

Utilizing Militia Forces in Modern Warfare: Role and Challenges

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Abstract

The militia as an informal pro-government irregular force helps government forces through a range of asymmetric security threats. Since 9/11, the employment of militia forces has been on the rise. Although the informal Pro-Government Militias (PGMs) operate in juxtaposition with the regular land forces, they are loosely aligned with them. Given the nativity of its members to the battlefield, a militia is best suited to comprehend the operational and tactical situation and, making itself a viable option for state-led forces both from the perspective of low-cost force or its flexibility to deal with irregular threats. Most informal PGMs maintain a stronger ideological and political base, they do not often care about the limitation of their sponsoring state's sovereignty and the legitimacy of their actions. They may even develop linkages with the terrorist outfits for their immediate goals. This puts national security in grave danger. Given the risks, weaker states become vulnerable at the hands of their sponsored militants. Still, the state-led forces will remain inclined to exploit such paramilitary forces to let them shoulder the burden of national security against asymmetric threats.

Keywords: PGMs, Militia, Modern Warfare, Middle East, Irregular Warfare.

Introduction

By definition, a militia is a politically motivated light infantry and nonstate paramilitary ground force that aligns informally with the state command but functions primarily in attaining the state's interests.¹ These militias, which are informally referred to as Pro-Government Militias (PGMs), operate more or less like the formal paramilitary forces, but with great autonomy and plausible deniability in employing violence.² Thus, this study is entirely focused on exploring these nonstate ideologically motivated militias that are loosely aligned with a state. They share many tactical, operational, strategic, and even political tenets with the formal paramilitary forces, but are not a permanent organ of regular forces.³ Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell explained the phenomenon as they note: 'Informal PGMs have no official link. The connection to the government might be clandestine but does not have to be. The group's

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leader could report to or be a member of the government, the group might receive weapons or training from the government, or it might carry out joint operations with regular forces.⁴ The paramilitary forces that formally operate under direct state command like national guards or some Special Operations Forces (SOFs) will not be a part of this study.

As a state is faced with a range of challenges, employing militias presents a viable strategy to counter its opposing forces. With changing operational environment in the recent past, militia deployment in irregular warfare scenarios has been on the rise.⁵

A typical militia has a recognizable manifesto, agenda, and roadmap to achieve its defined objective. It struggles to attain a proper zone of influence. Its support is acknowledged by the central government and at least some segments of the society. Militia formulation enjoys clear or tacit support by the government institutions with an aim to protect shared and mutual interests.⁶ Article 1 of the 1899 Hague Regulation of International Humanitarian Law too considers such pro-state organized militia in the same status as the state forces in the battle zone, calling it 'denomination army.'⁷ Likewise, when it comes to considering prisoners of war, again Article 4(A) of the 1949 Geneva Convention treats both forces as complementary to each other with almost equal legal status.⁸

Existing literature on this topic is mainly focused on exploring the economic and geopolitical interests for which militia forces were utilized during the Cold War; however, preserving and spreading ideology and achieving strategic ends has become another evolving phenomenon, which is relatively under-researched, when it comes to analyzing the current militia-dominated operational environment in this age of irregular warfare.⁹ Phil Williams, the famous land warfare scholar, notes that militias' motivations have expanded in maintaining an ideological base through armed violence, especially since the Iraq War.¹⁰ Hence, this paper seeks to explore ideologically-motivated militia.

The use of militia forces in warfare is not a recent phenomenon, they have served the imperialist agenda during the colonial era and even earlier,¹¹ which is not a consideration in this paper. Modern warfare is oriented on its particular ideological persuasions for which the militias fight. The earlier era of the Cold War featured militia bands fighting as a proxy for one of the two great powers—the Soviet Union and the US, to serve their communist and capitalist interests respectively.¹² In the current Middle East warfare, on the other hand, there are various regional and global powers striving to protect their interests through their reliance on militia forces that are now more concerned to protect and

expand their respective ideological and strategic agendas rather than limited and mere economic interests.¹³ This is the journey of militia's ideological evolution from protecting its handler's agenda in the Cold War to fighting for its own ideological persuasion in modern warfare.

For a militia, its own survival is more valuable in a battle than it is for a state-led military, and this makes it fiercer. Being native to the battle zone in most cases, the militia has a better understanding of geopolitics, culture, social dynamics, and the terrain.¹⁴ Using militia also reduces military campaign expenditures, and they may crush anti-state threats efficiently. They, however, may become powerful enough to create difficulties for state-led military forces in certain cases.¹⁵

Considering the vulnerabilities of deployment in the armed conflicts, the major and middle powers are compelled to support some hardcore militias and militants in the Middle East, where the Islamic State (IS) poses a major threat as a nonstate entity. Ease in employment and cost-effectiveness of the militia forces makes them a preference in the modern conventional land warfare.¹⁶ Given their local agenda, limited strategic and tactical goals, local militias are easy to deal with. Foreign militias are more likely to maintain broader ideological prisms and expanding tactical and strategic goals; and they are likely to be difficult to deal with for the government.¹⁷ Religiously-motivated PGMs fighting IS in Iraq, for example, could create enormous security challenges for the Iraqi government as their ambitions are not limited to Iraq, rather expanded worldwide with followers of their ideology in most, if not all, regions of the world, who might be ready to join in.

In the broader context, the third world countries have generally found it difficult to deal with militia in the long-term as the post-conflict scenarios result in a security nightmare for such states. For major powers, however, these militia forces instead of posing a direct threat to their homeland security; offer them a standoff distance from the conflict.¹⁸ Consequently, this arrangement offers a win-win situation for major powers and the militias that prove a buffer for them from the conflict.¹⁹

Factors in Militia's Rise

Irregular Warfare and Failure of Conventional Military

As a range of militias and other nonstate militant organizations dominate the current operational environment, conventional forces are left with little space to maneuver in the asymmetric nature of warfare.²⁰ The armed resistance and violence today are mainly inspired by the

ideologies and have developed a persistent nature and flexibility in shapes, modes, and tactics. This has compelled modern statecraft to pursue some flexible strategies in the battle zone.²¹

Having the ability to operate as a low-cost paramilitary force, the militia forces are a critical option to respond to the irregular threats without the fanfare, compulsions, and strings, attached to them, unlike regular forces.²² Resultantly, the development and commissioning of militias has become a countervailing operational response to abate a range of irregular threats like terrorism, insurgency, urban warfare, and drug trafficking.²³

For instance, when the IS rose to grab mainland swaths of the Levant within the jurisdictions of states like Syria and Iraq, the state apparatus suffered heavy losses and the governments were forced to look for irregular options to counter the irregular threat. They needed the forces that were rather loose in their structure and operational mechanisms, driven by an urge to defend their own ideology that the IS threatened, and could camouflage into the locals whenever required. Finding it hard to counter the eastward penetration of the IS, the Iraqi government invested in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—the group of hardcore Shia militias to stop IS from projecting its 'jihadi' power in major Iraqi urban centers.²⁴

Similarly, when the IS expanded its self-proclaimed caliphate in the Syrian heartland by defeating the major force posture of the Assad regime, the latter looked towards Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to extend help through its irregular Shia militia in the region.²⁵ Fighting as frontline soldiers of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, these ideologically-motivated Shia militias learned new military operational and tactical skills—both in urban settings and mountain warfare. To liberate Aleppo, the most populous city of Syria, from anti-Assad regime forces, these transnational Shia militias prevailed with the support from Iranian and Lebanese formal paramilitary forces. As a result, these militias not only secured the Assad regime but also regained the territory from the IS militants. In a juxtaposition, they exposed the drawbacks and limitations of the Syrian government forces in countering an existential threat.²⁶

Although the discussions are generally made about the Middle East and Africa, the phenomenon is not confined to any geographical area. The far-right militia Azov Battalion in Ukraine too proved itself more effective than the Ukrainian conventional forces in countering the Russian-sponsored Donbass separatists.

Militia: The Economical Option

Deploying regular forces in a hostile battle zone and maintaining vulnerable logistics is a zero-sum game both from the perspective of operational security and financial viability. Likewise, given the tight defense budgeting, if a state were to balance its defense expenditures with the irregular threats, it has to consider unconventional tactics in the case of an active violent streak.²⁷ The PGMs provide two key advantages to the state: the political and economic leverages, apart from the military gains.²⁸ For dealing with domestic terrorism or any other irregular threat, these militia forces have become an ideal option for the governments.²⁹

While the US and Russia too are engaged in the Middle East through their proxy militias, the case of neighboring Iran is more interesting due to its geographical proximity to the conflict zone. Keeping in view Iran's recent militia utilization in the Middle East civil wars, it did not face an existential threat to its homeland security since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Shia militias provided a buffer to Tehran from the threats looming just across its borders, where the terror of the IS was rising and expanding eastward. Due to the majority Shia population in Iraq, Iran has always enjoyed a remarkable sphere of influence which facilitated the formation of the PMF as Shia militia alliance in Iraq, which played a critical role against the IS.³⁰ Iran did not have to deploy its regular forces on the ground; it rather trained Shia militants through its Quds Brigade, which is famous for special operations and irregular warfare. This strategy provided Iran multi-pronged benefits starting from preventing its regular forces from being dragged into a mixture of urban and mountain warfare to preserving resources of its sanction-ridden regime.³¹ Interestingly, Iran also served the US' interests in the region at a juxtaposition. By and large, PMF helped both Iraq and Iran in the fight against the obdurate enemy, which constituted a convergence of interests against the IS. It is not uncommon that rival states cooperate against a threat that is hostile to each one of them, their security, and common interests. Over time, the US-Iran covert affair attached the US and Iran with a single bond on the ground at least shortly.³² Iran was the obvious handler of PMF and the US had provided PMF legitimacy and the power through its local partners to crush the IS challenge.³³ Resultantly, Haider Al-Abadi, the former PM of Iraq, became an iconic personality for being the US ally and at the same time cooperating with Iran through his Shia identity.³⁴ The US-Iran tacit cooperation, however, is not something permanent and only restricted against the common enemy of both rivals.

Developing and deploying a local militia gives a lot of room to maneuver in an asymmetric threat prism and irregular battle zone for both

weaker and major powers.³⁵ As the state-led or foreign force posture is not welcome in responding to a complex local conflict, deploying local militia bands can offer a viable strategy to get complex things done.

Diminishing State Control

The endurance of the civil wars has decreased—if not wholly eliminated—the interstate conflicts. But this does not mean that states have ceased to fight; rather this has resulted in the development and empowerment of a range of nonstate entities that are nurtured within the state to counter an internal irregular threat or to fight off a potential threat elsewhere. Nevertheless, militia forces help states at a critical stage. While at the embryonic stage of a conflict, the cooperation that cultivates between the state and militia is conditional and based on mutual bargain over resource division and geopolitical interests, the *state-militia love affair* could be challenging in the long-run for the state itself. The militia might get strengthened to the level where it might evade and even defy its sponsoring state. Such a consequence is more likely in cases of the weaker states. Not only the irregular nature of current warfare but also the state response through militia formation undermines the writ and authority of the state, more particularly in states with weaker institutional and military mechanisms.

The question of state control becomes more relevant in two phases relating to militia utilization in the conflict. One is relating to the embryonic stage of a conflict when the state forces find it difficult to counter irregular threats and they need a militia to help them, while the second phase is oriented on the post-conflict scenario when one victor militia presents itself as the sole liberator and win peoples' trust to claim even the credits that should have gone to the 'behind the curtain' state sponsorship and support.³⁶ Throughout this process, it remains a delicate affair for the state apparatus to prevent a militia from developing an agenda of establishing its zone of influence beyond state control.

In the second phase, militia force induces the masses and other agents with the belief of it being the sole guarantor of their security and having the right to claim a territory. Both Shia militias in Iraq and Azov Battalion in Ukraine, for example, preferred the post-conflict period to maneuver the situation of state's failure in their own favor with public sentiments on their side earned through their effective battle zone gains. If they would not get what they had envisioned, they could directly challenge the state or even establish the so-called No Go Areas (NGAs) within the country to increase their pressure.³⁷ Away from setting up NGAs, these militia outfits could undertake land grabbing, looting public and private properties, organizing torture cells, and other criminal, and

even terrorist acts, to name a few, to spread the chaos.³⁸ For example, in both phases of instabilities in Iraq, its Shia militants in a so-called cover of informal PGMs adopted an outlook of an organized criminal syndicate in the country to undertake human rights violations.³⁹

After the fall of Saddam's regime, US gains in Iraq were denied by militia power. In all cases, the states would attempt total pacification of a conflict zone but in several instances, these gains are undone by hostile militia ambitions.⁴⁰ Given its ambiguous outlook, a militia can cheat the state authorities with its splinters or rebranded identities.⁴¹ The Iraqi theatre of war developed several militias after the failure of the central government's writ, and these informal militias dominated the social sphere of society as well. Phil Williams had noted the nature of militias in the context of Jaysh al-Mahdi of Iraq in these words: 'Indeed, most accounts agree that Muqtada al-Sadr has very limited control over his followers. To some extent, the JAM name was appropriated by groups of his followers heavily involved in criminal activities and political assassinations.'⁴²

Through establishing a parallel system of control, these militias demonstrated their upper hand over state authorities, particularly in the post-conflict scenario. It is the mishandling and mismanagement of this messy business in which governments succumb to failure. In fact, every politically-motivated informal PGM envisions establishing its own zone of influence independent of state supervision.⁴³ The post-conflict scenario, therefore, becomes critical when a state is most vulnerable to lose its control where it has to manage the victorious militias, other domestic and foreign spoilers, devastated and highly anticipating public for basic goods and infrastructure, along with filling the strategic spots before they are exploited by competitors including the militia forces.⁴⁴

Future Operational Environment and the Role of Militia

Challenging State Sovereignty

Despite the weakening of state sovereignty at the hands of 'agents of chaos,' the state system still has a dominant role in regulating its power within its jurisdiction.⁴⁵ In case of current irregular security threats, militia forces prove to be a good option for states but this too is a risky business. A militia would not always share the objectives of the sponsoring state and, therefore, would not always care for the latter's limitations about sovereignty, security, and integrity. Instead, it might be interested in consolidating its control in its zone of influence that it garners through public appreciation and official encouragement for its achievements.⁴⁶ The history presents several instances of a PGM

ultimately turning against its main handlers i.e., the sponsoring government and seeking to consolidate its own control in the area.

When militias gained substantial and unabated influence after the US military attack on Iraq in 2003, they dominated Iraqi urban centers and the Jaysh Al-Mehdi (JAM) of Muqtada al-Sadr exploited the post-conflict vacuum created by the US and Iraqi forces. By and large, it was a debacle to the American strategy in the battle zone that paved the way of Mehdi Army's human rights violations in the country.⁴⁷ Although several other ideologically-motivated Shia and Sunni militias grappled with one another to get what they envisioned, but it was the Mehdi Army that dominated irregular warfare theatre in the first phase of instability in Iraq.

While in the second phase of instability in Iraq where IS tore the Middle East stability apart, the Mehdi army along with other Shia militants tried to highjack the situation in their favor. But, given the changing geopolitical consideration, this time the Iranians could not let Muqta-al-Sadr repeat the history, making him just one part of the entire PMF militia machine that was forged by Tehran.⁴⁸ With this balance in the force, even the IS threat was contained, if not eradicated. The PMF could subsequently become a direct challenge to the Iraqi government along with threatening to attack the entities hostile to Iran.⁴⁹ These militia bands provided Iran with a buffer and a supporting corridor to establish its regional influence from Tehran to the eastern Mediterranean via Iraq and Syria.⁵⁰ This looked like an advance towards the restoration of the old Persian Empire in the region. In a way, Iran used these militias to expand its zone of influence by exploiting the vulnerable conditions in the region.⁵¹

In Afghanistan's context, there are numerous examples. Abdul Rashid Dostum, for example, had become so strong that he found it feasible to violate the sovereignty of the successive governments in Kabul despite being an ally in most cases.⁵² Owing to Dostum's developing political base in the North, he managed his ties with foreign countries including Iran and Russia on one hand and the US and allied forces on the other. His influence prevented the Kabul administration from initiating an open investigation against him of his alleged human rights violations.⁵³ To get things done, Dostum militia established a proto-state—a parallel system of control in the North with much to the chagrin of the Afghan Government.⁵⁴

By and large, the post-conflict scenario offers informal PGMs a range of rewards, and the chances to exploit state sovereignty is one of them—if the state mishandles the situation. Deprivation from a territory

or gaining effective control over it, either in the heartland or in the peripheral region, which is caused by the same militia forces that the state had nurtured is no less than a nightmare for national sovereignty and integrity.⁵⁵

Keeping in view the deadly business of deploying militia to shoulder the government challenges, the latter is likely to become more vulnerable at some stage. Employing militias comes with the fears and challenges for the secure and stable future of a state: Its national security is rendered uncertain in case its conventional forces lag behind in their operations and loosen the grip in the irregular operational environment.

Great Power Strategy in Practice

Employment of PMGs is a win-win strategy, particularly in an off-shore conflict or even in a fight that provides a standoff distance to the major and middle powers. However, this is not true for the weaker states that are local to become a direct target in the conflict.⁵⁶ For employing PMGs without getting embroiled in the conflict, it is important to maintain a proper standoff distance from the conflict. The US, Russia, and regional powers like Turkey and Iran maintained a proper standoff distance from instability and fighting in the Middle East and were able to manipulate the situation as per their respective interests. Backed by the military, financial, diplomatic, and public support, the militias help their handlers as their force multipliers. This function as a force multiplier is a critical advantage for the handlers that operate in various manifestations, from geographic linkages to ideological convergences and of course acting as the powerful fist beyond the jurisdiction or easy access.⁵⁷ This advantage was gained by the Pakistani military when it engaged local Pashtun people in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region that was under fierce control of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to shoulder the weight along with the Pakistan Army in its counterterrorism operations.⁵⁸ These local militias presented a two-fold force multiplier to the state forces as their mountain nativity and the quest for survival of their families and culture proved to be a formidable force in opposition to the TTP militants.

Likewise, when the IS militants occupied the Mosul city, the Iraqi government considered ideologically-motivated local Shia militias as the best opposite sectarian force multiplier that was ready to go to any length against the IS.

From maintaining a buffer to protecting conventional forces in irregular warfare, these militia forces can work either as a balancing force

or an alternative to the Special Operation Forces (SOFs) or formal PGMs, the ones trained for irregular warfare.⁵⁹ Due to the failure of traditional forces in countering terrorists, insurgents, suicidal attackers, and lone wolves, the states have to employ informal PGMs to eliminate the asymmetric threats.⁶⁰

In the Middle East, the US helped raise the nationalistic, ethnic, and sectarian militias like People Protection Units (YPJ) of Kurds, and Shia militias in Iraq to avoid repeating its strategy of 2003 Iraq War in which it had relied on the conventional force. In the second phase of instability in Iraq, the new enemy IS, which was not only highly motivated but also well trained in irregular warfare, exposed the US to a tactical nightmare. Utilizing local militias by aligning them with state forces was of more benefit for the US in maintaining the regional balance of power without setting foot on the ground.⁶¹ The US utilized militias to liberate areas from IS control and attained this goal in a very short period. This was less likely to happen through traditional warfighting strategies.⁶² These advantages come along with a major benefit of relaxed defense expenditures in case of managing militias and avoiding putting the national armed forces into the battlefield.⁶³

In short, middle and weaker powers employ a range of informal PGMs to pursue their multifarious strategic, operational, and tactical agenda. And this tendency is here to stay, given the changing nature of warfare from conventional to irregular.

Intra-Militia Clashes and Terrorist Rapprochement

Through clashes within militias or their closeness and rapprochement with terrorist groups could pose an existential threat to national security in the long-term.⁶⁴ The militias may switch sides from favoring the sponsoring state to the ones whom the state considers terrorists or rogue elements due to several contributing factors such as ideological, political, strategic, geopolitical, and economic.⁶⁵ The *cooperation* is conditionally bargained between the state and a militia force. And whenever a government fails to fulfill what a militia demands, the equation becomes uncertain for further cooperation. In the recent Middle East conflicts too, several PGMs pursued this strategy in their immediate best interest.⁶⁶

The splinter groups continue to emerge from militias through the conflict but they generally remain focused against the common enemy. Their feuds and even battles become fierce in a post-conflict scenario when the actual battle for the zone of influence starts. Dissolving the militias and mainstreaming them into the society becomes a major challenge for the state that had nourished and utilized them earlier. The

best way to defuse and mainstream them may be to employ them into a regular force or make them part of a formal PGM, while the remaining chunk can be pacified and merged into the open society. In such case, it is easier to mainstream local militia than an off-shore foreign militia, and even the employment of militias is not always the best option owing to the particular ideals and rigidity that the members of the militia might have developed during their fight against an enemy having a particular ideology or identity. Any such effort for mainstreaming has to be based on a deradicalization or pacification program. If executed successfully, this approach may do wonders. Even the success stories of terrorists' mainstreaming in Pakistan are on the record where Pakistani government successfully pacified its terrorist-ridden FATA areas and reengaged the local militants to become productive members of the society.⁶⁷ This could, however, be uncertain for foreign militia bands as they maintain worldwide ideological tentacles.

It is a risky affair when a state is exposed to militia-terrorist rapprochement or their covert ties as this immediately brings the national security under imminent threat.⁶⁸ In the case of the Syrian Civil War, those militias that fought primarily to overthrow Assad Regime, later on, engaged against each other for resource division or preserving their local zone of influence. These inter and intra-militia clashes failed strategies that the sponsoring states had originally devised against the Assad regime in Damascus.⁶⁹ Such incidents undermine cooperation between state forces and militia, and the militia itself may suffer through leadership disputes, demoralization, factional fighting, and squabbles over resources.⁷⁰

Over time, some militia groups splinter out and align themselves with the outfits that are otherwise considered terrorist in a quest to survive for another day. Intra-militia clashes are complex but rather easy to defuse, but their rapprochement with terrorist groups is highly dangerous. In the Middle East, some militia groups shifted from being pro-state liberator forces to anarchist or terrorist forces aligning with the Al-Qaeda and other militant entities.⁷¹

The militia-terrorist rapprochement occurs when militia handlers start feeling relaxed in a post-conflict phase and are not attentive enough to the aspirations and expectations of the fighters in the militias. Azov Battalion was, for instance, exposed as far-right and white supremacist after the conflict in disregard to the sponsoring state's limitations.⁷² Likewise, PMF became a major concern for Iraq in the post-conflict situation that the PMF or any of its constituent group could undermine national security.⁷³

Eliminating the rogue elements from militias remains a major concern for the government as they have the potential to inflict serious harm to the stability of the latter and even of the state. Being part of an active state-led effort to share its battle zone burden, rogue elements of a militia could collect many weak points and loopholes to exploit them in a critical time. Dismantling such elements with the traditional approach of using force is not a preferred option.⁷⁴ In certain cases, state authorities might prefer to ban such elements, arrest or decapitate their leadership to demoralize them. Practically, this may win them more sympathizers and it is a highly difficult, rather zero-sum game to defuse the crisis. Deradicalization followed by healthy engagement in the society for mainstreaming such elements remains the better option. This strategy has shown its benefits in the case of the PMF as well.

A militia might be a reliable option for a state's national security but not for the financially weak or administratively fragile states. However, for major and even middle powers, it is usually a win-win situation to employ militias. The militias, as well as the complexities attached to them including the intra-militia clashes and militia-terrorist rapprochement, are there to stay and even thrive with developments in irregular warfare.

Conclusion

As the era of the major power conflict resurges, the interstate conflict will mostly remain irregular in nature. The employment of informal PGMs to respond to the land-based irregular threats will remain a preferred strategy for the major powers in particular, and the middle and weaker powers in general. The weaker states would remain interested in utilizing militias despite the threats they pose. The phenomenon does not confine to areas like the Middle East and Africa, rather every armed conflict is likely to witness some militias in action to safeguard the interests of some states. Once a militia is defused and its members are mainstreamed through the deradicalization initiatives by the state, the tendency to return to the front would not always go and a PGM might reincarnate into another for the same or another sponsor. For instance, militias in Iraq and Afghanistan would not disappear from the scene even after their handlers will leave the battle zone. They may reemerge again as they are not just mercenaries, rather ideologically and geopolitically motivated fighters that have long envisioned establishing their own zone of influence. To conclude, the informal PGMs have long played an important role in irregular land warfare and the age of asymmetric warfare and great power contestation, they will continue to flourish. Further, the states will prefer them over direct use of conventional forces despite the vulnerabilities involved.

Notes

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