests. In the wake of American unipolar moment and its NATO's eastward expansion that followed mainly in the Eastern Europe Russia considered this an existential threat (Gautam, 2022).

From a rhetorical posture to its kinetic application on the ground, there are four main incidents that drive the Russian Territorial Revanchism: i) Russo-Georgian war in 2008 after the Georgian pivot joining NATO, ii) annexation of Crimean peninsula by Russia in 2014 which was earlier part of Ukraine, iii) perceiving the same pro-West sentiments in Ukraine in 2014—that forced the Russians to sponsor pro-Russian separatism in Donetsk and Lohansk regions of Donbas in eastern Ukraine, and iv) the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022, while perceiving here the similar threat of joining Ukraine in NATO (Snegovaya & Laniszka, 2024). Russian attack on Georgia in 2008, for example, was the first European war in the twenty-first century, ceding the pro-Russian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Tbilisi aimed to build there Soviet-style sphere of influence. Since the Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili was wishfully inclined to join NATO, it compelled the Russians to employ the offensive strategies needed to prevent Georgia from falling into the Western orbit, attempting to restore its own sphere of influence in one of the critical areas of Caucasus in the eastern Black Sea Basin—a region once was in both the Soviet Union and Russian Empire. (BBC News, 2008).

Analyzing Russian Territorial Revanchism move in Ukraine in 2014, it first annexed Crimean Peninsula, situated on the northern rim of Black Sea and has only land-route with the coastal city of Kherson, which is also now under Russian control in the wake of Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Crimea has been one of the core maritime imperatives of Russia, taking it back would strengthen the Russian Black Sea Fleet—the principle Russian naval fleet to protect its maritime interests in the wider

Black Sea basin. Furthermore, maintaining control over Crimea will undoubtedly strengthen the Russian military power for its revanchist moves (CSIS, 2025).

Current Russian Territorial Revanchism in Ukraine is solely focused on controlling the eastern region of Dnieper River where enough Russian ethnic population resides. To get things done, Russia first sponsored separatist groups loyal to Kremlin in Donetsk and Lohansk regions of eastern Ukraine. They were the forces behind the Russian long-term strategy how to clear the ground for a wider military operation to gain a permanent buffer along its western border. When Kiev either did not pay attention to the Kremlin's concerns about its tendency of joining NATO or it was wishful that "sanity" would prevail, Russia launched a military offensive in 2022 in the same eastern Ukrainian region (Snegovaya & Laniszka, 2024). Hence, Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 helped strengthen what President Putin has long been planning to achieve, incorporating all of Russian speaking and pro-Russian land and politics under Kremlin control. By doing so, Russia has clearly reiterated that the area called "Novorossiia" among the Russian elite circles and which is situated in the eastern part of Dnieper River, has historically been a part of Russia and its rich history (Diakonov, 2025).



Source: *Institute for the Study of War*

To its benefit, especially keeping its long-term strategy in mind, Russia has planned to tighten its control over the Black Sea along with connecting it with pro-Russian Transnistria, a breakaway region in the northeastern Moldova, containing any land-based or hostile naval power in the Black Sea Basin. It would ultimately help to build a secure pro-Russian western buffer the Russians are fighting for (Place, 2024).

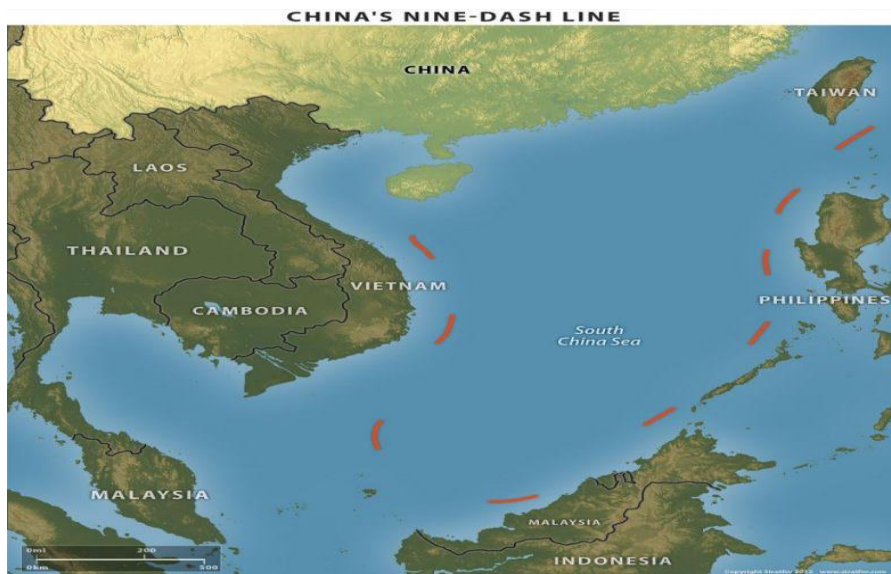
The role of Territorial Revanchism in shaping the Russian current geopolitical approach argues that this tendency will continue to influence its pivot of foreign policy agenda in the future. And how current Russian Territorial Revanchism will impact the regional and global geopolitical situation in the broader spectrum, is also an important question to be investigated as this phenomenon has deep implications not only for Europe but also globally.

2.2. Emergence of Chinese Territorial (Maritime) Revanchism

Characterized by Chinese nationalists and, in particular, by its ruling Chinese Communist Party, Chinese Territorial Revanchism traces its origin back from the era of ‘Century of Humiliation’ (1839-1945) (Gries, 2004). How the outsider powers ceded and Balkanized wider Chinese Empire’s land, while weakening it geopolitically—a traditional wisdom has been preoccupied the ruling Chinese government. This is also the inherent cause of rising Chinese maritime revanchism, shaping its current geopolitical stratagem (Gries, 2004).

The Current spate of Chinese Territorial Revanchism started in 2019 from initiating its extradition bill in Hong Kong—a former British territory that was given back to China in 1997 only under the conditions of protecting Hong Kong’s democratic rights and individual freedoms (Orchard, 2019). Perceiving massive western influence in Hong Kong, the Chinese government took its direct control altogether in 2019. Now Chinese authorities want to expand eastward even incorporating Taiwan Island under its One China policy—a clear indication of rising Chinese Territorial Revanchism. To gain its direct control over the supposed maritime areas mainly in the South China Sea and its surrounding waters, reinforcing its maritime Revanchism—the Chinese government claims that these areas were once part of the Chinese Empire, owing to historical and geopolitical reasons (Perkins, 1998).

Analyzing Chinese Territorial Revanchism mainly in maritime realm, its maritime doctrine posits two core principles; i) controlling South China Sea under “Nine Dash Line”—a loose maritime boundary line from the East China Sea to the South China Sea, hitting many smaller South East Asian Nations’ Exclusive Economic Zones, and ii) taking back Taiwan in a way to prevent any outsider force from challenging Chinese maritime power in the East China Sea (Gao & Jia, 2013).



Source: *Stratfor Worldview*

While Beijing has long-held claims that South China Sea has been a critical part of its Empire-building and survival, as majority of Chinese global trade depends on this sea. Thus, disruption any of archipelago-ridden waterways or blockage of South China Sea's critical chokepoints will equally mount an undermining effect the Chinese power will face (Gao & Jia, 2013). As far as it is considered a question of survival, South China Sea is believed to be considered a primary component in broadening the revanchist pivot the current Chinese Communist party is asserting for. As it was denied in the United Nations' ruling on the Law of Sea in 2016 to undone China's historic and legal standing of Nine Dash Line, it compelled China even more to reinforce its territorial revanchist position in its backyard (Burgess, 2020).

In this age of Rising Chinese economic might and its fast transformation into military might has alarmed both the regional and global powers to counterbalance this. The United States, in particular, has perceived the rise of China in any shape is a direct threat to its own maritime hegemony over high seas, while forcing it to build alliances with likeminded nations that share more or less the same American concern in the region (Baker, 2016). Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is the one hallmark example in which the US, India, Japan, and Australia came together to counter the assertive Chinese geopolitically-motivated Territorial Revanchism both in-land and maritime domains (Buchan & Rimland, 2020).

Away from these multilateral approaches, the US has also established deep operational and strategic relations with Australia and Japan. To give Japan F35 fighters and Anti Access Area Denial weapon systems along with signing of nuclear submarines' deal with Australia, are clear examples that the US will contain the Chinese Territorial Revanchism at any cost (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

For Japan, securing its control over Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea are critical, since they could provide a maritime bulwark in a time of Chinese eastward naval expansion in the western Pacific. Given their geo-strategic and economic importance, both China and Japan claim their sovereignty over these tiny islands (Zhao, 2023). Chinese assertive behavior is evident that Beijing is bent upon taking these areas back. For example, China's stance that its control over these islands is dated back to the Ming dynasty and it has a "legitimate right" of taking control of these islands (People's Daily, 2003).

Given its One China policy, on the other hand, Chinese obsession with Taiwan under its control is also an important question of its historical, political, and even strategic imperatives. And it is clearly evident that the Chinese government under President Xi Jin Ping is trying to analyze the possible options, both kinetic and non-kinetic, how to take back Taiwan to make China great again (Global Guardian Team, 2023). That's why, the American establishment has been analyzing the likely war games findings whether the Chinese military would launch an attack on Taiwan either amphibious assault or naval blockade. This is a grave concern of pressing challenges ahead both for the US and its partner nations (Global Guardian Team, 2023).

3. Great Powers' Territorial Revanchism Affecting the Multi-Polar World

Some factors are important like how the existing alliance politics will affect the changing multi-polar world, in part, by Territorial Revanchism and the situation, that followed. By taking advantage of multipolarity, some middle and regional powers, Turkey and Iran, alike have also followed suit to regain control over their older territories paving the way for their own revanchist pivot.

3.1. Territorial Revanchism: A Challenge to the Traditional Alliance Politics

In this age of mounting Russian Territorial Revanchism in its Special Military Operation in Ukraine and the returning of US president Donald Trump in the White House, several factors will change the course the traditional alliance politics was operating. For example, Trump's desire to end the Ukrainian war, while advising its President Zelensky to stop the war and initiate negotiation with Russian President—a move that provoked her NATO European allies as a damaging blow to the alliance credibility, they are working to restore (Global Guardian Team, 2023). While the U.S. President Donald Trump's hawkish geopolitical rhetoric from incorporating Canada as the U.S.' fifty-one state to taking control of Greenland or even its policy shift towards Panama Canal, these are all indications that the future of Transatlantic Alliance and its cooperation is on a bumpy path, weakening the older credibility of alliance stability, while making its members wary about the Trump's aggressive geopolitical posture (Bergmann, 2025).

Considering the rise of China as an existential threat for the US but not for the Europeans, at least, in geopolitical terms—the ones though openly abide by this threat, but not the way the Americans considered it, exposing the limitation of alliance credibility over which it was based (Bergmann, 2025). Resultantly, it forced the American policy elites to search new allies that are not only geopolitically-driven but also consider the Chinese Territorial Revanchism as a direct threat to their own survival, while wielding the US' regional balance of power strategy too (Bisley, 2024). For example, the formation of QUAD and AUKUS—the quadrilateral and bilateral security and maritime cooperation agreements respectively among the US,

India, Japan, and Australia, are geopolitically-driven initiatives in which regional countries more or less share a common threat with the United States (Bisley, 2024). This changing landscape of security and the mounting conflict situation has made the NATO alliance model—which traditionally was built to contain the Soviet threat in the European region, less attractive, if not totally incompatible, than the current bilateral or trilateral partnerships the weaker and middle powers are gradually embarking on, given their flexibility in dealing with. Amid the limitation of NATO's force posture in Ukraine war, this situation will ultimately change the traditional approaches of partner states that have had long relied on NATO for their last resort (Ortega, 2020).

To defend their own positions; both the Russians and Chinese are not following the traditional way of alliance systems, on the other hand. They appear to be protecting their interests under any paradigm they consider appropriate. In waging a 'meat-grinding' war of attrition in Ukraine, for instance, Russia gained military support both from North Korea and Iran—the countries that do not openly claim to be the Russian ally (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). Deep Korean and Iranian military cooperation with Moscow in Ukraine and, in particular, helping Russia in its depleting artillery shells—the important military component to wage the war of attrition, has changed the tide in Russian favour. Especially at a time when the western military alliance could not replenish its own Ukrainian proxy with artillery shells—and it is difficult to believe when it would be available, weakening the NATO's overall alliance capability and force posture—even helping a single non-NATO ally (Luttwak, 2025).

Thus, Ukraine war has exposed the weaknesses of traditional approaches when it comes to relying on older multilateral alliance by the weaker state (Ruokonen, 2024). Given this and the rising quest for Territorial Revanchism among the Great Powers, traditional alliance system could find itself in a very hostile threat prism it would have to be lived within. This situation will ultimately run counter to the traditional mindset that the global politics is "stable," as the current multi-polarity is susceptible to fuel more anarchy and chaos—a situation where nations will be more obsessed to quest for Territorial Revanchism as a common currency of conflict for their national security.

3.2. Increasing Territorial Revanchist Pivot Among the Middle Powers

Analyzing Territorial Revanchism as a driving geopolitical force among the middle and regional powers, they are also adopting it to regain control over the areas they lost in the past—mainly in their backyard. This section covers how the modern Turkish state is destined to regain control over the former Ottoman Empire's territories near its borders along with analyzing the deadly Iranian regime's expansionist strategies in Iraq to build its own regional power.

3.2.1. Turkish Territorial Revanchism in Syria: A Wave of Neo-Ottomanism

To discuss it broadly, revanchist strategies of a territorial control are also being deployed by current Turkish government, utilizing both kinetic and non-kinetic means to regain influence mainly in its backyard, the Syrian territory, and other areas in the wider Middle East: North Africa and Horn of Africa, under Neo-Ottomanism, which was lost almost a century ago. From humanitarian support to the financial

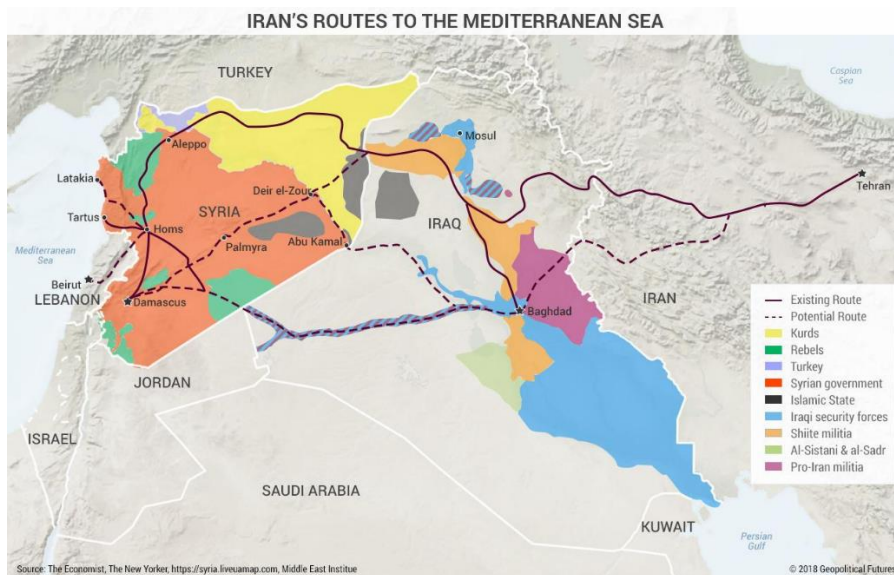
assistance, the Turks are not limited to non-kinetic strategies; they are sponsoring many likeminded militias and irregular forces to attain the Ankara's territorial revanchist objectives in the kinetic domain (Wastindge, 2019).

In its current drive of Territorial Revanchism in Syria, for example, Ankara helped to install its pro-Turkish government in Damascus in December 2024 through sponsoring the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, a Sunni militant outfit in the Levant, to overthrow long-held Assad government (Guneylioglu, 2025). Turkish support to like-minded groups and even some militants started from the first Syrian instability right after the Arab uprising in 2011 (Starr, 2014). In the ensuing Syrian civil war in 2011 and the period that followed, Turkish government received millions of Syrian refugees, providing them humanitarian assistance and ultimately using them for its own future soft power buildup in Syria (Starr, 2014). Given their deep strategic interests in the Levant, the Turks will strengthen their geopolitical position in Syria.

Turko-Syrian cooperation will gradually transform into a security and military partnership designed to build its own sphere of influence in the region. This order—as the Ordagon government of Turkey has long envisioned, would ultimately prevent any outsider power including Israel and Iran from intervening in or attacking the Syrian homeland in the long run. If it would continue to hold its power in the long run, the current Syrian regime under Sharra could become a latest bastion of Turkish Territorial Revanchism in the Levant and likely to becoming a vassal of Turkey (Starr, 2014). Take the Turkish Territorial Revanchism in its backyard, for instance, —as the concentration of this study is based on one state's own backyard or in its border areas, in particular, the other Middle Eastern regions—from Libya to Somalia across the way to Sudan which were once part of the Ottoman Empire, have also becoming witness of mounting Neo-Ottoman influence, but they do not fall into the very concept of Territorial Revanchism that covers the recent state-led geopolitical design.

3.2.2. Iranian Territorial Revanchism in Iraq

By sponsoring proxy forces like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Popular Mobilization Forces of Iraq, in particular, the Iranians expanded their influence across the Middle East, often invoking the Persian historical dominance—they were in a stronger position long time ago (Mirza & Mushtaq, 2021). Yet the current Iranian regime is Shia majority, it is exploiting this card to align itself with the fellow Shias beyond the borders stretching from Tehran to Baghdad and across the way Damascus to Beirut, incorporating them under one banner of Shia Crescent (Barzegar, 2008). But, Iranian Territorial Revanchism in Iraq is indicating how Tehran employed range of strategies and tactics to achieve its Territorial Revanchism in its backyard. From a historical stand point, Iraqi eastern part has had been one of the core spheres of influence the Iranians maintained under their control in the past (Friedman, 2018).



Source: Geopolitical Futures

Since the demise of Iraqi president Saddam Husain's regime and the rise of Sunni resistance in the Middle East and, in particular, mounting militancy both by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East, Iran used this threat to build its own Shia militias in Iraq—the Popular Mobilization Forces under the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, to expand westwards to make Iran great again (Mirza & Mushtaq, 2021). Away from building a stronger influence position in Iraq, the geopolitical design of Iranian expansion was over-ambitious, covering even other Levant regions, threatening other powers interests in the region (Mirza & Mushtaq, 2021). Unlike the Neo-Ottomanism, the Iranian Territorial Revanchism which depends on hostile militias and power politics in Iraq, in particular, has less ground to maneuver due to geopolitical and global challenges. Given the rise of Republican administration—hostile to the Iranian expansionist ambitions in the Middle East, in the White House, this could undermine further the supposed Iranian territorial revanchist pivot in Iraq for now, decreasing its influence to a lower level, at least regionally (Arango, 2017).

3.2.3. Territorial Revanchism and Proxy Warfare

As this is the age of Great Powers' politics in which Territorial Revanchism and proxies go hand in hand, at least, in some battlegrounds (RAND Corporation, 2023). Demise of unipolar movement is another factor that convinced the nations to adopt proxies owing to their operational and strategic flexibilities (RAND Corporation, 2023). In attaining their Territorial Revanchism agendas through proxies, state-led forces have two main operational leverages to employ: stand-off distance from the main battle zone and a least cost force posture in their backyard (Byman, 2018). In their own designed and targeted sphere of influence, Russia, Iran, and Turkey supported their proxies in ways they won't be spiraled into a wider conflict (RAND Corporation, 2023).

By relying on proxies, Russian support of separatists in eastern Ukraine in 2014, deploying North Korean troops at parallel with its own forces to liberate Russian Kursk region from Ukraine in 2024 (Choe, 2025), Iranian support to the range of Shia militias in Iraq, and the sponsoring of Sunni militants in northern Syria by the Turks, it is envisaged that the state's reliance on proxies for Territorial Revanchism will here to stay (Hoffman & Orner, 2021). Since the Chinese Territorial Revanchism has yet to start, at least in the kinetic form—and even the Chinese maritime militias have a limited operational posture—there are likely chances that the employment of proxies both state and non-state, will contribute to heighten this process in the future of warfare. It is increasingly becoming evident that Great Powers' reliance on proxy forces—both state and non-state, will here to stay, given their advantages they are providing in this age of Territorial Revanchism. This process will prompt even the middle and weaker powers to follow suit—an outcome which could run counter to their over-ambitious reliance on proxies, spiraling them into a wider conflict they may not be able to deal with in the long run (Hoffman & Orner, 2021).

Conclusion

A key to prevail, at least, in geopolitical terms, is that the Great Powers' aspiration of Territorial Revanchism is increasing. Yet there are many ideological and resource-based conflicts in some areas and they will remain to be a major bone of contention among the nations; they may not be able to alter the world order the way Territorial Revanchism has transformed the unipolar world into multi-polar world. While the Territorial Revanchism by one party will be considered an aggressive encroachment by the affected party, it will not be an aggressive attempt altogether. For example, the coming pivot of Territorial Revanchism by any state will only be limited in a targeted area the one “aggressor” has had long claimed to be its “historic and legitimate” part. Thus, Territorial Revanchism will be limited and targeted, at least, from the perspective of a revanchist state. In this age of multi-polar world, a range of weaker states may stand to exploit this situation to further their own revanchist or even irredentist claims. In a nutshell, Territorial Revanchism with all its tenets will continue to shape and heighten the ongoing anarchy in the multi-polar world.

Conflict of Interest

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