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On proxy war: A multipurpose tool for a multipolar world

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Abstract: Current literature on proxy war tends to miss a set of key factors germane to the study and practice of proxy war. First, proxy wars are distinct from coalitions and alliances because proxy wars, unlike the latter, are rooted in offsetting one's own risk by offloading it to another actor. Next, analysing proxy relationships and risk through agency theory, network theory, and theories of power illuminate five basic models of proxy relationship – coerced, exploited, transactional, cultural and contractual. These models provide a new understanding of how strategic actors can best leverage a proxy. Moreover, these models provide a basic understanding of what specific types of proxies cannot do. For example, coerced and exploited proxies cannot be counted on for complicated work, or long-duration operations. Transactional proxies, given the business agreement between the principal and proxy, can be counted on to go to the razor's edge together. Nonetheless, task completion accelerates dyad divergence, and mission accomplishment usually results in transactional solvency. Cultural and contractual relationships are tight-bonded, facilitate complicated missions, and can operate for long periods of time. As a result, strategic actors looking to invest in proxy strategies are best served when utilising cultural or contractual proxies.

Keywords: proxy war, proxy warfare, irregular war, power relationships

1 Introduction

Today's international system is the womb in which obfuscated wars are fought. Leading proxy war theorist Andrew Mumford asserts that, 'Proxy wars are the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome'.[1] Although a useful starting point, this definition, and those that rely on the idea of indirectness fall short of fully illuminating the form, character and utility of proxy war.

Instead of indirectness, proxy wars rely on one actor directly involving itself in a conflict through varying degrees of obfuscation. Obfuscated methods in proxy wars may take several forms – from manufactured insurgencies and irregular warfare to technology diffusion and financial support. Nevertheless, proxy war is one of the most prolific and profitable forms of obfuscated war today. Furthermore, unlike insurgencies, proxy war is versatile because it straddles the spectrum of conflict. Proxy strategies provide policymakers with a useful tool by decreasing political and domestic risk at home through abstruse involvement. Proxies also provide policymakers with a useful tool because operating through an intermediary offloads strategic and tactical risk (i.e., the preponderance of death and dying that accompanies warfighting) to an intermediary. Moreover, proxy force employment can span the spectrum of conflict – from competition to crisis, which then leads to armed conflict. Simultaneously, proxy force employment can support operations from policing to large-scale combat operations – the aggressor's capabilities and intentions are the primary limiting factors.

The Cold War dominated the post-World War II (WWII) international system until the Soviet Union's demise in 1991. A brief period of American unipolar dominance ruled the international system following the Cold War, resulting in some theorists asserting that Western liberal democracy had won out.[2] Other more astute observers cautioned against such naivety and warned that as technology brings the world closer together, a new era of strategic competition would likely emerge.[3] Within international relations theories, Al Qaeda's 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks on the United States proved the Realists more right than

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1 Mumford, A. (2013). *Proxy Warfare*. Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 11.
2 Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history? *The National Interest, 16*, pp. 3-18. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184.
3 Huntington, S. (1993). The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs, 72*(3), pp. 22-49. doi: 10.2307/20045621.

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wrong, and the Liberals, like Fukuyama, more wrong than right. Further, 9/11 close the book on American unipolarity and ushered in a fresh period of multipolar strategic competition which reverberates today.

Accordingly, today's international system is in a protracted period of fluctuation as a small collection of strategic actors' jockey for primacy with one another. China and Russia are actively working to upend the United States as the leader in international affairs.[4] On the other hand, transnational terrorism, which became a strategic boogeyman following 9/11, significantly cut into America's reputation abroad and reduced its standing in the international community, both from a practical and moral position.[5]

The post-9/11 increase in polarity effects uncertainty within the international system. Fewer poles create more certainty and stability within the system, whereas more poles decrease certainty and stability therein.[6] During the Cold War, for instance, American policy focused on the containment of the Soviet Union and the expansion of liberal, democratic and capitalistic values.[7] The Soviet Union, on the other hand, focused on growing its brand and principles across the globe, while denying the expansion of Western values.[8]

In today's contested strategic space, two primary themes frame the environment in which actors operate to advance their self-interest. First, today's international community values stability, that is, the absence of international armed conflict, because of the resulting economic and domestic benefits.[9] Consequently, the international community, directly and indirectly, shuns the use of war for territorial conquest, regime change or coercion. Second, as international relations theorist Charles Glaser comments, 'Nuclear weapons enhance deterrence, thereby moderating competition and reducing the probability of war between states'.[10] However, more to the point of this paper, international relations scholar Kenneth Waltz states that nuclear weapons are not war's great neutraliser, but rather, the impetus for war to move from traditional approaches to alternative means.[11] These two factors are the prime motivation for war moving from an overt use of brute force in pursuit of policy objectives, to something more discrete, limited and obfuscated.

War, for its part, has shifted alongside the evolution of the two factors mentioned above. War has become more limited and obfuscated. The increase of the fait accompli and proxies in armed conflict reflects this strategic shift. Scholar Dan Altman writes that since the end of WWII faits accompli are the primary method of territorial conquest because of the international community's reluctance to embrace overt war as it did in the past.[12] Altman further suggests that today's faits accompli, i.e., attempting to make policy gains while operating below the threshold of quick detection and large-scale war, follows a simple pattern. According to Altman, the aggressor obtains a small piece of enemy territory before the opponent realises that it happened.[13] Next, the aggressor demonstrates that attempting to retake the territory will be too costly for the opponent, which is done through posturing and signalling.[14] Finally, the aggressor holds the territory and staves off war through deterrence and manipulating the international system's rules and norms.[15] Russia's annexation of Crimea, coming on the heels of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, immediately followed by the annexation of large portions of Ukraine's Donets River Basin (Donbas), are modern examples of the role of faits accompli in modern war.

A proxy war is the other primary method in which nation-states vigorously pursue their respective self-interests in a strategic environment that outwardly shuns and deters war. Indeed, proxy war in the post-Cold War strategic space is gaining considerable ground for policymakers interested in continuing to compete for primacy, resources and influence in an increasingly connected world.[16] Proxy

4 2022. "National Security Strategy," *United States Government*, 12 October 2022, accessed 18 December 2022, Available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.

5 Wike, R. et al. (2021). US image plummets internationally as most say country has handled coronavirus badly. *Pew Research*, 15 September. Accessed 6 July, 2021. Available at https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/.

6 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita. (1978). Systemic polarization and the occurrence and duration of war. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 36*(4), p. 242. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/173799.

7 Avery, P. (2012). Confronting Soviet power: U.S. Policy during the early cold war. *International Security,36*(4), pp. 172-174. doi: 10.1162/ISEC_a_00079.

8 Figes, O. (2014). *Revolutionary Russia, 1891-1991: A History*. Metropolitan Books, New York, pp. 230-243.

9 "National Security Strategy," United States Government, 8-10.

10 Glaser, C. (2010). *Relational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p. 242.

11 Waltz, K. (1964). The stability of a bipolar world. *Daedalus, 93*(3), pp. 895-896. Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026863.

12 Altman, D. (2020). The evolution of territorial conquest after 1945 and the limits of the territorial integrity norm. *International Organization, 74*(3), p. 491. doi: 10.1017/S0020818320000119.

13 Altman. The evolution of territorial conquest. p. 491.

14 Altman. The evolution of territorial conquest. p. 491.

15 Altman. The evolution of territorial conquest. p. 491.

16 Mumford, A. (2013). *Proxy Warfare*. Polity Press, Cambridge, pp. 110-112.

war's presence is even more alarming when the proxy relationships are articulated because doing so illuminates many proxy wars hidden behind misleading language (Figure 1).

2 Methods and limitations

In this paper, I explain how proxy wars fit within today's international environment and I provide a further refinement to the concept's ontological framework. I used process tracing to identify causal mechanisms in principal-proxy relationships, which is used to construct a set of five relationship models between principals and proxies. Each model comes with a set of considerations and expectations based on the relationship between the proxy and the variables upon which they are measured. The variables include regulatory ties, regulatory bonds, the solidity of the bond, agency cost, time and the balance of risk.

Following explaining the structure of proxy war and principal-proxy relations, I survey the five basic relationship models in proxy war – coerced, exploited, transactional, contractual, and cultural – to details the pros and cons of each of those relationships and how agency cost and risk both supports and works against the relationship. I conclude the paper with a set of assumptions and principles of proxy war which can serve as a guide for anyone attempting to study or use proxy war.

I rely predominately on secondary sources for this paper, which can be seen as a limitation. The primary reason for the use of secondary sources is that most primary source material relating to the case studies and models in this paper remains locked in secrecy with their respective governments. Further, many publicly released government documents contribute to the problems of misdirection regarding proxy war through the use of flowery language, instead of relying on straightforward definitions and terms. Nevertheless, I have done my best to parse the true meanings and intentions of relationships in armed conflict by illuminating the distinctions between alliances, coalitions and proxy relationships, as well as by offering a detailed set of definitions and frameworks to offset those limitations.

3 Mapping the proxy environment

3.1 Differentiating alliances, coalitions and proxy relationships

To better understand proxy war, one must first understand a proxy environment and proxy relationships because those two factors, beyond the policy decision to operate through an intermediary, are the foundation upon which proxy wars operate. The first thing to understand about a

Principal	Proxy	Conflict	Theater	Date
United States	Mujahideen	Soviet-Afghan War	Afghanistan	1979-1989
Iran	Hezbollah	Multiple	Greater Middle East	1980s-present
United States	Iraqi security forces	Operation Inherent Resolve	Iraq	October 2014-May 2018
United States	Syrian Democratic Forces	Operation Inherent Resolve	Syria	October 2014-present
Russia	Syrian regime forces	Syrian Civil War	Syria	October 2014-present
Russia	Various proxies	Operation Inherent Resolve	Syria	October 2014-present
Iran	Shia militia groups	Operation Inherent Resolve	Iraq	October 2014-present
United States	Philippine defense forces	Defeat ISIS campaign	The Philippines	Fall 2016-present
Russia	Separatists	Russo-Ukrainian War	Donbas area of Ukraine	Spring 2014-present
United States	Iraqi security forces	Operation Iraqi Freedom / New Dawn	Iraq	March 2003-Dec 2011
United States	Afghan defense forces	War in Afghanistan	Afghanistan & Pakistan	Oct 2001-August 2021
Russia	Chechen forces	Multiple: Russo-Ukrainian war, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Inherent Resolve, War in Afghanistan	Multiple: Ukraine, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan	2001-present

1. This matrix is not inclusive; it is a sampling of recent proxy wars.
2. Data comes from a variety of open-source information.
3. In instances when hard dates are unavailable, dates listed are an approximation based on open-source information.

Fig. 1: Sampling of Modern Proxy Wars.

proxy environment is that alliances and coalitions are not proxy relationships. Russian strategist Alexander Svechin helps with this distinction by stating that partners in war are either allies by interest (i.e., coalition or alliance members), or allies by duty (i.e., surrogates to which the work of warfighting is off-loaded).[17] Risk and agency are at the heart of the differentiation between alliances, coalitions and proxies.

The structure of alliances and coalitions more equitably distributes risk amongst partners based on each actor's capabilities and political caveats. This results from the fact that alliances and coalitions are arrangements in which all participants are willing contributors to a common set of aims. In turn, the agency costs (i.e., the suboptimisation that follows outsourcing work to another actor) in alliances and coalitions are relatively low.

In proxy arrangements, however, the principal (Actor A) offloads high degrees of tactical risk (i.e., the human and material costs of warfighting) to a surrogate (Actor B) to limit the impact of strategic risk (i.e., the political costs of war) on its pursuit of self-interest. In most instances, Actor A is stronger than Actor B and therefore Actor A uses various levers of power to manipulate Actor B to fulfill its objectives. This arrangement creates a principal-agent relationship between the two actors and this defining feature is what sharply distinguishes alliances and coalitions from proxy arrangements.

The distribution and use of resources are other noticeable distinctions between alliances and coalitions and proxy relationships. For proxy force utilisation, an actor must generally enable its surrogate. This is done in several ways, including providing the proxy with a host of resources such as personnel, weapons, equipment and advisors. Alliances or coalitions operate much differently. In those configurations, resources are pooled, or a member is assigned roles under its inherent resources. Furthermore, in alliances and coalitions, advisors give way to liaisons, whose focus is on facilitation, coordination, and communication. Meanwhile, in many cases fully integrated headquarters are the norm for alliances and coalitions, whereas proxies receive a centralised approach to command and control. Organisations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) typify alliances. At the same time, formations such as the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) and Combined Joint Force Land Component Command-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJFCC-OIR) are typical reflections of a coalition. On the other hand, Russia's command of its proxies in Ukraine's Donbas and its command of the 4th and 5th Syrian Assault Corps during the ongoing Syrian civil war are exemplars of this point.[18]

3.2 Proxy war 2.0

Cold War-era proxy wars are sometimes conflated with modern proxy wars. In fact, it is common to hear senior policymakers and military officers suggest that the West understood proxy war during the Cold War and fought it well, despite extremely poor showings in Korea and Vietnam. Nevertheless, Cold War proxy wars, ostensibly between the United States and the Soviet Union, focused on containment and denying the other power's ability to inject its political and economic ideology, whether directly or indirectly, into a weaker actor.

When differentiating between today's proxy wars and those of the past it is also important to dispel a couple of myths. First, proxy wars are not linked to one type or form of war. For instance, many discussions suggest that proxy wars are insurgencies or counter-insurgency strategies, but this is not the case. As the fierce, conventional battles of Russia's war with Ukraine during the proxy-laden 2014–2015 Donbas campaign demonstrate, proxy wars host bloody battles of attrition just as easy as insurgencies and other forms of irregular war.[19]

The role of irregular forces and non-state actors is often miscategorised in proxy wars. This is also a common misconception that can be attributed to how Cold War proxy wars were fought. That form of proxy war was characterised by a state actor and non-state actor aligned to combat either a state actor or a non-state actor. That traditional proxy war arrangement is no longer valid. Traditional irregular forces – patched together bands of fighters, existing militias and manufactured armies, to name a few – are common fodder for proxy force generation. It is also important to mention that private military companies, like Russia's *Wagner Group* or the American *Academi* (formerly known as Blackwater) are non-state actors. In all, incorporating the two pairings already listed in this paragraph demonstrates that six basic parings exist in proxy war (Figure 2).

17 Svechin, A. (2004). *Strategy*. East View Information Services, Minneapolis, MN, p. 139.

18 Miron, M., & Thornton, R. (2021). Emerging as the 'Victor'(?): Syria and Russia's grand and military strategies. *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *34*(1), 14. doi: 10.1080/13518046.2021.1923991.

19 Fox, A. (2022). The Donbas in flames: An operational level analysis of Russia's 2014-2015 Donbas campaign, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 2-8. doi: 10.1080/09592318.2022.2111496.

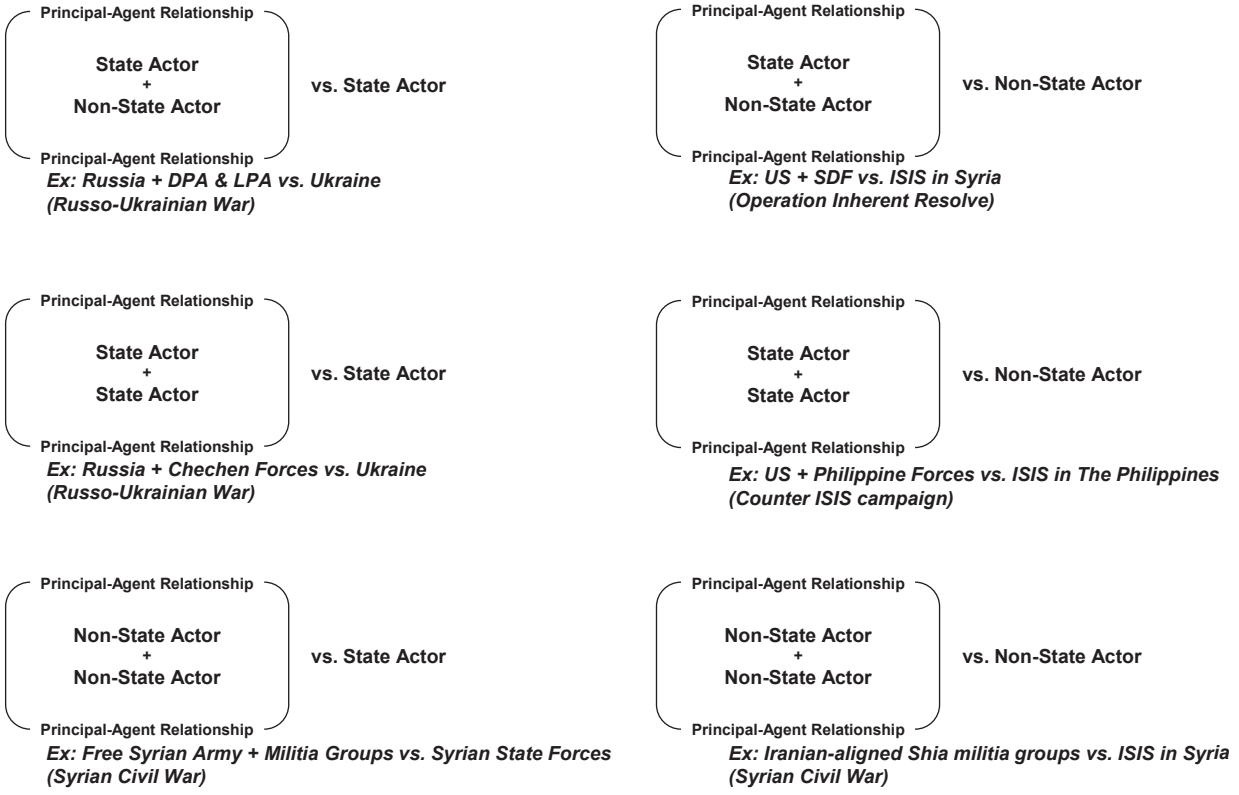


Fig. 2: State Actors and Non-State Actors in Proxy War.

To close this section, it is important to reflect on definitions. Undeniably, proxy war is a hotly debated concept and the concept maintains a bevy of both supporters and detractors. Nevertheless, proxy war lacks an accepted proprietor, a common framework, and an accepted set of terms, definitions and concepts. Despite many theorists and analysts' contemporary work on proxy war, none have achieved an authoritative status on the subject. As a result, this paper introduces its own concepts, definitions and terms within the proxy war banner with the expressed purpose of filling in existing conceptual gaps and improving the language and concepts within the proxy war.

4 Overcoming obfuscation in proxy war

4.1 Agency theory and proxy dyads

A clear understanding of the relationship amongst actors in proxy war is a critical factor in understanding the purpose, utility and benefits of proxy relationships, and thus, why they are so relevant in war. Agency theory and principal-agent relationships are the building blocks in understanding proxy relationships. This is because agency theory provides the basic shape, function and rules for proxy relationships.

Agency relationships exist when one actor (i.e., the principal) delegates or outsources work to another actor (i.e., the agent).[20] In proxy war situations, the principal is typically the stronger, more powerful actor, whereas the agent is the proxy. Nevertheless, it is dangerous to assume that a principal holds the upper hand in principal-agent relationships.[21] Information asymmetries between the principal and agent result in the agent maintaining hidden information, which keeps the principal in the dark regarding the agent's intentions, capabilities, risk tolerance and commitment.[22] As a result of those asymmetries, principals cede varying degrees of power to the agent, which manifests in agency costs.[23] Risk is another

20 Eisenhardt, K. (1989). Agency theory: An assessment and review. *The Academy of Management Review, 14*(1), p. 58. doi: 10.2307/258191.
21 Shapiro, S. (2005). Agency theory. *Annual Review of Sociology, 31*(1), p. 267. doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122159.
22 Shapiro. Agency theory. pp. 264-265.
23 Shapiro. Agency theory. pp. 282-285.

word for agency costs. Risk in principal-agent dyads often includes:

- suboptimised performance;
- an agent acting against the principal's welfare to offset tactical and strategic risk, or general risk aversion;
- an agent acting under its own self-interest at the expense of the principal's interest;
- difficulty regulating agent behaviour;
- an agent's vulnerability to being swayed by other strategic competitors;
- an agent utilising information as a commodity to gain or retain power concerning its principal[24]

In sum, agents are not necessarily innocent bystanders in principal-agent dyads, but often possess asymmetries of power for which principals must account.

Principals, on the other hand, offset agency costs through a variety of means, including incentive alignment, investment and compensation, and agent monitoring.[25] Agent monitoring in proxy war situations is vital and manifests in the principal's use of advisors to manage its surrogacy and their associated agency costs. In fact, the use of advisors in war is a primary indicator of a proxy relationship, as is the use of phrases such as *train, advise, assist*, *build partner capacity*, and *partnered security forces*.

The more that agency costs, or risk, impedes mission accomplishment, the more agent monitoring is a focal point for the principal. In strong-bonded principal proxy relationships, agent monitoring is minimal. In loosely bonded relationships, agent monitoring is high and often coupled with efforts to increase the agent's capacity. From an American perspective, the combat advisors used in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria during Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and Inherent Resolve are exemplars of this point. Russia's use of embedded advisors and using Russian officers to command proxy forces within the Donetsk People's Army (DPA) and Luhansk People's Army (LPA) is how Russia managed agency costs throughout its 2014–2015 Donbas campaign.[26] Beyond Ukraine, Russia continues this practice in its support of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad, as the deaths of Russian generals Valery Asapov and Vyacheslav Gladkikh attest.[27] Both men were leading proxy armies in Syria at the time of their respective deaths. In practice, therefore, principal-agent relationships are exercises in risk manipulation and management.[28]

In proxy dyads, a tie (or bond) is the product of the exercise of agency and power between actors, and they are measured on a scale from weak to strong. The stronger the bond between the principal and agent, the lower the agency costs, and therefore, the principal does not require a high degree of oversight of the agent.[29] Conversely, the weaker the bond between the principal and agent, the closer the principal must monitor and regulate the agent's behaviour because the relationship's agency costs are greater.[30]

Furthermore, when a principal-agent dyad completes its unifying mission the relationship will collapse, especially when neither actor was significantly invested in the other, or if promising alternatives to a continued relationship exist.[31] Regardless of the strength of the bond, proxy relationships, unlike alliances or coalitions, exist in a finite world because the relationship is operating against a clock with a fixed amount of time. As a result, principal-agent days will terminate shortly after mission accomplishment or, depending on the degree of power the principal holds concerning the proxy, when the proxy is no longer willing to support the principal, regardless of mission accomplishment.[32]

Moreover, outside actors can accelerate the relationship's fracture or suboptimisation by strategically targeting the proxy's vital interests, causing it to discontinue or pause its relationship with the principal. Turkey's attack on Syrian Kurd territory during the height of America's counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) proxy war is instructive. Turkey, growing weary of Syrian Kurdish strength and legitimacy because of their relationship with the United States, threatened Kurdish

24 Shapiro. Agency theory. pp. 281-282.

25 Wiseman, R. et al. (2012). Towards a social theory of agency. *Journal of Management Studies, 49*(1), 206-207. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2011.01016.x.

26 Holcomb, F. (2017). *The Kremlin's Irregular Army: Ukrainian Separatists Order of Battle*. Institute for the Study of War, Washington DC, pp. 7-9.

27 2017. "Russian General Killed in Syria Held Senior Post in Assad's Army." *Reuters*, 27 September, accessed 26 December 2022. Available at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-general/russia-says-general-killed-in-syria-held-senior-post-in-assads-army-idUSKCN1C22TW.

28 Fong, E., & Tosi, H. Jr. (2007). Effort, performance, and conscientiousness: An agency theory perspective. *Journal of Management, 33*(2), p. 164. doi: 10.1177%2F0149206306298658.

29 Magee, J., & Smith, P. (2013). The social distance theory of power. *Personality and social psychology review, 17*(2), 164. doi: 10.1177/1088868312472732.

30 Magee & Smith. The social distance theory of power. p. 159.

31 Magee & Smith. The social distance theory of power. pp. 160-161.

32 Bueno de Mesquita. Systemic polarization and the occurrence and duration of war. pp. 249-250.

regional hegemony and the Kurds therein.[33] The purpose of Turkey's aggression, known as *Operation Olive Branch*, was to lure Syrian Kurds away from the counter-ISIS campaign and into battle with the Turks so that Turkey could use the battle to neuter Kurdish strength and legitimacy. The trap worked and the Kurds broke with their American principal in Syria's eastern desert to return home and defend their ancestral lands and people.[34] Regular Turkish assaults, in turn, drove multiple operational pauses during the US counter-ISIS proxy war as the Kurds returned home.[35] Turkey clearly understood the principal-agent challenges and agency costs between the Americans and its Syrian-Kurd proxy force and exploited that juncture to advance its own agenda within a much broader regional war.

4.2 Power and proxy dyads

Philosopher Bertrand Russell offers what should be accepted as one of the proxy relationship's central tenets. Russell states that 'The laws of social dynamics are only capable of being stated in terms of power in its various forms'.[36] In proxy relationships, where mutual interest is often unsatisfactory at maintaining an agent's focus on the principal's objectives, power fills the motivation vacuum to harmonise the two actor's activities.

Political scientist Robert Dahl provides a celebrated theorem for power which posits that one actor has power over another actor insofar as the former can make the latter do what it would otherwise not do.[37] Bases of power are critical to Dahl's theory of applied power because they provide the tools and resources that an actor has at their disposal to exert power over another actor.[38] Put another way, an actor cannot exercise power over another actor without a base, or bases, of power. Furthermore, a relationship must exist between two actors for one actor to exert power over another.[39] This is important because if a relationship does not exist between principal and agent, then prescriptive and coercive power is often the technique needed to motivate an agent, whereas in strong, transactional principal-agent relationships, power is less coercive, and the principal provides the proxy increased freedom of action and self-governance.

Power moderates relationships through one of five forms. These forms of power are attraction, expertise, reward, coercion and legitimacy.[40] Attraction power is a situation in which Actor A relies on Actor B's fondness for the latter to mediate the conduct and collaboration between the two actors.[41] Expert power results from Actor A leveraging Actor B's faith that the latter possesses superior knowledge and information, and thus willingly submitting itself to surrogacy on Actor A's behalf.[42] Reward power is the ability for Actor A to levy rewards to Actor B in exchange for services rendered, or to incentivise Actor B to work as a surrogate on the latter's behalf.[43] Coercive power is Actor A's ability to dole out punishment to Actor B to cajole Actor B to work on Actor A's behalf.[44] Legitimate power, like expert power, results from Actor B's belief that Actor A possesses the authority to direct their behavior.[45] As this theory of power is juxtaposed with proxy war and principal-agent relationships, Actor A serves as the principal, and Actor B serves as the proxy. In proxy dyads, a blend of coercive and reward power is most often used to motivate agents and offset agency costs. This carrot-and-stick strategy is common in weak-bonded relationships. In strong bonded relationships, reward power mediates the activities between the principal and proxy because the agent does not require high degrees of external motivation or accountability.

4.3 Time

As noted during the discussion of agency and power, time preserves an authoritative grip on proxy relationships – in effect, finality characterises proxy relationships. Proxy

33 2021. "AP Explains Turkey's 'Operation Olive Branch' in Afrin, Syria." *Voice of America*, January 22. Accessed 18 July, 2021. Available at https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/ap-explains-turkeys-operation-olive-branch-afrin-syria.

34 Burns, R. (2018). Pentagon: Operations against ISIS in Eastern Syria 'paused'." *Military Times*, March 5. Accessed 18 July, 2021. Available at https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/03/05/pentagon-operations-against-isis-in-eastern-syria-paused/.

35 Ali, I. 2018. Turkish offensive in Syria leads to pause in some operations against IS: Pentagon." *Reuters*, March 5. Accessed 18 July, 2021. Available at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-pentagon/turkish-offensive-in-syria-leads-to-pause-in-some-operations-against-is-pentagon-idUSKBN1GH2YW.

36 Russell, B. (2004). *Power: A New Social Analysis*. Routledge, New York, p. 4.

37 Dahl, R. (1957). The concept of power. *Behavior Science, 2*(3), pp. 202-203. doi: 10.1002/bs.3830020303.

38 Dahl. The concept of power. p. 203.

39 Dahl. The concept of power. p. 204.

40 French, J. (1956). A formal theory of social power. *Psychological Review, 63*(3), pp. 183-184.

41 French. A formal theory of social power. p. 184.

42 French. A formal theory of social power. p. 184.

43 French. A formal theory of social power. p. 184.

44 French. A formal theory of social power. p. 184.

45 French. A formal theory of social power. p. 184.

relationships are objective- or tasked-based arrangements which means that as soon as the relationship is joined, the relationship's longevity begins to diminish. As a result, in many cases, military success accelerates disunion.[46]

When territory is in question, as it often is in war, the dynamic changes behavior. Terrain retention (a positive aim) and terrain denial (a negative aim), similar but distinct behaviors, are the two conditions of territorial issues. Russia's retention of the annexed Crimea and portions of the Donbas are exemplars of terrain retention. On the other hand, the American-led effort to wrest land from ISIS in Syria and Iraq through aggressive joint warfare demonstrates the basic process of brute force terrain denial.

In both cases, the principal finds a way to extend the principal-proxy dependency beyond that of just accomplishing a finite military objective. This tends to occur through the use of euphemistic terms that seek to abstruse the relationship's character and instead make the arrangement sound more like an agreement. As the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq offer, the phrase *build partner capacity* is the guise often used to obfuscate the true goal of access, influence, and territorial control.

Iran provides another example of this situation. Since the ousting of Saddam Hussein as the head of state of Iraq in 2003, Iran has maintained a stable of reliable, political and military proxies in Iraq to advance its own interests, and to counter those of the United States.[47] An array of Shia militia groups, supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, are the primary thorn on America's side, inhibiting tactical and strategic advancement in the post-Saddam Hussein strategic space.[48] The IRGC's supported militias, most notably Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, continue to operate on behalf of Iran in Iraq at the expense of Iraq's national stability, Iraqi strategic interests, and American interests in the region. Undeniably, the siege of the US Embassy in Baghdad in December 2019, the subsequent assassination of Quds Force commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani, and the ongoing exchange of rocket and missile strikes in Syria and Iraq between both parties highlight the US and Iran's long-running, tit-for-tat proxy war.[49]

Taken collectively, agency, power, and bonding generates five basic proxy relationships. Risk is the underlying feature that separates one relationship from the next, but outwardly this manifests in principal-provided freedom of action.

4.4 Five models of relationship in proxy war

The amalgamation of agency theory, theories of power, and time yields five basic relationship types in a proxy war. These relationships are not an end unto themselves, but instead a heuristic to generate an understanding of actor dynamics in proxy wars. The five models rest on two primary variables: a) the tasks to be completed on behalf of the principal, and b) the method of power that the principal uses to manage agency costs and counterbalance agency risk. The first two relationship models – exploited and coerced – blend coercive and reward power, which are basically two sides of a coin. The other three models make sure of other forms of power, which are highlighted in each model's section. All models are explained in greater detail in the following sub-sections.

4.5 Coerced model

Applied power is at the heart of the coerced model. International relations theorist John Mearsheimer asserts, 'Power itself matters greatly in dealings among groups, because possessing superior power allows a group to get its way when it is at odds with another group'.[50] Mearsheimer's proposition serves as a good starting point for understanding the coerced model.

The coerced model results from Actor A (i.e., the principal) impressing an unwilling or reluctant actor (Actor B) to work on its behalf, thereby making Actor B its agent or proxy. Coerced proxies tend to arise from a situation in which a conquering power has toppled an extant ruling body, but then enlists the previous regime's

46 Fox, A. In pursuit of a general theory of proxy warfare. *Institute of Land Warfare*, Land Warfare Paper 123 (February, 2019), pp. 6-7.

47 Boot, M. (13 October, 2021). Iran-backed militias in Iraq poised to expand influence. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Accessed 27 June, 2022. Available at https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/iran-backed-militias-iraq-poised-expand-influence.

48 Godfroy, J. et al. (2019). *The United States Army in the Iraq War, Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011*. United States Army War College Press, Carlisle, PA, pp. 222-239.

49 Dagrees, H. (2021). The Qasem Soleimani assassination feels like ages ago – But Iran Hasn't forgotten. *Atlantic Council*, 1 January. Accessed 27 June, 2022. Available at https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-qasem-soleimani-assassination-feels-like-ages-ago-but-iran-hasnt-forgotten/.

50 Mearsheimer, J. (2018). *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, p. 17.

security apparatus – either external, internal, or both – to advance its own ends.[51]

Borrowing from network theory, the coerced model is an event-type tie between the principal and the proxy held together through coercive power. Coercive power, as previously noted, is power derived from Actor A's ability to mediate power against Actor B to make the latter do what it would not otherwise do.[52] Event-type ties, on the other hand, are bonds based upon transitory task completion, as opposed to state-type ties, which are the result of relationships, familiarity or preference.[53] Event-type ties result in weak bonds between the principal and the proxy. Weak bonds, in turn, result in high agency costs. The high agency costs cause the principal to employ several measures to account for these costs and keep the coerced proxy on the path toward mission accomplishment. High agency costs reflect a general lack of commitment to the principal and its objectives, resulting in coerced proxies that are unwilling to share high amounts of existential, strategic or tactical risk. In many cases, it is often only the principal's physical presence that keeps a coerced proxy working on the principal's behalf.

The US military's use of a rebuilt and reluctant Afghan force to combat non-government forces during the US's twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan shows all the signs and symptoms associated with a coerced proxy. The Afghan's suboptimal performance from 2003 to 2021 highlights the extreme agency costs experienced between the United States and the Afghan forces. For instance, by 2018 – three years before the United States ended its mission in Afghanistan and after 15 years of America-NATO-Afghan security efforts – the Taliban controlled upwards of 65% of Afghanistan.[54] American President Joe Biden, shortly after his election to president, announced that the US's war in Afghanistan was over and he was withdrawing US forces from the conflict no later than September 2021.[55] By June 2021, the Taliban controlled 84% of Afghanistan's territory.[56] US Army General Scott Miller, the final commander of US forces in Afghanistan, went on record in his final days in command to state that he fears that the country will fall into civil war once the United States and its NATO allies depart Afghanistan.[57]

Shortly after the United States withdrew from the country, the Taliban deftly moved back in and retook control of the county. The collapse of Afghan security forces in the wake of a dedicated twenty-year proxy relationship with the United States clearly demonstrates the relationship's weak foundation, as well as the limitations of a coerced proxy as it relates to a principal's policy objectives in a foreign land.[58]

Furthermore, a large disparity in casualties indicates a coerced proxy. In true partnerships, the associates share tactical risks. In coerced proxy relationships, tactical risk (i.e., the fighting and dying associated with military missions) falls more squarely on the proxy. In Afghanistan, the Americans lost 2,312 service members in its proxy war against the Taliban, al Qaeda, and other non-state actors.[59] NATO partners suffered an additional 1,145 killed in action.[60] Afghans, often referred to as a partner, and not a proxy, suffered 73,253 killed in action during the same time.[61] The massive chasm between Americans and Afghans killed in action does not represent a partnership but instead, it represents a coerced actor working on behalf of a risk-reluctant principal.

51 Fox, A. (2021). Strategic relationships, risk, and proxy war. *Journal of Security Studies, 14*(2), p. 8. doi: 10.5038/1944-0472.14.2.1879.

52 French, "A Formal Theory of Social Power," 184.

53 Borgatti, S., & Halgin, D. (2011). On network theory. *Organization Science,* 22(5), pp. 1169-1170. doi: 10.1287/orsc.1100.0641.

54 Ahmad, J. (2018). Taliban dismiss Afghanistan's Peace Talks offer. *Reuters*, 30 December. Accessed 29 June, 2022. Available at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/taliban-dismiss-afghanistans-peace-talks-offer-idUSKCN1OT051.

55 White House. 2021. Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan. 14 April. Accessed 29 June, 2022. Available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/.

56 2021. Taliban Say They Control 85% of Afghanistan, Humanitarian Concerns Mounts. *Reuters*, 10 July, 10. Accessed 16 July, 2022. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/militia-commanders-rush-aid-afghan-forces-against-taliban-2021-07-09/.

57 Lubold, G., & Amiri, E. (2021). US commander in Afghanistan warns of civil war risk as security deteriorates ahead of final pullout. *Wall Street Journal*, 29 June. Accessed 30 June, 2022. Available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-commander-in-afghanistan-says-security-deteriorating-as-troops-close-in-on-complete-pullout-11624984624?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

58 de Luce, D., Yusufazi, M., & Smith, S. (2021). Even as the Taliban are surprised at how fast they're advancing in Afghanistan. *NBC News*, 25 June. Accessed 29 June, 2021. Available at https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/even-taliban-are-surprised-how-fast-they-re-advancing-afghanistan-n1272236?fbclid=IwAR1DHJcNLcvcWIRIxa06MMt6tZjpuXZ_XlrdhJYYZ5gcxlfQ26Q3MGzLCkY.

59 Martinez, L., Seyler, M., & Smith, C. (2021). As US troops prepare to pull out, a look at the war In Afghanistan by the numbers. *NBC News*, 13 April. Accessed 16 July, 2021. Available at https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-troops-prepare-pull-war-afghanistan-numbers/story?id=77050902.

60 Crawford, N., & Lutz, C. (2019). Human costs of the post-9/11 war. *Brown University*, 13 November. Accessed 16 July, 2021. Available at https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/Direct%20War%20Deaths%20COW%20Estimate%20November%2013%202019%20FINAL.pdf.

61 Crawford & Lutz, "Human Costs of the Post-9/11 War."

Assassinations also define coerced proxy relationships. To be sure, assassinations are a salient component of Moscow's strategy to use coercive power to manage its Donbas proxies early in the Russo-Ukrainian War.[62] Assassinations rely on fear and intimidation to keep a proxy subjugated to the principal. Eliminating popular leaders is a common approach for implementing a strategy of coercion vis-à-vis a proxy and one that Russia commonly relies on in Ukraine. For example, in October 2016, Russian operatives killed Arsen Pavlov, commander of the DPA's prominent and successful *Sparta Battalion*, in his Donetsk apartment building.[63] Russian operatives also eliminated Mikhail Tolstykh, commander of the *Somali Battalion*, in February 2017.[64] On the political side of coercive power, Russian operatives assassinated DPR Prime Minister Alexander Zakharchenko in a Donetsk café bombing in August 2018.[65] These three examples, a small sampling of the assassinations inflicted by Russia's proxies in the Donbas, highlight the ends to which coercive power can be used to regulate agency costs and manage risk in proxy wars.

Lastly, a coerced proxy's inherent weakness makes it an enticing tool for a full range of activities. Yet, given its high agency costs, weak commitment and the resulting need for extensive advising and sustainment support in both combat and non-combat environments, coerced proxies are best for short-duration, task-oriented surrogacy. As the American-Afghan dyad in Afghanistan demonstrates, coerced proxies should not be used for long-term, complicated surrogacy that is oriented on such challenging endeavors as nation-building or recasting a nation-state in foreign form.

4.6 Exploited model

The exploited model arises from a principle seeking out and enlisting a weaker actor to serve as its proxy. However, unlike the coerced model, in which the principal plays a heavy-handed role in offsetting agency costs, the exploited model reflects a principal's reliance on a trusted actor. This springs from the proxy being a more conciliatory participant than the surrogates found in coerced relationships. In many cases, this is due to a host-parasite arrangement between the two actors, in which the principal provides the proxy with what it needs to survive. Nevertheless, in keeping with the ethos of agency theory, the proxy also possesses power concerning the principal. Exploited proxies, like Russia's DPA and LPA, often maintain a commanding position in a principal's strategy. Accordingly, the principal will do what it must to prevent its agent from faltering, failing or being physically destroyed. Russia's rescue of the DPA and LPA during the influential battles at Ilovaisk, Second Donetsk Airport, and Debal'tseve illuminate this point.[66]

Parallel to the coerced model, event-type ties govern exploitative relationships. Occasionally, however, exploitative relationships can be state-type ties, the distinction is a result of the actor selected to serve as a proxy. State-type ties, unlike task-oriented event-type ties, are based on kinship, roles-based relationships, or sentimentality.[67] Moreover, agency theory asserts that power is not a binary distinction in relationships but is instead a combination of two or more types of power.[68] Exploitative relationships fit into this qualification because the exercise of power in this model is dependent upon the trustworthiness of the actor serving as the proxy. When a cultural facsimile, or close parallel, is the surrogate, such as Russia and the DPA and LPA, or Iran's surrogates in Iraq, then the principal moves beyond coercive power and employs additional types of power to manage its proxy. Legitimate and reward power are the most common alternative forms of power used in this situation.

Exploitative relationships, as the name implies, are based on the principal's self-interest. Because of this, the principal seeks to terminate the relationship when either the unifying mission is accomplished, the agent is no longer able to maintain positive gains towards those ends, or the agent is no longer useful.[69] Beyond terminating the relationship, assassinations are also used in exploitative relationships to maintain status quo power dynamics and to keep the proxy subservient to the principal.

Exploited proxies come with high agency costs. Coerced proxies tend to demonstrate weak commitment to the principal and its mission, requiring exceedingly high oversite. However, when a culturally similar proxy is used, commitment tends to increase, and oversite decreases. Nevertheless, culturally similar coerced proxies, like Russia's DPA and LPA, become overzealous, which comes with its own risk. To be sure, the DPA's downing

62 Galeotti, M. (2022). *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*. Osprey Publishing, Oxford, pp. 194-196.
63 Galeotti, *Putin's Wars*. pp. 194-195.
64 Galeotti, *Putin's Wars*. pp. 194-195.
65 Galeotti, *Putin's Wars*. pp. 194-195.
66 Fox, A. (2021). Russian hybrid warfare: A framework. *Journal of Military Studies, 10*(1), pp. 8-10. doi: 10.2478/jms-2021-0004.
67 Borgatti & Halgin. On network theory. p. 1169.
68 French. A formal theory of social power. p. 184.
69 Fox. Strategic relationships, risk, power, and proxy war. pp. 18-24.

of Malaysian Airliner MH17, with a Russian-provided surface-to-air missile system in July 2014, hammers this point home.

Exploited proxies are also best suited for short-term, task-oriented work. Yet, if their goal is destructive, as opposed to growth-based, like the DPA and LPA's mission in the Donbas between 2014–2022, then exploited proxies are a useful option.[70]

4.7 Transactional model

The transactional model of proxy relationship proves challenging to discern because it is often confused with a coalition-type partnership. In effect, the transactional model represents a business deal between state actors in which both actors agree to a common strategic objective, such as the defeat of a mutual enemy. This concept is not new. Writing in the early nineteenth century, Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz recorded that:

> But even when both states are in earnest about making war upon the third, they do not always say, 'we must treat this country as our common enemy and destroy it, or we shall be destroyed ourselves'.' Far from it: The affair is more often like a business deal.[71]

However, unlike an alliance or coalition in which actors more equitably distribute risk amongst participants, transactional proxy relationships are defined by the inequitable burden sharing and distribution of risk.

In this arrangement, Actor A (i.e., the principal) takes a backseat role, providing tools to support the proxy – drone surveillance, precision-guided munitions and combat advisors, among other things – while Actor B (i.e., the proxy) provides the preponderance of force that does the true fighting and dying in battle. These relationships are often misleadingly referred to as partnerships, but as the imbalance in burden sharing and assumption of physical risk indicates, they are proxy relationships. The US's post-February 2022 relationship with Ukraine fits into this category.[72]

Expert power and a transaction-oriented event-type tie govern the relationship.[73] The transactional character of the event-type tie further emphasises the point that the relationship cannot be open-ended and is not suited for mission creep because the proxy, a willing participant, maintains significant agency over its own policy and affairs.

Beyond the United States-Ukraine proxy war against Russia, the US and Iraqi relationship against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq provides an expressive illustration of this model. Iraq sought help from the international community to stem ISIS's advance in Iraq in late 2014.[74] The United States and the international community answered the call and formed a multinational task force, CJTF-OIR, to combat ISIS across Iraq and Syria.[75] CJTF-OIR also established a land component (CJFLCC-OIR) specifically focused on Iraq.[76] The United States and the government of Iraq established the policy objectives, parameters, and strategy to combat ISIS. The combination of Iraqi military commands, CJTF-OIR, and CJFLCC-OIR, in consultation with each nation's department or ministry of defense, established the operational level military objectives and campaign plan to defeat ISIS in Iraq.

Tactically, however, the proxy nature of things came to the fore. The United States and coalition fought the war by, with, and through the Iraqis, while providing warfighting capabilities beyond those that exist within the Iraqi military. By, with, and through, as already noted, is a euphemism often used to cloak proxy relationships beneath the veneer of partnership. Nonetheless, the Iraqi security forces paid the butchers bill to defeat ISIS in Iraq. In the battle for Mosul, for example, the Iraqi security forces lost over 1,200 soldiers, including fourteen battalion commanders within the elite Counter Terrorism Service (CTS).[77] The Iraqi army, which procured 140 M1 Abrams tanks following the 2011 American withdrawal from Iraq, had only a dozen tanks left the following combat in Mosul while losing control of several others to Iranian-backed militias.[78] On the other hand, the United

70 Jensen, D., & Doran, P. (2018). *Chaos as a Strategy: Putin's 'Promethean' Gamble*. Center for European Analysis, Washington DC, p. 8.

71 von Clausewitz, C. (1986). *On War*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p. 603.

72 Fox, A. (August 2022). Ukraine and proxy war: Improving ontological shortcomings in military thinking, *Association of the United States Army*, Land Warfare Paper 148 pp. 3-4.

73 Borgatti & Halgin. On network theory. pp. 1070-1071.

74 Gordon, M. (2014). "Iraq's leader requests more aid in the fight against ISIS. *New York Times*, 3 December. Accessed 29 June, 2021. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/world/middleeast/iraqi-leader-seeks-additional-aid-in-isis-fight.html.

75 Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve. 2020. "History of CJTF-OIR." Public Affairs Office, 3 September. Accessed 16 July, 2021. Available at https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/20200903_History_of_CJTF-OIR.pdf?ver=mIQbnGWQSx_UTq-2Ho3Y2w%3d%3d.

76 Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, "History of CJTF-OIR."

77 Watling, J., & Reynolds, N. (2020). *War by Other Means: Delivering Effective Partner Force Capacity Building*. Royal United Services Institute, London, p. 57.

78 Axe, D. (2018). Made in America, but Lost in Iraq. *Foreign Policy*,

States and the coalition lost only a handful of soldiers and very little equipment during the battle.[79]

Time is also an important component of transactional relationships. Mutual interest in a fixed problem, like defeating ISIS in Iraq, brings like-minded actors together. However, because the problem is finite, and the proxy's interest in the principal decreases at a comparable rate to the accomplishment of the actors' mutual interest, the resulting principal-proxy relationship is also finite. Therefore, transactional relationships are subject to a running clock, which in turn erodes the relationship's longevity with the accumulation of tactical success and the passage of time. Resultantly, the relationship has a fixed duration, and that duration shortens once the battle is joined.

The political-military arrangement between the Iraqi and American governments illustrates this point. Following Mosul, and ISIS's inability to muster significant resistance thereafter, the government of Iraq realised that ISIS was strategically defeated. The government of Iraq, riding the wave of victory, no longer needed the same degree of US or coalition military support and thus began to distance itself from the United States and the coalition.[80] Key indicators of Iraq's disassociation from the United States and coalition included its military campaign to squelch Kurdish independence in October 2017, Prime Minister Haider Abadi's formal declaration of victory over ISIS in December 2017, and Abadi's advocacy to reduce American forces in Iraq in the intervening period.[81] (Knights 2017; Mehta 2017).

To summarise the transactional relationship, this model tends to be confused as a coalition arrangement. However, it is not because risk sharing is not equitably distributed, as is the case in coalitions and alliances. Transactional proxies are the result of a strategic business deal between two actors (A and B). At the operational and tactical levels, Actor A advises and supports Actor B as Actor B methodically advances both actors' strategic objectives. The bond, an event-type tie, is strong, but given the relationship's transactional nature, the relationship is necessarily short-term. Therefore, transactional proxies can be counted on for missions requiring significant risk, but they should not be counted on for long-term missions.

4.8 Contractual model

The contractual model is the result of a principal seeking a professional, non-state actor solution to the military component of a political problem. Contractual proxies include mercenaries, private military companies and any other non-state actor willing and capable of accepting a contract to conduct combat or combat-related activities. The work of contractual proxies is often obfuscated through the use of politically sensitive phrases, including integrated security, risk management and mission support. Contractual proxies are an enticing option for state actors looking to distance themselves and their populations from the horrors of war, and in turn, decrease political and domestic risk.[82]

Like the coerced, exploited and transactional proxy, the contractual proxy is the byproduct of a transactional event-type tie with the principal. The principal offsets agency costs with a contractual proxy by using reward power.[83] Because of the contractual arrangement between both actors, proxies contractual assume high degrees of risk on the principal's behalf.

Yet, on the other side of the token, if a contractual proxy jeopardises the principal's strategic objectives, then the principal often resorts to curtailing the relationship ahead of schedule. American mercenary firm, *Blackwater*, now referred to as *Academi*, and its haphazard killing of over 20 Iraqis in Baghdad's Mansour District in 2007 is a useful data point that supports this assertion. Following *Blackwater's* Mansour District incident, the United States began to publicly distance itself from the company.[84]

2 March. Accessed 18 July, 2021. Available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/02/u-s-made-tanks-that-fell-into-militia-hands-in-iraq-sparks-assistance-standoff/.

79 2017. Two American soldiers killed in Iraq, US military says. *NBC News*, August 13. Accessed 18 July, 2021. Available at https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/2-american-soldiers-killed-iraq-u-s-military-says-n792256.

80 El-Ghobashy, T., & Salim, M. (2017). Iraqi military reclaims city of Tal Afar after rapid Islamic State Collapse. *Washington Post*, 27 August. Accessed 28 July, 2021. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqi-military-reclaims-city-of-tal-afar-after-rapid-islamic-state-collapse/2017/08/27/a98e7e96-8a53-11e7-96a7-d178cf3524eb_story.html.

81 Knights, M. (2017). Kirkuk: The city that highlights Iraq's war within a war. *BBC News*, 17 October. Accessed 27 July, 2021. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41656398; Mehta, A. (2017). Tillerson: US could stay in Iraq to fight ISIS, wanted or not. *Defense News*, 30 October. Accessed 27 July, 2021. Available at https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2017/10/30/tillerson-us-could-stay-in-iraq-to-fight-isis-wanted-or-not/.

82 Fox. Strategic relationships, risk, and proxy war. p. 13.

83 French. A formal theory of social power. pp. 183-184.

84 Priest, D. (2004). Private guards repel attack on U.S. headquarters. *Washington Post*, 6 August. Accessed 29 July, 2021. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/04/06/private-guards-repel-attack-on-us-headquarters/fe2e4dd8-b6d2-4478-b92a-b269f8d7fb9b; Scahill, J. (2007). *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*. Nation Books, New York, pp. 122-132.

Russia's *Wagner Group* is today's most eminent contractual proxy. *Wagner* works on behalf of the Kremlin, and in lieu of Russian land forces, in Ukraine, Syria and South America. *Wagner* plays an important role in Moscow's post-February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[85] *Wagner* proxies are noted for their work alongside the DPA and LPA in the Donbas, as well as a significant clash with American forces in the Dier ez Zor region of Syria in February 2017, which resulted in the death of over 300 *Wagner* proxies.[86] Furthermore, thirty-three *Wagner* contractors were arrested in Belarus in July 2020, at the height of the political chaos, which demonstrates *Wagner's* hidden reach that is not outwardly apparent to most onlookers.[87]

Russia also employs contractual proxies, like the *Wagner Group*, in Africa, most notably in the Central African Republic.[88] In this case, proxies facilitate Russia's strategic position on the continent without high overhead costs.[89] To be sure, Moscow uses contractual proxies to lessen the burden on Russia's armed forces, to offset the political and domestic risk associated with potential troop deployments to the continent, and to offset the strategic risk associated with proxy tactical activities.[90]

To summarise the contractual results from a state actor outsourcing combat or combat-related activities to a corporate organisation that can accomplish military solutions to political problems. Like the transactional model, the contractual model possesses a strong bond between each member of the relationship. The relationship's duration and risk tolerance are captured within the legal documents that govern the affiliation. Contractual proxies can be counted on for risky missions, but their ability to conduct complicated, long-term missions remain to be seen.

4.9 Cultural model

Historian John Keegan provides sage counsel for understanding cultural proxies. Submitting an alternative view of war to Clausewitz's dictum that war is a continuation of politics by other means, Keegan focuses on the intersection of war and culture. Keegan argues that 'War embraces much more than politics: that it is always an expression of culture, often a determinant of cultural form, in some societies the culture itself'.[91] Keegan is not alone in this outlook on culture. Mearsheimer posits that culture is what holds groups together.[92] Because culture is fixed in self-identification, cultural links in proxy wars are powerful and result in stalwart, rugged principal-agent relationships.

Principals often cull cultural proxies from areas in which culture's major features – religion, ethnicity, and language – bleed across the boundaries of the political map.[93] Cultural proxies are state-type ties fueled by kinship, and measured by strength, intensity, and duration. Thanks to the strong reliance on shared identity, cultural proxies come with the lowest agency cost of any of the five proxy relationships, which means that the principal can augment cultural proxies with capabilities and give them complex missions, instead of devoting attention and resources to ensure the proxy's fidelity. Principals govern cultural proxy relationships through legitimate power, or Actor B's (i.e., the proxy) belief that Actor A (i.e., the principal) has a right to prescribe its behavior or opinions on Actor B.[94] In addition to legitimate power, the principal uses the power of attraction to influence a cultural surrogate. Consequently, a vigorous link connects the principal and proxy, which in turn results in a high degree of risk sharing between the two.

Iran is the undisputed leader in today's proxy war arena. Iran structured its Quds Force, an elite element within its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), for proxy force development, integration, maintenance, support, and combat advising. Iran, the IRGC, and the Quds Forces deftly leverage culture, most commonly Shiite Islam, to build and maintain proxy armies in the Middle

85 Martsen, K. (2022). Russia's use of the Wagner group: Definitions, strategic objectives, and accountability. *Testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security United States House of Representatives*. 15 September, 2022. Available at https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/Marten%20Testimony.pdf.

86 Rondeaux, C. (2019). *Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy War*. New America, Washington DC, pp. 51-52; Hauer, N. (2018). Russia's mercenary debacle in Syria. *Foreign Affairs*, 26 February. Accessed 18 July, 2021. Available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-02-26/russias-mercenary-debacle-syria.

87 Felgenhauer, P. (2020). Russian Wagner mercenaries arrested in Belarus. *Eurasia Daily Monitor, 18*(112). Available at https://jamestown.org/program/russian-wagner-mercenaries-arrested-in-belarus/.

88 National Security Strategy, pp. 43-44.

89 Antonova, N. (2021). Russian mercenaries in Africa aren't just there for the money. *Foreign Policy*, 9 July. Accessed 10 July, 2021. Available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/09/russian-mercenaries-africa-putin/.

90 Antonova. Russian mercenaries in Africa aren't just there for the money.

91 Keegan, J. (1993). *The History of Warfare*. Vintage Press, New York, p. 12.

92 Mearsheimer. The great delusion. p. 36.

93 Fox. Strategic relationships, risk, and proxy war. p. 13.

94 Borgatti & Halgin. On network theory. pp. 1169-1170.

East.[95] Hezbollah in Lebanon and Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq are today's most prominent Iranian proxies. At the same time, it supports Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hamas, and many other Shia militia groups in Syria and Iraq.

Kata'ib Hezbollah, Iran's go-to proxy force in Iraq, is a good example of a cultural proxy. Established in the wake of the 2003 American-led toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, Kata'ib Hezbollah, a force of approximately 7,500, spearheads Iranian political-military objectives in Iraq.[96] During the 2003–2011 war in Iraq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, among other Iranian-sponsored actors, came to light because of their deadly employment of sophisticated and potent roadside bombs, known as Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFPs), or explosively formed penetrators.[97] The group resurfaced during Iraq's war against ISIS because the Iraqi military's need for personnel exceeded its capacity to recruit, train, and retain combat forces.[98] Since the cessation of major combat against ISIS in December 2017, Kata'ib Hezbollah has been at the center of several serious provocations with the United States. These events include but are not limited to December 2019's rocket attack at Kirkuk airbase, which killed an American contractor, the December 2019–January 2020 siege of the US Embassy in Baghdad, the American strike that killed Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, and a running exchange of rocket and missile attacks that continue to today.[99] The point is that Kata'ib Hezbollah, Iran's cultural proxy in Iraq, and to a lesser degree in Syria, continually absorbs inordinate levels of risk, including the assassination of its leaders, alongside those of its Iranian principal to advance the principal's ambitions.[100]

Of the five models discussed within this paper, cultural proxies possess the tightest, most stalwart relationship with their principal because of the kinship ties that anneal the two into a near seamless dyad of common interest. For principals looking to conduct any sort of significant, dangerous (i.e., high degrees of strategic and tactical risk), and long-term proxy activities, cultural proxies are the most useful implement because of the stalwart solidarity they maintain with their principal. Figure 3 provides a graphical summary of the five models of strategic relationships in proxy wars.

4.10 Risk in proxy war

As highlighted throughout this paper, each of the relationships in proxy war possesses a unique risk profile. These profiles are important for the student and practitioner of war to understand because they provide a guideline for analysis and operations in proxy wars. Targeting risk can expedite the collapse of proxy relationships, and consequently, collapse the strategy of an actor applying that form of war to achieve its policy objectives. Targeting risk provides a useful alternative to attempting to meet and overcome a principal-proxy dyad head-on.

Risk in proxy war is akin to Napoleon Bonaparte's strategy of central position, which the general used to great effect during the Napoleonic Wars. According to Bonaparte's strategy, an actor (C) seeks to separate two aligned actors (A and B) along the seam in which those forces are cojoined or where they are attempting to link up. Actor C attacks this position to make the battle more manageable by facing each combatant separately.[101] In those cases, in which two (or more) actors have not yet joined, Bonaparte's strategy seeks to prevent their unification by Actor C thrusting itself between the convergence of Actors B and C, thus denying those two actors' ability to reap the benefits of unification (see Figure 4).[102] Network theory provides a similar strategy by arguing that denying coordination and amalgamation accelerates a network's defeat.[103]

Applying Bonaparte's strategy of central position, as well as network theory's literature on defeating networks, to proxy war provides a useful heuristic for defeating principal-agent dyads in war. Instead of a headlong attack against a principal-proxy dyad, the non-proxy actor (C) can attack A and B's seam through risk manipulation. The goal of risk manipulation is to dissolve the bond between principal and proxy and subsequently advance its own interest in war.

95 Watling, J. (2019). *Iran's Objectives and Capabilities: Deterrence and Subversion*. Royal United Services Institute, London, pp. 13-32.

96 Knights, K. (2019). Iran's expanding militia army in Iraq; The new special groups. *CTC Sentinel*, *12*(7), 3.

97 Knights. Iran's expanding militia army in Iraq. 3.

98 Manaker, E. (2020). This time is different: Can Iraq Rein in the PMF. *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 2 October. Accessed 27 July, 2021. Available at https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2020/10/02/this-time-is-different-can-iraq-rein-in-the-pmf/.

99 Dozier, K. (2020). Bengazi definitely crossed everyone's minds: The inside story of the US embassy attack in Baghdad. *Time*, 2 September. Accessed 4 July, 2021. Available at https://time.com/5885388/us-embassy-baghdad-attack/.

100 Yuhas A. (2020). Airstrike that killed Suleimani also killed powerful Iraqi militia leader. 3 January. Accessed 4 July, 2021. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/world/middleeast/iraq-iran-airstrike-al-muhandis.html.

101 Chandler, D. (1966). *The Campaigns of Napoleon*. Scribner Books, New York, pp. 433-439.

102 Chandler. *The Campaigns of Napoleon*. pp. 433-439.

103 Borgatti & Halgin. On network theory. p. 1173.

Relationship	Regulatory Tie	Regulatory Form of Power	Solidity of Bond	Proxy's Agency Costs	Proxy's Embrace of Risk	Example	Analysis
Coerced	Event-type (Transactional)	Coerced Power	Weak	High	Low	US and Afghan Security Forces	Use for simple, low risk, short-term work.
Exploitative	Event-type (Transactional)	Coerced Power	Weak	Medium	Medium	DPA and LPA with Russian armed forces	Use for simple, medium risk, short-term work.
Cultural	State-type (Kinship)	Legitimate Power	Strong	Low	High	Iraq-based Shia Militia Groups and Iran	Use for complicated, high-risk, long-term work.
Transactional	Event-type (Transactional)	Expert Power	Strong	Medium	High	US and Iraq security forces during counter ISIS fight	Use for high-risk, task-oriented missions; short-term.
Contractual	Event-type (Transactional)	Reward Power	Strong	Low	High	Russia and Wagner Group	Use for high-risk, task-oriented missions; short-term.
Deductions	Most ties are transaction-based	Multiple forms of power animate proxies	The use of coercive power is a cause and effect of weak bonded proxies	Strong bonded proxies results in low agency costs	Strong bonded proxies share high levels of risk	Not applicable	Not applicable

Fig. 3: Summary of Five Models.

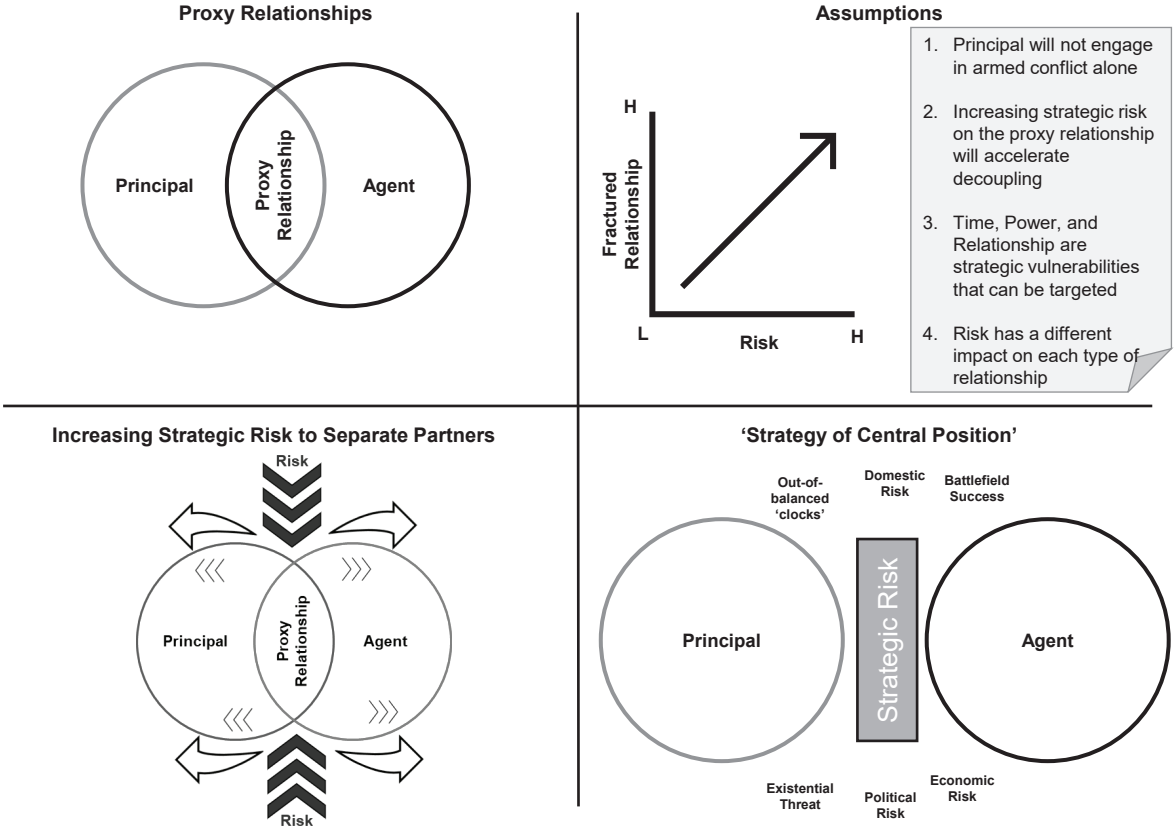


Fig. 4: Risk and Proxy War.

Coerced and exploited proxies possess the lowest tolerance for risk and are therefore the most susceptible to suboptimisation and disunion through risk manipulation. On the other than, contractual and cultural proxies maintain the highest tolerance for risk and hence are the most challenging proxies to combat. Transactional proxies, on the other hand, fit between the previous two groupings. Transactional proxy relationships, like that

of the United States and Iraq during the counter-ISIS campaign of 2014–2018, or that of the United States and Ukraine in today's ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, are balanced against a swiftly moving clock. The quicker the proxy dyad moves towards victory the sooner the relationship dissolves. Yet, as the hard slog throughout the battle of Mosul (from October 2016 to July 2017) illustrates, a transactional proxy will also shoulder extremely high degrees of tactical risk in support of its principal. As a result, the risk is not quite as important in transactional arrangements as in other relationships. Overcoming a transactional proxy relationship, aside from a frontal attack, then results from accelerating the relationship to its decoupling point or increasing the material costs to the point that the proxy is strategically exhausted and can no longer put a fighting force on the field of battle.

Based upon the synthesis of the five models of proxy relationships, the dynamics therein, and how risk influences proxy relationships, a series of baseline generalisations can be made about proxy environments. These assumptions, although not laws, are sufficiently rigorous to be applied in a universal sense when examining proxy war. The assumptions are:

- Despite the language used to characterise the relationship, proxy environments are driven by cynical self-interest, and not altruism; therefore, self-interest forms the basis of any military partnership in proxy wars;
- Principal-agent relationships in proxy war are bound by power dynamics; nevertheless, agency costs give the proxy asymmetric power over the principal;
- Power is not static; power can shift if the proxy grows strong enough to stand on its own, or if the proxy generates and maintains support from external actors;
- Proxy relations fall within one of five basic models, each of which possesses unique characteristics that guide the nature of the relationship;
- All proxy relationships are of limited duration;
- Not all political, strategic, and operational decisions in proxy war generate noticeable or direct change at the tactical level;
- Battles won accelerates divergence amongst principal and agent, whereas battles lost weaken the bond between both actors;
- A proxy war is not exclusive to one type of war but operates anywhere along the continuum of conflict.

The environmental assumptions summarised above provide the basis for a set of basic principles of a proxy war that apply in all proxy war scenarios. Those principles of proxy war are annotated below:

- All actors in a proxy war, regardless of their degree of fidelity to its principal, will act in a manner that supports their own self-interest;
- Agency costs will suboptimise any proxy relationships; therefore the principal should anticipate falling short of its actual aims, working with a proxy that is not as effective as the principal would like, and that principal-sponsored capability improvement programs will fail to bring the proxy to the level of the principal's ambition;
- Proxy relationships will expire; therefore, responsible principals must identify their own termination criteria and transition plan in accordance with the relationship's forecasted expiration date;
- It is better to face one opponent at a time than two; therefore, an actor will seek to dislocate proxies from principals to simplify how it fights in a proxy environment;
- Smart actors will fracture principal-agent relationships by attacking their bond or by increasing the tactical or strategic risk beyond one of both actor's level of acceptability;
- Coerced and exploited proxies are of little utility for requirements greater than short-term, menial task completion, or for problems in which mass and attrition are the answer;
- Cultural proxies are most useful for long-term, high-stakes commitments;
- Contractual proxies are most useful for operations that require deniability or when the political environment necessitates secrecy.

5 Conclusion

Proxy war, often mascaraed as coalition warfare, irregular warfare or counterinsurgency, is more distinct than generally understood. A proxy war is not an alliance or coalition warfighting, but a standalone form of war that possesses its own characters and relationships. Furthermore, proxy war is not beholden to one type of environment but instead operates along the spectrum of conflict; the determining factor being the capabilities, policy aims and sensitives of its combatants.

Proxy relationships are not one-size-fits-all in which a stronger actor dictates their wishes to a surrogate and then manages task completion. Instead, proxy relationships are unique because of the personalities of the principal and proxy, but also because of how agency and network theory, power dynamics, and time affect the

characteristics of each actor within a given dyad. Agency costs dictate that a proxy's work will not measure up to the expected outcome of the principal and that this phenomenon will grow at scale based on the proxy's commitment, or lack thereof, to its principal. As a result, given weaker bonds, a principal must dedicate more energy and resource to more reluctant proxies, whereas those with strong commitments require less oversight. To put it another way, proxies that require coercive power as motivation are far less productive and useful than proxies that require legitimate or expert power.

In the end, given today's security environment and the corresponding international system, proxy wars will continue to play a significant role in armed conflict for years to come. It offers a cheap and low-risk way for state actors to wage wars that they would not otherwise be able to wage. They can modulate political and domestic risk to almost non-existent levels by offloading the death, destruction, and human cost to actors that cannot generally say no. Resultantly, by keeping populations at home unaffected by bloody strife abroad, policymakers will continue to turn to proxy war's attractive solutions to modern policy problems, because as Svechin reminds the student and practitioner of war, 'During a war the political life of the countries waging it continues rather than grinds to a halt'.[104]

104 Svechin. *Strategy*. p. 83.