In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare

by Major Amos C. Fox, U.S. Army

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Preface

In recent years, the U.S. Army has routinely found itself in wars being waged through intermediaries, or proxy forces. At the same time, the Army does not speak frankly about these proxy wars but instead speaks indirectly about the character of these environments and its relationship with its partnered force. It does so by arguing that those environments are one in which it operates by, with and through partners in a security force assistance capacity in pursuit of common objectives. While this approach softens the coarseness of proxy warfare, it also degrades understanding of proxy warfare by not speaking frankly about its environmental and relational character. In examining proxy warfare, one finds that it is dominated by a principal-actor dynamic, power relationships and the tyranny of time. Taking those ideas a step further, this examination yields two models of proxy warfare—the transactional model and the exploitative model. The goal of setting forth this theory of proxy warfare is to generate better conceptual understanding, allowing the U.S. Army to more effectively manipulate proxy environments toward its own ends.

In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare

Introduction

Buried deep in Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* is the Prussian general's ruminations on the differences that exist between limited and total war. Clausewitz argues, "We can thus only say that the aims a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, must be governed by the particular characteristics of his own position; but they will also conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character."[1] The astute scholar of war should pause at this statement and ponder what it means for both contemporary and future war. Specifically, what are the peculiarities of modern war, and what are the divergent effects of those idiosyncrasies?

One can proffer many causal reasons for the increased relevance of proxy warfare, to include everything from the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons to the precision of today's technocratic weaponry and ethos. Nevertheless, restricted warfare has overtaken the major land wars of yore. This is not to say conventional land warfare has gone anywhere but rather that the method in which land warfare is conducted has evolved to be more covert and oblique. Although the world's major powers occasionally flirt with the idea of war with one another, the conditions governing war have severely eroded overt interstate war. As a result, nations large and small have found utility in outsourcing warfighting. Proxy warfare has become the predominant form of modern war.

Warfighting through intermediaries while vigorously pursuing one's self-interests is the spirit of the age and the general character of war in the 21st century. Most students of modern conflict are quick to acknowledge the role of Russian proxies in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region and of Iranian proxies in the Middle East, but the United States is perhaps the largest employer of proxy forces in modern war. However, a significant problem for the U.S. military, and more importantly, the U.S. Army, is that it refuses to speak openly or clearly about proxy environments and proxy warfare. Instead, it chooses to hoodwink its practitioners through complex language. Terms and phrases such as *security force assistance*, *training and advising*, *partnered force* and *by, with and through* are all misleading and meant to soften

or hide the coarseness of proxy warfare. This practice—speaking through euphemism—highlights the problem that arises when the manner in which we must operate does not mirror the method or narrative in which we want to operate. A doctrine built around misleading or obfuscated outward intentions does little to nothing to help the Soldiers, staffs and leaders who find themselves in proxy situations; the use of vague terms and their associated doctrine creates a cognitive Potemkin village that inhibits environmental understanding and causes the Army to muddle its way through dynamic, nuanced environments.

This paper is theoretical and does not look to expand on or advocate for existing Army doctrine. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to add to existing military theory and accepted precepts of war. This paper does so by proposing a theory of proxy warfare, currently absent from discussions of military theory, based on historical study, social theory and the tyranny of time. The theory articulates two models of proxy warfare, a *transactional model* and an *exploitative model*. One of these models is found any time proxy environments exist. The models evolve from social interactions, most notably through principal-agent interactions (power relationships) coupled with the oppressive character of time. This work, arguing that proxy warfare is the dominant form of war today and will remain so for as long as major nations are unwilling to put their armies in the field against one another, concludes by providing a handful of principles of proxy warfare that should be used as the starting point for continued discussions on proxyism.

The Spirit of the Age and Its General Character

Proxy environments dominate modern war. As figure 1 illustrates, a quick scan of the globe shows proxies fighting on behalf of partners from Ukraine's Donbas region to the Euphrates River Valley in Syria and Iraq, as well as points in between. To emphasize this point, one needs to look no further than the recent posture statements by multiple U.S. combatant commanders. Discussions of proxy warfare dominate U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) March 2018 posture statements. An entire section of USCENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel's testimony is dedicated to proxy warfare's role within his area of responsibility.[2] USEUCOM Commander General Curtis Scaparrotti discussed the influence Russian proxies play throughout Ukraine, Eastern Europe and the northern Caucasus region.[3] Moving beyond the boundaries of U.S. combatant commands, multiple sources indicate that Russians from the northern Caucasus region are working on behalf of the Russian government in Syria and Iraq.[4]

Beyond USEUCOM and USCENTCOM, proxyism continues to play a relevant role in the conduct of war. Central America and South America have long been hotbeds of proxy warfare, as the United States has employed host forces across the Southern Hemisphere to increase its influence and to undercut that of other nations, such as the former Soviet Union and its globalist Communist agenda. While proxy wars have slowed in Central America and South America, they continue to play an important role in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's area of responsibility. The most recent and most notable example is the Battle of Marawi, which was fought as part of a larger U.S. proxy campaign to defeat Islamic State forces that had found a home in the Philippines. The Battle of Marawi, fought between May and October 2017, saw U.S. forces leverage Philippine intermediaries to defeat the Islamic State's forces. Victory came at the cost of 50,000 displaced people (a quarter of the city's population), millions of dollars of infrastructure damage and a city that is now uninhabitable.[5]

Figure 1

Sampling of Modern Proxy Wars

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
Iran	Houthi rebels	Yemeni Civil War	Yemen	Spring 2015–present
United States	Philippine defense forces	Defeat ISIS campaign	The Philippines	Fall 2016–present
Russia	Separatists	Russo–Ukrainian war	Donbas region of Ukraine	Spring 2014–present
United States	Iraqi security forces	Operation Iraqi Freedom/ New Dawn	Iraq	March 2003–December 2011
United States	Afghan defense forces	Operation Enduring Freedom/ Freedom's Sentinel	Afghanistan and Pakistan	October 2001–present
Russia	Taliban	Operation Enduring Freedom/ Freedom's Sentinel	Afghanistan and Pakistan	Unknown–present
Russia	Chechen forces (regular and irregular)	Multiple: Russo–Ukrainian war, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Enduring Freedom	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.

In sum, proxy warfare looms large in modern war. It is not just a Russian, Iranian or American approach to war, but one in which many nations and polities engage. However, the U.S. Army lacks a paradigm for proxy warfare, which disrupts its ability to understand the environment or develop useful tactics, operations and strategies for those environments.

Defining Proxyism: Present, Past and Future

U.S. Army and joint doctrine are absent definitions for either *proxy environment* or *proxy warfare*. Therefore, it is incumbent to draft definitions to carry the discussion forward. A proxy environment is one marked by two or more actors working toward a common objective; however, the relationship between the two actors is hierarchical. The principal actor employs the agent, or proxy, as an intermediary to accomplish its objectives. By default, the principal's objective becomes the agent's objective. Proxy warfare, on the other hand, is the associated theory of action for a proxy environment. It is the physical manifestation of a dominant actor, or the principal, leveraging an intermediary, or a nondominant actor (the agent, or proxy), against an adversary to achieve the dominant actor's objectives. A historical sweep of proxy environments and wars underpin these definitions.

The following paragraphs are intended to provide context to proxy environments; they are not intended to be an inclusive list of proxy engagements. The author acknowledges the absence of Iranian proxies, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and many others. This was done to keep the examples succinct while providing sufficient examples to support the author's argument.

From a historical standpoint, Russia is the unmistakable leader of proxy warfare. British military historian John Keegan notes that the Romanov dynasty, which ruled Russia from the 17th century until the Russian Revolution of 1917, regularly enlisted Cossacks to serve as its proxy and to augment its regular and irregular forces.[6] Similarly, Russia looms large in modern proxy flashpoints by achieving access and influence through pliable local nationals, mercenaries and sympathetic foreign nationals. Various Russian proxies can be found throughout Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region, but the country's most high-profile examples today are in Syria and Ukraine's Donets River basin.*

In the Donets River basin, or Donbas, Russian proxies have been undercutting their Ukrainian neighbors since the spring of 2014. The proxies, manifest as Russian-aligned Ukrainian separatists, carved out a foothold in Eastern Ukraine and have maintained quasi-independence from the government in Kyiv courtesy of Moscow's support. While direct Russian military involvement in the conflict is now well known, that was not the case early in the conflict. However, Russian generals have been at the helm of the separatist armies since their inception.[7] Along the way, Russian forces—both the country's proxies and its army—have killed over 10,000 Ukrainians in the Donets Basin and wounded an additional 24,000.[8]

In Syria, Russia serves as a protectorate for President Bashar al-Assad. To do so, Russian armed forces manipulate Syrian proxies, homegrown mercenaries and Chechen clients to bolster al-Assad's grip on power. Further, Russia practices operational and strategic jujitsu by using the Syrian civil war and the mission to defeat the Islamic State in the Levant against the involved parties while offering to mediate the chaos it creates. This approach has been so successful that it has garnered the attention of General Votel. He has commented that in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility, Russia plays both the arsonist and the fireman.[9]

The United States also makes ample use of proxies. Recent examples of U.S. forces fighting through proxies are legion. Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) is perhaps the most obvious example of U.S. proxy warfare. U.S. forces, in conjunction with coalition partners, fought through Iraqi and Kurdish intermediaries to militarily defeat the Islamic State in Iraq, and U.S. forces are currently working to do the same in Syria, albeit with a different proxy force.

OIR is not the only proxy war in which U.S. forces have been engaged. The U.S. employed Filipino proxies to militarily defeat the Islamic State in the Philippines, as the Battle of Marawi illustrates.[10] In Yemen, U.S. forces are working through Saudi proxies to subdue Houthi rebels throughout the country.[11] The United States' longest-running proxy hotspot, Afghanistan, has seen both direct U.S. combat and war via proxy since 2001. In 2017, the U.S. Army deployed its first security forces assistance brigade to lead its proxy campaign against the Taliban and other regional threats.[12] Meanwhile, in Africa, the U.S. reportedly has over 5,000 Soldiers employing local proxy forces to counter Islamic State expansion across the continent.[13]

Given the diversity and density of proxyism in modern conflict, it logically follows that a general theory of proxy environments is necessary. This theory should form the basis for proxy warfare doctrine. It is imperative that both the theory and doctrine be rooted in current and historical examples to ensure that a broad picture of the phenomena is painted from which discrete understanding can be obtained. The theory and doctrine must not be focused on a U.S.-specific point of view or a narrative-drive position but must be derived from a position that explains

* Russian proxies are operating in Ukraine, Crimea and Transnistria in Eastern Europe. In the southern Caucasus region, Russian proxies are working in Georgia's breakaway regions on South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

the uncolored character of each. The goal is to have an unvarnished understanding of proxyism that puts the U.S. Army, at all levels of war, in a cognitive place to effectively manipulate the situation.

The Foundation for a General Theory of Proxyism

Given the cursory discussion of proxyism in the preceding paragraphs, a handful of principles of proxyism come to the fore. At the most rudimentary level, proxy environments appear to be bound by the following tenets:

- All proxy environments are driven by political interest; this forms the basis for military partnership and aligned military objectives.
- Proxy environments are based on a relationship between a principal and a proxy, or agent.
- Proxy relationships are transactional or exploitative.
- Proxy relationships, being either transactional or exploitative, have a limited duration.
- Proxy relationships are capricious and therefore always need honest monitoring.
- Not all political, strategic and operational decisions come with a noticeable or overt change at the tactical level.
- Battles won accelerate divergence, while battles lost weaken the principal-agent relationship.
- Proxy wars are not unique to one type of warfare but operate anywhere along a war's continuum.
- The status of a proxy relationship is subjective and relative to the observer.
- The base of power within a proxy (principal-agent) relationship can shift if
  a) the proxy grows strong enough to stand on its own;
  b) the proxy gains or mobilizes power from actors that are not the principal partner; or
  c) the proxy accomplishes the goals that brought it in line with the principal.

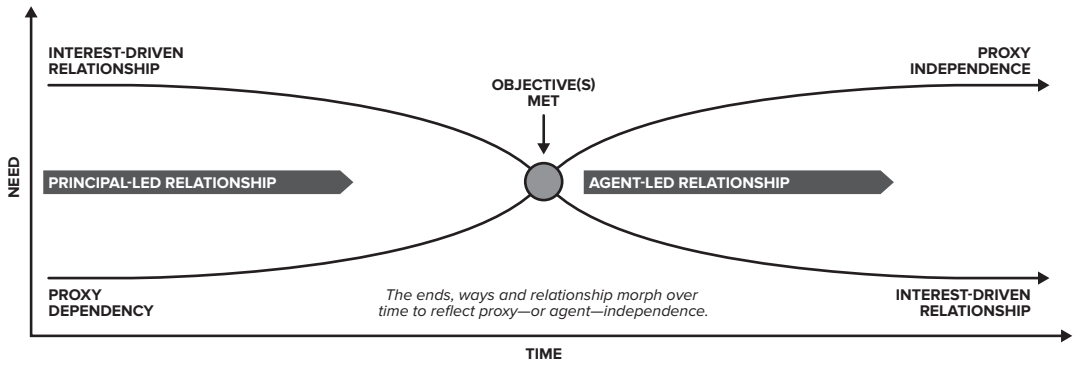
These tenets, or bookends to proxy environments, provide a point of departure from which to further extrapolate a theory of proxy warfare. Fundamentally, these principles boil down to the fact that available time, power over a proxy force and mutual interests are fleeting. This is because proxy relationships are transactional; they are marriages of convenience in which a given force works through another force in pursuit of provisionally aligned political or military ends.

Mixing Cement: Pursuing a Theory of Proxy Warfare

British historian, theorist and soldier J.F.C. Fuller offers an instructive point in arguing for rigor in doctrine. Fuller posits that "method creates doctrine, and a common doctrine is the cement which holds an army together. Though mud is better than no cement, we want the best cement, and we shall never get it unless we can analyze war scientifically and discover its values."[14] With Fuller's point in mind, the following section seeks to develop the theoretical underpinning that he suggests is so vital to developing a solid doctrine. This section, which builds on the previously noted principles of proxyism, seeks to form a general theory of proxy environments by exposing their components—the impact of time, the fallacy of limited liability, the role of power and the principal-agent problem.

Figure 2

Time's Effect on a Proxy Relationship



Time: The Governing Condition of War

Given proxy warfare's character, which is driven by the principal and the agent's shifting political winds, it is fair to argue that a running clock dominates proxy environments. Arguably, the inability to effectively manipulate time in war, above all else, is what commanders wrestle with most.[15] Military theorist Robert Leonhard contends that "military conflict—whether in wars, campaigns or battles—seeks to summon that failure (or delay it) and is, therefore, when reduced to its fundamentals, a contest for time."[16] Fuller contends that "superiority of time is so important a factor in war that it frequently becomes the governing condition."[17]

Time operates at varying rates across the levels of war, as well as across the social and political spectrums. Furthermore, time varies based on a society's level of involvement in a specified conflict. As figure 2 illustrates, a proxy's need for the principal's assistance decreases over time if the proxy experiences tactical, operational or strategic success or if the proxy generates force to compensate for battlefield losses. For instance, the Iraqi social and political clock, as it related to the defeat of the Islamic State, moved more swiftly than that of the United States. As a result, Iraqi Prime Minister (PM) Haider al-Abadi was quick to declare victory over the Islamic State in December 2017 and then hastily shifted to the discussion of U.S. troop reductions in the country.[18]

Social and political clocks also operate more quickly than a military's clock. Military commanders often push for more time, while social and political leaders urge the military to briskly conclude martial activity, as U.S. political-military discussions on Syria in 2017 illustrate.[19] In proxy environments, commanders and staffs must accept the fact that they do not have carte blanche control of time and that they must balance the time kept on all clocks.

More importantly, commanders and staffs in proxy environments must be keenly aware of the social and political appetites of their proxy, because as Thucydides reminds the practitioner of war, a nation prosecutes war out of fear, honor or self-interest.[20] If the proxy is no longer aligned with the principal—because its interests have shifted, it no longer feels threatened, or it no longer feels dishonored to the degree that it needs external support—it will distance itself from the principal. However, failure to see that and accept that these transaction or exploitative relationships have a finite duration will result in the principal-agent relationship turning foul. The May 2018 Iraqi national elections provide a prime example of how mismanaging time can negatively impact a proxy relationship.

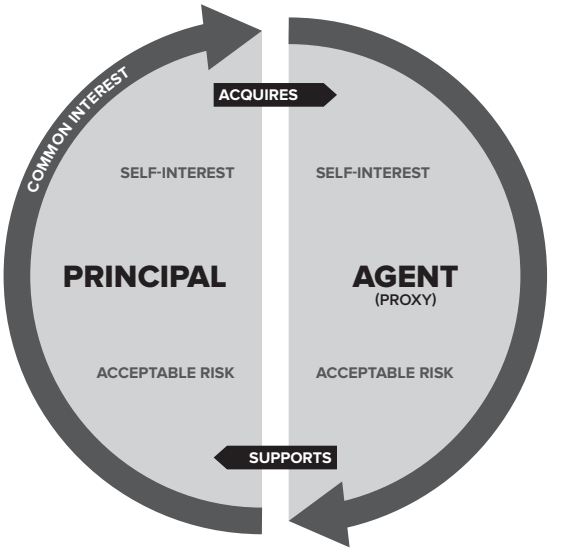
The success of demagogue Muqtada al-Sadr, at the expense of PM al-Abadi, in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections is perhaps representative of the role time plays in proxy environments. Given PM al-Abadi's success pulling Iraq back from the brink at the hands of the Islamic State, al-Abadi and his political bloc should have better resonated with the Iraqi voters. Al-Abadi led the defeat of the Islamic State, quelled Kurdish independence and held the country together when it was teetering on collapse. However, al-Abadi's government was unable to quickly reduce U.S. troop numbers in Iraq following that string of victories. Causality is difficult to discern, but the Iraqi electorate turned out to support al-Sadr's pro-Iraqi, Shia nationalist platform in the election, resulting with al-Abadi and his bloc coming in third place.[21] It is not a stretch to argue that al-Abadi's defeat was a result of the United States' inability to effectively operate in that proxy environment. The strategic impact of the 2018 Iraqi election is still unknown; however, it is easy to see the character of the United States' relationship with Iraq sharply evolving into something less friendly in the future.[22]

The Principal-Agent Problem: The Root of Transactional and Exploitative Relationships

Next to time, the principal-agent problem is the most germane feature of proxy environments. Stanford University professor and organizational theorist Kathleen Eisenhardt argues that principal-agent problems result from situations "in which one party (the principal) delegates work to another (the agent) who performs that work."[23] Further, Eisenhardt states that the problem of agency and the problem of risk sharing arise in the principal-agent dynamic.[24] She defines the *problem of agency* as a situation that arises once "the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict," and she defines the *problem of risk sharing* as one that occurs when the principal and agent possess dissimilar prerogatives toward risk, resulting in divergent action as contact with risk continues.[25] It should be noted that the problems of agency and risk sharing (as illustrated in figure 3) are nothing new. Clausewitz highlighted the idea almost 200 years ago. He said, "One country may support another's cause but will never take it so serious as it takes its own."[26]

Figure 3

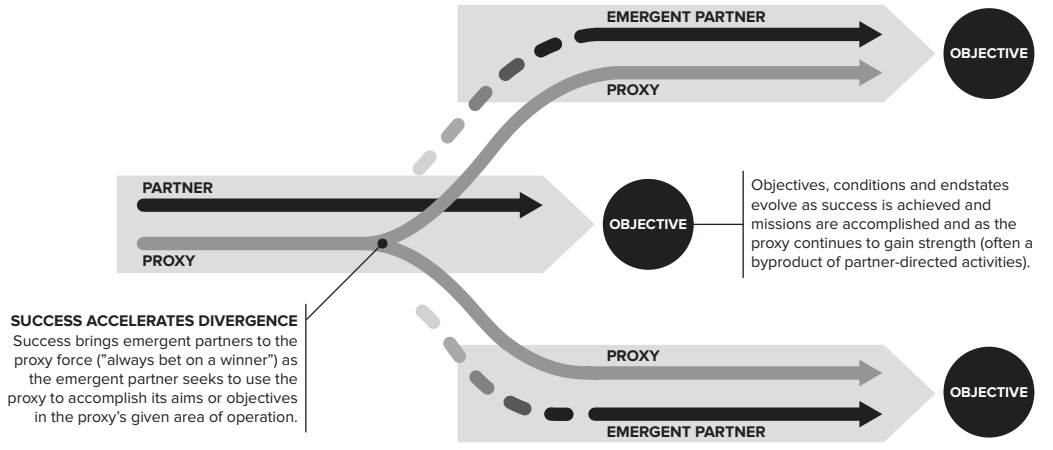
Principal-Agent Problem



The U.S. military generally sees the proxy, or agent, possessing limitless desire and will to work with its forces. This often shows itself in an unwillingness to allow the agent to stand on its own. This manifests in the U.S. military always finding an excuse for why an agent cannot be left to fend for itself. In most cases, the U.S. military fails to see that cooperation is fleeting because as the agent, its proxy force, becomes more capable, the agent becomes less interested in working with the principal. As time progresses and objectives are accomplished, each parties' self-interest begins to supplant the objectives that brought the principal and agent together in the first place. OIR provides an instructive model of the principal-agent problem, which is shown in figure 4.

Figure 4

Proxy Success and the Evolution of Partnered Relationships



Following the brutal siege of Mosul, a series of additional tactical objectives remained on the ledger. These objectives included defeating residual Islamic State forces in Tal Afar, in Hawijah and along Iraq's Euphrates River corridor that runs from Fallujah to Al Qaim.[27] Given the 2,000 Islamic State combatants projected to be in Tal Afar, the developing clashes were forecasted to match the savagery found in Mosul.[28]

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) (the agent) and the U.S.-led coalition (the principal) commenced hostilities against the Islamic State in Tal Afar on 19 August 2017, but the Islamic State evaporated, and the battle was over within eight days.† Casualties on both sides were low, especially in light of the casualties levied in Mosul. Al-Abadi and many leaders within the ISF appear to have taken two lessons from this period. First, the siege of Mosul had a decisive impact on the Islamic State. The organization's military wing in Iraq was physically defeated, leaving little force for the Islamic State's political wing to continue large-scale combat operations. Second, Mosul had an annealing effect on the ISF. These two effects resulted in the government of Iraq and the ISF (the agent) losing interest in maintaining pressure on the Islamic State; or, in other words, following the battles of Mosul and Tal Afar, the principal's raison d'être and the agent's interest were rapidly diverging.

With the threat of the Islamic State marginalized and the ISF self-confident, the government of Iraq reoriented on the Kurds. In September 2017, Iraqi Kurdistan, under the leadership of Masoud Barzani, voted for independence from Iraq. Al-Abadi, unwilling to accept Kurdish independence, launched a small-scale offensive in mid-October 2017 to thwart the movement. Side-stepping his coalition partners, al-Abadi's Kurdish operation was unilateral, successful and a clear signal of divergence between the principal and the agent in Iraq.[29]

Another example of the principal-agent problem exists in Syria; although, this one finds the United States as the principal and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

† An argument can also be made that the Iraqi government was the principal and the U.S.-led coalition was the agent, at least politically and strategically. At the operational and tactical level, it seems clearer that the ISF was the proxy and that the U.S.-led coalition was the principal.

as the agent. Turkey, upset with growing Kurdish strength in Syria, accelerated pressure on the Syrian Kurds by attacking Kurdish land along the Turkey-Syria border. This weakened the strategic bond between the principal (the United States) and the agent (the SDF). The Kurds saw a higher risk to their self-interest in maintaining a tight relationship with the U.S.-led coalition in the fight against the Islamic State than it did in loosening ties with the U.S. to protect its territory and people in northern Syria. As a result, the SDF temporarily broke contact with the U.S.-led coalition to defend its self-interests in Afrin and other areas of northern Syria, which drove a two-month operational pause in the counter-Islamic State mission in Syria.[30]

OIR provides two examples of the principal-agent problem, but the problem exists anywhere proxy warfare is conducted. As long as one actor seeks to work through another actor, problems of agency and risk will exist.

The Role of Power in Proxy Warfare

Power—its principles, components and influence—lies just below time and principal-agent problems in understanding proxyism. British historian Michael Howard offers an insightful view of power at the macro-level. Howard argues that "power, to the statesman, is . . . that capacity to control their environment on which the independent existence of their states and often the cultural values of their societies depend."[31] Moving to a more tangible level, political scientist Robert Dahl provides a useful model for understanding the discreteness of power.

Dahl argues that power exists in a relationship between two or more actors. He states, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."[32] Dahl continues, stating that power is not self-perpetuating but that in most cases it has a base that consists of all the resources that can be harnessed to impact the behavior of another actor. Dahl posits that the base of power is similar to potential energy in that it requires activation to generate its desired effect. He says that being able to effectively manipulate one's base of power is the primary means for maintaining power over another actor.[33] Dahl notes that a delay exists between A's exertion of power and B's ability to react. This delay, which he refers to as "lag," represents the processing and action time associated with A's power and B's ability and willingness to be overpowered.[34] As illustrated in figure 5, lag influences proxy environments because it often hides or distorts an actor's true intentions. This creates dissonance for actors across the levels of war as they attempt to maintain power and influence within their relationship.

Equally important, Dahl argues that a relationship between two actors must exist or there is no vehicle for power to be enacted.[35] Figure 6 shows that these relationships are not static but morph as conditions change, time passes and other actors enter or depart a given situation. This idea that associations change, thus increasing or decreasing one's relative power, is a central tenet in proxyism. However, this idea is often overlooked in applied relationships—when A, guided by its interests, attempts to maintain power and influence over B—like those found in proxy wars and shown in figure 7.

Tying Dahl's theory of power to the principal-agent problem, one can argue that Dahl's A equates to the principal, while B is the agent. Therefore, the principal possesses the power of the proxy, or agent, insofar as it can make it do something it would not otherwise do. Dahl's principles of power form the basis for understanding two theoretical models of proxy warfare—the exploitative model and the transactional model.

Figure 5

Graphical Representation of "Lag"

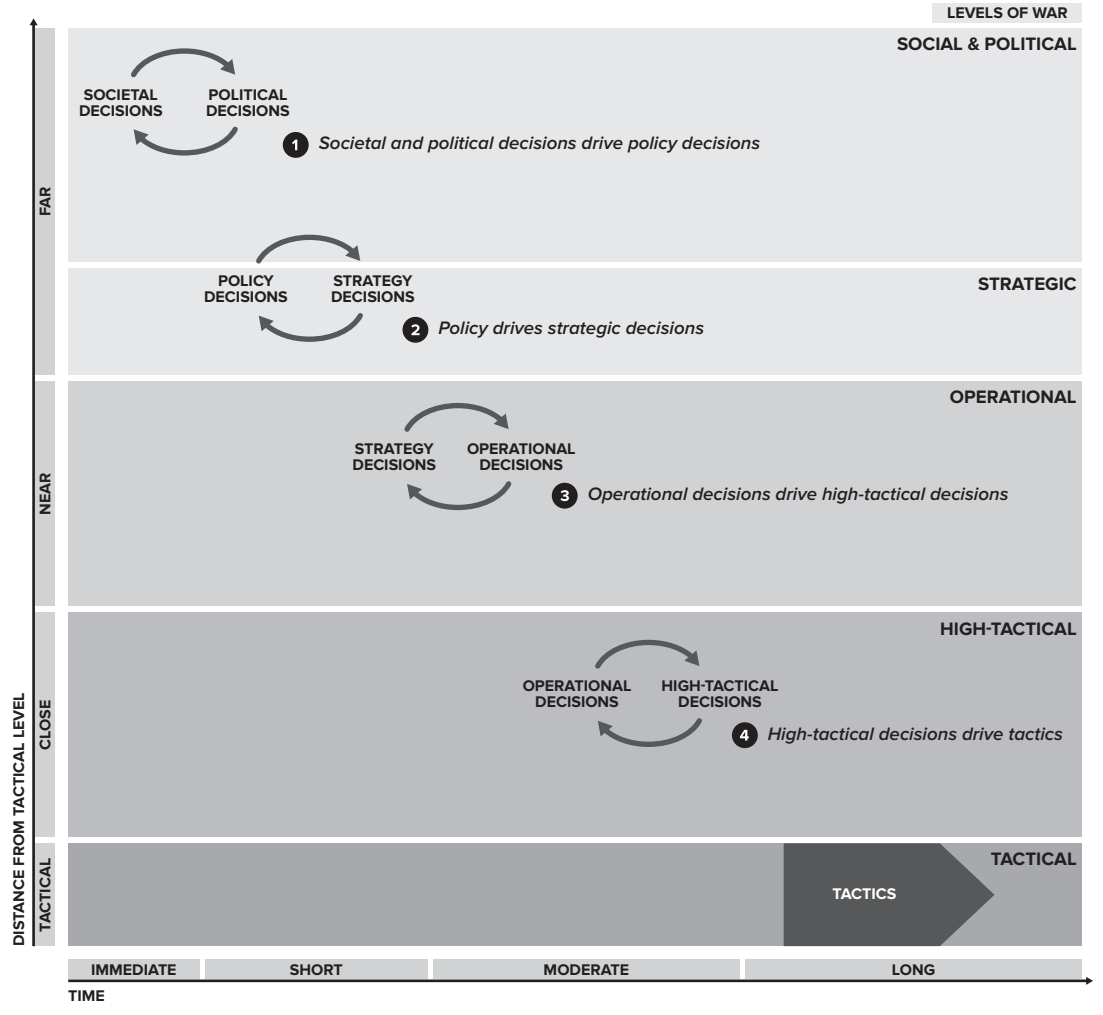


Figure 6

Wave of Influence (Principal to Agent)

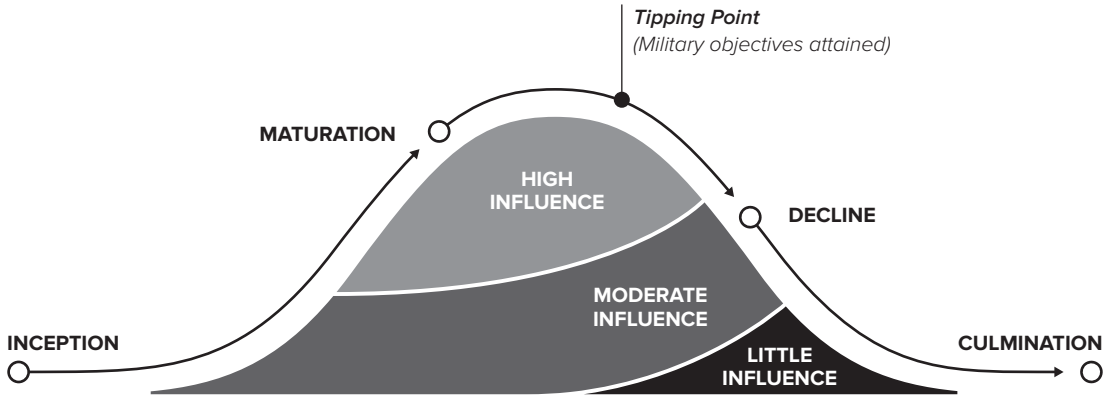
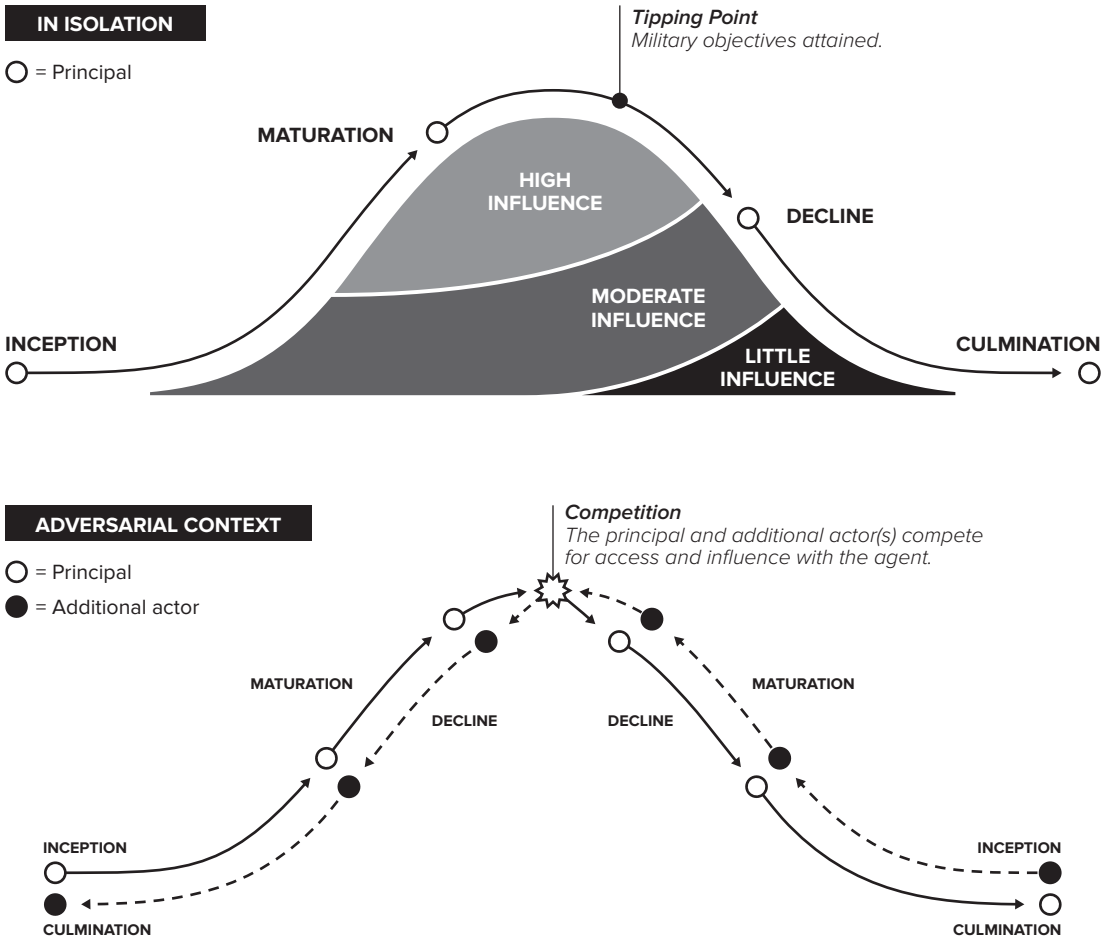


Figure 7

Wave of Influence in Adversarial Context



Two Theories of Proxy Warfare

Theories serve to set the course for doctrine. General Clausewitz said that "the primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled. Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply and expect the reader to share one's view."[36] In the spirit of Clausewitz's musing, and viewed in relation to components of proxy environments, two models of proxy warfare come to the fore. These models represent the idea of varying degrees of proxy warfare in a way that makes the idea useful for the practitioner of war.

The Exploitative Model: Principal Leads, Agent Follows

Proxy environments are characterized by two similar yet distinct models: the exploitative model and the transactional model. From the outside, these models look similar, but their inner workings differ. The exploitative model, as depicted in figure 8, is characterized by a proxy force being completely dependent on its principal for survival; the relationship could almost be viewed as one between a parasite and a host. The principal provides the lifeblood for the

parasitic proxy to survive. This dependency creates a strong bond between the proxy and the partner, resulting in the partner possessing almost unlimited power and influence over the proxy.

The exploitative model is usually the result of a stronger actor looking for a tool—a proxy force—to pursue an objective. As a result, the proxy is only as useful to the principal as its ability to make progress toward the principal's ends. Once the principal's ends have been achieved or the proxy is unable to maintain momentum toward the principal's ends, then the principal discontinues the relationship or distances itself from the proxy.

Eastern Europe provides one of the best contemporary examples of this model, embodied in the relationship between Russia and the separatists in Ukraine's Donets Basin. The existence of the Russian-leaning separatists, the funding and materiel backing of its army, and its pseudo-political status are all Russian creations. More to the point, reports indicate that Russian generals are leading the separatist armies.[37]

USCENTCOM also provides several examples of the exploitative model. Perhaps the two most memorable examples are the U.S. military's relationship with the ISF throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom and its ongoing relationship with the SDF, a U.S. military creation. The SDF's status as a U.S. partner will likely last only as long as the SDF can maintain pressure on the Islamic State in Syria. Similarly, the ISF, rebuilt from the ashes of Saddam Hussein's army after Paul Bremer's dismissal of the Iraqi Army in May 2003, was the United States' intermediary in combating al Qaeda, Shia militia groups, Iranian proxies and other adversaries in Iraq until policy changes formally ended the principal-agent relationship in December 2011.

In each case, the agent is dependent on its principal. However, success can cause the power relationship to change. A successful proxy force can generate enough legitimacy or support that it grows powerful enough to no longer need its principal's backing. Similarly, the political apparatus the proxy supports can gain sufficient power and legitimacy that it decides to no longer serve as an agent, as the ISF's independence following the U.S. departure in December 2011 highlights. The proxy can also find itself in the second model—the transactional model—through battlefield success, political wrangling or other actors seeking to undermine the existing principal.

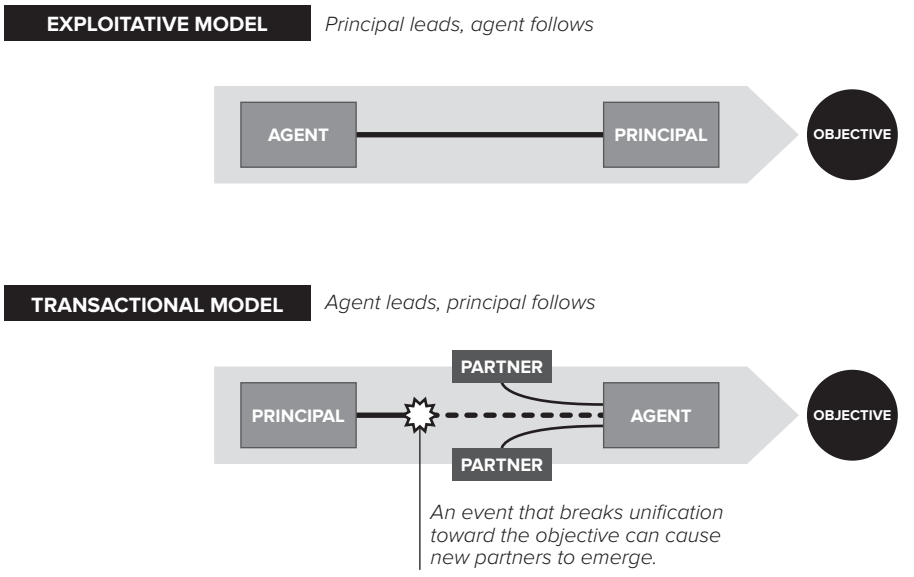
The Transactional Model: Agent Leads, Principal Follows

The transactional model is proxy warfare's second model and is illustrated in figure 8. Again, Clausewitz provides the foundation for understanding this model. He writes, "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."[38] An exchange of services and goods that benefits all parties—defeat of a mutual threat, training of the agent's force, foreign military sales and finance—is at the heart of the transactional model.

However, this model is a paradox because the proxy is the powerbroker in the relationship. In many cases, the proxy government is independent but looking for assistance in defeating an adversary; it is not interested in political or military subjugation by the principal. Moreover, the proxy possesses the power in the relationship because its association with the principal is wholly transactional. Given the transactional character of the relationship, the clock starts ticking on the duration of the bond as soon as the first combined shot is fired. As a result, as the common goal is gradually achieved, the agent's interest in the principal recedes at a comparable

Figure 8

The Proxy Environment



rate. The Iraqi government's 2014 request for U.S. and coalition assistance to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq is an example of this dynamic.

Unlike the exploitative model, this model sees the proxy force's government request support from other nations to defeat a given threat. In doing so, the proxy force's government places parameters on the partner, to include such things as force caps, an unambiguous mission and time constraints. The proxy issues parameters to align the principal with its own political and military objectives. Additionally, the proxy constrains the principal to limit its ability to influence the proxy beyond the defined parameters of the affiliation. The proxy also has fixed political and social interest in the principal; it is likely the proxy will look to end its dependency on the principal once its goals are attained.

At the same time, the transactional model is extremely vulnerable to external influence. It is vulnerable because the proxy is less invested in the principal as it is in the exploitative model. This provides leverage for clever actors seeking to drive a wedge into a principal-agent relationship. Russia and China's activity in Iraq provides an example of this dynamic. Weapons and finance are but one way in which Russia and China have cut into the United States' position in Iraq. Specifically, both Russia and China have wedged themselves into the foreign military sales and foreign military finance realm, which was the bulwark of U.S. political and military strategy in Iraq.[39] In doing so, both Russia and China have gained strategic access and influence and have made tactical in-roads across the country. Similarly, shrewd external actors will undercut the principal by providing assistance and support with fewer caveats on what they provide the agent. They do so to cleave away the principal by exploiting the gaps in the principal's policy and relationship strategy.

It is critical to understand the model in which one is operating. Hubris, inattentiveness or naivety in the transactional model can result in the decoupling of the principal and the agent. Self-assessment and an egress plan are critical when operating within the transactional model.

Self-assessment allows the principal to see itself in relation to its agent and determine the status of its relationship with the agent. The egress plan is the strategy to conclude the principal-agent relationship and move forward on constructive footing. Failure to self-assess and have an exit strategy can result in the agent bilking the principal or the principal ruining the long-term political relationship between the two.

The Foundation for a Proxy Warfare Doctrine

The discussion to this point has focused on framing proxyism by illuminating the features, characteristics and salient components of proxy environments. The principles of proxy environments, or theoretical proxy environmental models, result in a handful of further deductions. These deductions, or principles of proxy warfare, form the base for proxy warfare doctrine and are articulated in the following points:

- Principals, agents and actors will operate in a manner aligned with their respective political objectives.
- Proxy relationships will expire; therefore, it is important to identify one's termination criteria and transition plan.
- Because of the lag between the tactical level and higher echelons, one should take tactical feedback as not wholly representative of operational, strategic and political direction.
- A principal's continued presence beyond the end of the principal-agent relationship can cause the agent's political, social and military entities to turn against its former partner.
- It is better to face one opponent than two; therefore, opponents will attempt to dislocate principal-agent relationships.
- Savvy opponents will seek to fracture the principal-agent alliance by
  - attacking the relationship's bonding or
  - introducing existential threats that challenge the livelihood of one of the partners.
- Due to the lag in tactical feedback, red teaming and assessments are critical to monitoring a principal-agent dynamic; red teams and assessment teams should tell the commander what they need to hear, not what they want to hear.‡

Conclusion

Antoine Jomini, a 19th century Swiss general officer and student of Napoleon Bonaparte, argues, "Correct theories, founded upon right principles, sustained by actual events of wars, and added to accurate military history, will form a true school of instruction for generals."[40] This work has sought to apply Jomini's postulate to remedy U.S. Army doctrinal deficiencies by introducing a general theory of proxy warfare. The theory—focused at the high-tactical, operational and strategic levels—is dominated by three concepts: time, the principal-agent problem and power relationships. Power is the ability of one actor to make another actor do something they would not otherwise do. Power cannot exist without an existing relationship between actors. However, relationships can change as new actors are introduced or as existing actors depart or are no longer interested in the existing power dynamics.

‡ A paradox exists within this principle. If the high-tactical, operational and strategic levels fail to properly monitor and assess the status of the principal-agent relationship, then actions at the tactical level can appear to be indicators or signs of changes in the relationship. However, this is only a result of overlooking indicators and warnings at the political, strategic or operational levels.

Principal-agent problems command proxy environments. One partner never values the reason for fighting as much as the other. Once an objective has been accomplished, each partner begins to pursue its separate interests. The introduction of external actors or meddling adversaries, seeking to gain their influence or fracture the principal-agent partnership, often accelerates the divergence of interests. Thus, time dominates proxy environments. Principals and agents have finite time to accomplish their goals; therefore, it is prudent for the U.S. Army to develop termination criteria and time horizons, driven by an empowered red team and assessments crew to enable realistic environmental understanding.

Continuing along the same path—regularly engaging in proxy wars without a theoretical and doctrinal foundation for proxyism while obfuscating the realities of proxy hotspots through mismanagement of the environment—the U.S. Army will keep finding itself unable to conclude its proxy wars. The Army's open-ended proxy wars across the globe illustrate this point. As Clausewitz said, one must conform to the spirit of the age and the general character of war. Moving beyond the quixotic notions of security force assistance, partnered force development and train, advise and assist and embracing the realities of proxyism will help the U.S. Army prosper in future proxy environments.

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