# Strategic Relationships, Risk, and Proxy War

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## Abstract

Proxy wars dominate modern war fighting. Despite the frequency of proxy wars on today's battle field, the strategic studies community lacks sufficient models and strategic theories to frame proxy wars from the strategic level. This works seeks to build on the limited amount of preexisting theoretical work on proxy war by introducing five models of proxy relation - coerced, transactional, cultural, exploitative, and contractual. This models help policymakers, strategists, and practitioners understand and navigate through the strategic workings of today's proxy wars.

# Introduction

Proxy war is creeping back to a point of strategic relevance. Simultaneously, proxy war's slow, abstruse move to a position of dominance in contemporary armed conflict has occurred in an environment wanting of a strategic theoretical framework. Most contemporary proxy war literature offers cursory definitions of the phenomena but fails to articulate the strategic mechanics amongst actors found therein. In many cases policymakers, strategists, and practitioners apply an anchor bias when analyzing proxy war, or they weaponize a narrative to offset the coarseness of proxy relationships and they describe those relationships in a more palatable manner. For example, in a recent discussion on proxy war, analysts Jack Watling and Erica Gaston mentioned that few state actors are willing to openly define proxy relationships in that manner because of the negative connotations associated with the proxy label.[1]

Yet, in softening proxy war's coarseness the distinct character of a proxy relationship is overlooked, hidden, and lost. The U.S. Department of Defense's joint force doctrine, for example, incorrectly categorizes the strategic relationship of proxy war by contending that when state actors employ proxies in pursuit of their objectives, they (the state actor) are operating outside of armed conflict, while their proxies are operating within the realm of armed conflict.[2] This assertion is incorrect because by virtue of employing a surrogate to accomplish its military objectives, which support the larger policy objectives, a state actor is engaged in armed conflict. Furthermore, as is evident in state actor-driven proxy wars, state actors provide combat advisors, liaisons, logistics, and other military and support capabilities that enable its proxy to accomplish its (the state actor's) military objectives.

Based on the arch of the current strategic environment, which portends continued proxy wars, it is paramount for the strategic studies community to continue developing theoretical taxonomies that allow policymakers, strategists, practitioners, and historians to effectively navigate proxy war's murky waters. To be sure, as Professor Vladimir Rauta contends, "In order to prevent or prevail in fighting proxy wars a strategic understanding of why proxy wars are waged is needed."[3] This work's goal is to shed further light on the broad character of strategic actors within proxy environments

1

and describe how risk—strategic and existential—factors into those relationships. Risk, for its part, is the binding agent between principal and proxy, and by extension, the cleavage points between those actors.

Although proxyism—a unified theory of proxy war—is again gaining relevance in war, proxies and proxyism have a long, rich history in the conduct of war. This history, coupled with recent observations in proxy war provide a useful window into the mechanics and character of proxy war, proxy relationships, and how risk influences the proxy environment. Historian John Keegan contends that surrogates have long played an important role in war.[4] For example, Italian condottieri and Swedish companies for-hire were contractual proxies that played pivotal roles in the wars of the Middle Ages.[5] The Great Northern War's (1700-1721) battle of Poltava (July 8, 1709)—decisive in facilitating Sweden's strategic decline while igniting Russia's rise on the international stage—saw both Sweden and the Tsardom of Muscovy heavily rely on Cossack proxies to increase their pool of available forces and offset the loss of their native forces.[6] Hessians—German contractual proxies for hire from the state of Hesse— played important roles during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, perhaps none more noticeable than serving as British auxiliaries during the American Revolution.[7] This says nothing of the Cold War's prodigious count of proxy wars as the Soviet Union and the West battled for ideological supremacy around the globe.

Although dormant for many years, Russia's 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine ushered in a new era of proxy war. Russia's employment of culturally aligned and contractual proxies, dedicated to Moscow and the Kremlin's policy objectives, shook the western world as it watched Ukraine lose control of large portions of its country. Western governments are articulating the prevalence of proxy force employment around the globe. American combatant commander reports to the U.S. Congress regularly highlight the threat posed by proxies within their specific areas of responsibility. Outside the U.S., in a 2019 speech, former U.K. Defense Secretary Penny Mordaunt argued about the dangers of proxy forces in modern armed conflict and for a credible deterrent to those dangers.[8] Despite the vociferous contentions from commenters such as historian Lawrence Freedman or analyst Michael Kofman, July 2020's Trilateral Contact Group agreement between Ukraine, Russia's proxies, and Moscow, all but rubber-stamped the Kremlin's strategic and territorial

gains in Ukraine's Donets River Basin (Donbas), demonstrating how effective proxy campaigns can result in strategic wins.[9]

Based on proxy war's far-reaching nature in today's strategic environment, it is paramount to further develop proxy war's strategic framework and map the basic structure of relationships between strategic actors therein. This work seeks to increase the strategic and defense study community's professional body of knowledge on proxy war. It does so by adding to proxy war's existing literature. Specifically, this work further advances the idea that five models of strategic relationship—exploitative, coercive, cultural, contractual or transactional—exist within a proxy war framework. A proxy, or principal-agent relationship, takes one of these five forms. Risk is the sinew that binds, and conversely, can lead to the unraveling of actors within a principal-agent relationship. Adroit players and observers in proxy war understand this and seek to manipulate it, much in the same fashion Napoleon Bonaparte employed his strategy of central position throughout the Napoleonic Wars. This work elaborates on this idea, discussing how strategic and existential risk can be manipulated in proxy war both for and against a principal-proxy dyad. A brief review of terms and definitions are required before beginning that analysis.

## Definitions, Terms of Reference, and Framing Proxy Relationships

Proxy war and its associated ideas and terms are contested concepts. As a result, no standard exists in which to point to guide proxy war discussions. In the absence of an accepted set of concepts and lexicon, those listed within this section are the standard used throughout this work.

Proxy war is a broad taxonomy of armed conflict, not a discrete form or type of warfighting. Broadly associating one form of warfighting with proxy war demonstrates intellectual laziness and is not useful in making sense of the phenomena. While proxy wars fight be fought through partisans or insurgents as irregular wars or insurgencies, this is not the only way in which these types of wars are fought. Russia's rapacious hybrid campaign in eastern Ukraine, which heavily relied on conventional combat operations, stresses this point. The war's Donbas Campaign, which birthed the violent, bloody, and destructive battles of Ilovaisk, Donetsk Airport, Luhansk Airport, and Debal'tseve, has resulted in 13,200 Ukrainian dead

3

and 30,000 wounded since the war began in the spring of 2014.[10] This is a clear signal that today's proxy wars are more than just state-sponsored insurgencies waged in political hinterlands, but instead can fall anywhere along the continuum of conflict.A proxy war's form or method of warfighting is subject to each participant's political narrative, preference, objectives, and resources. The principal, on the other hand, is constrained by the narratives, objectives, and resource limitations of its chosen agent, and the bond that exists between it and its surrogate.

Equally important, proxies must not be taken entirely as non-state actors. Proxy forces, based upon the type of principal-agent dyad, can span the spectrum from state armies fighting as surrogates for a benefactor, to proto-state forces fighting for international legitimation, to partisan groups cobbled together by an actor to do its tactical dirty work. Nevertheless, the group identity of the actor filling the role of proxy is not as important as the type of relationship between the principal and the proxy. The relationship's character is the glue that bonds the two actors into a singular whole.

Moreover, a proxy war is one in which two or more actors, working against a common adversary, strive to achieve a common objective.[11] This dyad is governed by a principal-agent reciprocation, time, and power dynamics. See Figure 1, Proxy Environment. Within the dyad, the principal actor operates indirectly, through another actor—an agent, surrogate, interlocutor, or proxy—to accomplish its strategic objective or curate its strategic interests. By virtue of working on behalf of the principal, whether willfully or by coercive means, the principal's objectives become that of the surrogate actor.[12] As theorists Carl von Clausewitz and B.H. Liddell Hart note, problems of risk-sharing and agency accompany a principal-agent dyad. According to Carl von Clausewitz, "One country may support another's cause, but will never take it as serious as it takes its own."[13] Meanwhile, Liddell Hart posits that, "No agreement between governments

4

has had any stability beyond their recognition that it is in their own interest to adhere to it."[14]

Figure 1: Proxy Environment
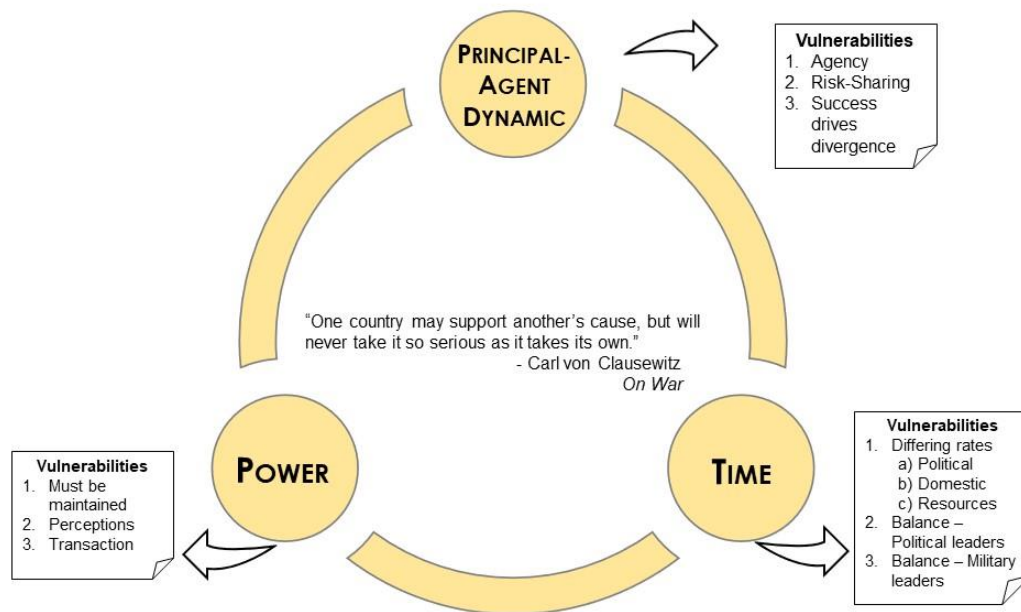


Source: Author

Professor Kathleen Eisenhardt suggests that these problems arise when the ambition or aims of the two actors become misoriented or come into conflict with each other.[15] Additionally, Eisenhardt contends that this occurs when the actor's attitudes and acceptance of risk are misaligned.[16] In turn, risk's impact on the relationship tends to result in dyad divergence as contact with risk continues.[17]

Recent work on proxy war suggests that two models of relationship exist within proxy war—transactional and exploitative models.[18] Current proxy war research argues that these two models do not fully articulate the character of relationships in proxy environments. Analysis focused on risk, commitment, investment cost, and strategic interaction amongst partners instead suggests that five relationship models subsist within proxy war. These models—exploitative, coercive, cultural, contractual and transactional—provide the policymaker, strategist, practitioner, and

5

historian useful tools for making sense of proxy war. Furthermore, understanding risk, and how it can be manipulated to accelerate or decelerate divergence within a principal-agent dyad, can further assist those interested or involved in proxy wars.

## The Exploitative Model—The Parasitic Model

In the exploitative model the proxy is dependent on the principal for survival. A parasite and a host are a useful mental model to visual when pondering the exploitative model. In this situation, the principal serves as the host, while the proxy serves as the parasite—it would not survive without being able to leech off the host. Yet, paradoxically, the proxy provides value to the principal in this arrangement, and therefore, the principal will do what it must to ensure its proxy's survival. This reliance creates a strong bond between the proxy and the partner, resulting in the partner possessing near boundless power and influence over the proxy. Russia's support for its Ukrainian proxy during the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014-present) is a useful example to demonstrate this point. During several critical battles, to include Ilovaisk, Second Donetsk Airport, and Debal'tseve, Russian land forces came to the relief of their overwhelmed and outmatched proxies during the Donbas Campaign.[19]

This model tends to be the result of a strong actor looking to outsource tactical combat operations, for a variety of reasons, to a weaker actor. As a result, the newly acquired proxy is only useful to the principal insofar as its ability to accomplish the principal's objectives. Resultantly, exploitative proxy dyads are temporary—once the principal's ends have been achieved, or the proxy is unable to maintain momentum towards the principal's ends then the principal tends to discontinue the relationship.

Additionally, if the principal assesses that is proxy is gaining too much strength or independence, the principal will often eradicate political, strategic, or influential proxy leaders to maintain its primacy within the relationship. Theorist Colmar von der Goltz contends that, "The assailant also incurs the danger of losing allies who are willing to support him up to a certain point, but do not wish to see him grown strong at their expense."[20] The dubious assassinations of the Donetsk People's Republic's Prime Minister Alexander Zakharchenko in August 2018 and acclaimed military commanders Mikhail Tolstykh in February 2017 and Arseny

6

Pavlov in October 2016 fall into this category.[21] Open-source reporting makes attribution challenging to identify, but many sources contend that Zakharchenko, Tolstykh, and Pavlov were assassinated by Russian agents to neutralize their growing power and notoriety and to keep their Donbas proxies weak and compliant to Moscow.[22]

The United States has a similar, yet less violent relationship with its counter-ISIS proxy in Syria. The United States military manufactured the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from a mixed bag of Syrian Kurdish militias, to include the People's Protection Units, or YPG.[23] As the result of early success in the deserts and cities in eastern and northern Syria, the SDF branched out and established a political wing—the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)— to advance its political agenda.[24] Kurdish self-rule in Syria's Western Kurdistan region, also known as Rojava, is the primary goal of the SDF-SDC pact.[25]

Yet, Kurdish self-rule, as also seen in Iraq, presents a unique problem for principal actors locked in formal politico-military alliances such as NATO. Kurdish independence and self-rule are a major point of contention for Turkey, a US NATO ally. Turkey formally objected to the SDF and SDC's growing power and influence in Syria and expressed this objection militarily. Since 2018, Turkey has conducted many military operations, to include Operation Olive Branch, to undercut the SDF-SDC's growing political and military strength in Syria.[26] Turkey's voracious objections in northern Syrian Kurdish territory and Rojava have derailed ongoing US-SDF military operations on several occasions, resulting in strategic and operational pauses in the US-SDF campaign to defeat ISIS.[27] As a formal alliance member with Turkey, the US stood by and watched its proxy take a thrashing as it battled to protect its homeland from the Turks.[28] As a result of the battles with Turkey, the SDF has been beaten into a shell of the 60,000-man proxy force that it once was.[29]It is also important to note that exploitative proxies, which are often various groups brigaded together by a stronger actor to achieve a common objective, are challenged to remain unified as they approach mission accomplishment. The SDF in Syria, as but one example, experienced this unraveling as the group's impetus, defeating the Islamic State, slowly recedes into the background.[30]

To close the discussion on exploitative proxy relationships, it is important to underscore that proxy success can change the relationship between the

7

principal and the proxy. Successful proxies that can avoid punitive principals can generate sufficient legitimacy to outgrow is subservient relationship with its principal. Battlefield success and political moves can set dependent, exploited proxies free. Conversely, if a principal anticipates an exploitative proxy as a more useful tool in a more independent status, it might elect to allow that actor to gain more political power and independence.

## The Coercive Model—Impressment of Unwilling Contributors

The coercive model is centered on the impressment of unwilling or reluctant contributors. In this model the proxy is a pre-existing environmental actor that is coerced into a principal-agent relationship with a strong actor. The impressed or coerced proxy possesses a low willingness to shoulder the risk that comes with being a proxy, and therefore, the relationship's bond is loose. To be sure, it is often only the principal's physical presence that keeps the coerced proxy working on behalf of the principal. In turn, the proxy is given a minimal autonomy and the principal often micro-manages the proxy because of the lose bond between the two.

Coerced proxy relationships are often fraught with internal danger for the principal and the proxy. The proxy is subject to harsh punishment by the principal, while the principal must worry about inside attacks by the proxy. Resultantly, a principal must often employ internal security forces while working with and alongside a coerced proxy. The American employment of security forces to protect itself from its Afghan proxies in Afghanistan is one example of this idea.[31]

The coerced proxy is often the byproduct of a situation in which a principal has come into an area and defeated the existing ruling body and its security forces. Following that defeat, the principal coopts trusted elements from the defeated regime's security forces. The proxy, either indifferent to the occupying power, or concerned about the effect of cooperating with the principal, displays little motivation for working with the occupier and displays limited capability, whether that be in the form of governance or security.

Germany's use of Soviet proxies on the Eastern Front of World War II is an informative example of a coerced proxy. Shortly after the halcyon days of 1939-1941, Nazi Germany found itself bogged down in the Soviet Union and facing manpower shortages as it extended beyond its operational reach.[32] Historian Robert Citino notes, "It was in southern Russia that *Bewegungskrieg* ground to a halt, giving way to the very type of war that the German Army had historically tried to avoid: *Stellungskrieg*...After their promising starts, the German offensives of 1942 would give birth to twins: Stalingrad and El Alamein."[33]

In light of this snowballing calamity, the Wehrmacht began to press Soviets into service along the Eastern Front; *hilfswillige*, or *hiwi*, is the term that became associated with these surrogates.[34] Historian Antony Beevor contends that while a small number of hiwis were willing participants, most, especially by the time of the battle of Stalingrad, were Soviet prisoners of war coerced into service by the Wehrmacht.[35] Germany's Sixth Army, its primary warfighting formation at the battle of Stalingrad, had 50,000 Russian proxies aligned with its front-line divisions.[36] This number roughly equated to twenty-five percent of Germany's total force in Stalingrad.[37] After the Soviet victory at Stalingrad, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD, imprisoned or killed most of the hiwis that it was able to identify.[38]

Although not to suggest parallels between Nazi Germany's proxy strategy in World War II with American proxy strategy in the post-September 11, 2001 strategic security space, the United States' relationship with the government of Afghanistan and the Afghan security forces is a contemporary instance of the coerced proxy model. Following the Taliban's initial defeat in Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002, U.S. forces created the Afghan army and its security apparatus from scratch.[39] In this relationship the United States is the principal actor, and the Afghans are the coerced proxy. Together both parties combat the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and many other splinter groups and non-strategic actors that have materialized during twenty years of war.

Yet the Afghans are a coerced partner, forced to both work with the United States military (and its NATO partners) and to combat the Taliban and other security threats. Due to the lack of buy-in, Afghan security forces are often reluctant to work with U.S. forces and, despite nineteen years of

9

focus on building Afghan capacity, Afghan forces demonstrate limited combat capability. The Afghan's disinterest in risk sharing and lack of agency resulted in the Taliban re-taking many parts of the country. The Taliban argue that they control 70 percent of Afghanistan.[40] On the other end of the spectrum, one reputable report contends that the government of Afghanistan controls 54 percent of the country, while the Taliban controls 13 percent, and the remaining 33 percent of the country is actively contested between those two warring parties.[41] The Afghan government and its security force's inability and unwillingness to eliminate the Taliban—a true existential threat to both those institutions—despite almost two decades of train, advise, and assist support from the United States and NATO strongly points to the coerced character between the Afghans and the United States. Furthermore, the significant number of insider attacks levied by the Afghans against American forces in Afghanistan points to the relationship's friction brought about by its coerced bond.[42]

Beyond Afghanistan, analyst Jack Watling propounds that several groups in Syria also fall into the coerced proxy category. Watling notes that many Islamic rebel groups fighting against the Al-Assad regime have consumed fledgling, non-Islamic rebel groups of the Free Syrian Army and pressed them into service.[43] As the fighting in Syria has worn non-Islamic rebel groups down, the stronger, more powerful Islamic rebel groups have coerced the weaker groups to join forces with them against President Bashar al-Assad.[44]

Power is the driving force that binds the principal and proxy in a coerced relationship. Power binds the dyad because the bond between the principal and proxy, based on the proxy's willingness to share risk and assume agency, is so feeble.[45] The principal's ability to make the proxy do something it would not otherwise do, such as Soviets fighting under the swastika against the Soviet Union, or Afghan soldiers fighting the Taliban on behalf of the United States, clearly demonstrates power's efficacy in the coerced model.[46]

## The Cultural Model—Cousins and Like-Minded Believers Working Together

Writing in his classic work, *A History of Warfare*, historian John Keegan breaks free of the shackles of Clausewitzian thought, focused on war being a political endeavor, and instead forces the reader to address the relationship between culture and war. Breaking ranks with Clausewitz, Keegan argues, "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."[47] Keegan's position is the starting point for understanding proxy war's cultural principal-agent relationship. Because culture is rooted in self-identity, cultural bonds in a principal-proxy dyad are extremely strong, forming an abiding relationship.

As the history of war and international competition shows, cultural connections often exist beyond the limits of the political map. The major features of culture—religion, ethnicity, and language—as well as geographic precedence are often used as leverage to generate proxies in heterogeneous areas where proxy wars materialize. Cultural proxies are the result of a principal actor tapping into existing cultural demographics to obtain power and influence over a group of individuals. Russia's use of culturally similar groups in eastern Ukraine to build a proxy government and proxy army are a useful illustration of this model.

For much of its history, Ukraine has been part of Russia, either in part or in whole. Because of that relationship with Russia Ukraine differs greatly from west to east. Western Ukraine is predominately ethnic Ukrainian, Catholic, and heavily populated with Ukrainian speakers. Eastern Ukraine, on the other hand, carries the legacy of imperial Russia. Many portions of eastern Ukraine's Donbas belonged to Imperial Russia throughout the rule of the Romanov czars. As recent as 1922, the Novorossiya region of Ukraine—Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Odessa, Zaporizhia, and Mykolaiv—belonged to Russia, while Crimea did not become part of Ukraine until 1954.[48] Resultantly, much of the eastern expanse of Ukraine, to include its border with Russia, is populated by ethnic Russians, Russophones, and Eastern Orthodox Christians who are intermixed with Catholic, Ukrainian-speaking ethnic Ukrainians.[49]

Under the Romanov dynasty the czars stylized their holdings, of which Ukraine was a centerpiece, as All Russias. Cleverly manipulating historical precedent and geographic pedigree, Russian President Vladimir Putin used the All Russias and Novorossiya concepts to legitimize the Kremlin's political and military ambitions in Ukraine.[50] To be sure, during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war's outset, Putin and foreign minister Sergey Lavrov often employed the term Novorossiya and its historical lineage within the All Russias framework to justify Russian aggression in Ukraine.[51] As part of this advocacy, Putin and Lavrov said it was Russia's right to protect ethnic Russians, Russophones, and Eastern Orthodox Christians abroad, to include those in Ukraine.[52] In sum, Russia made use of history, geography, and cultural demographics to cultivate sympathetic supporters in Ukraine to build proxy governments and proxy armies to combat Kyiv.

Moving to the Middle East, Iran provides an excellent case study for this model too. Iran uses cultural ties, generally the Shiite branch of Islam, to build strong-bonded proxies throughout the Middle East. Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah are Iran's most notable proxies across the Shia Crescent, while it also supports the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hamas, and a host of Shia militia groups in Syria and Iraq.[53] Iran's Quds Force, a keystone feature within Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, is the prime mover for its proxies. The Quds Force provides funding, support, and advisors to its proxies, in addition to strategic and tactical planning.[54]

As Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq demonstrates, cultural bonds between principal and proxy are strong and result in the proxy willing to share high degrees of risk with their principal.[55] Since its inception following the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, Kata'ib Hezbollah has provoked and fought the United States, directly and indirectly, on behalf of Iran.[56] Further, the group's continued resistance to American interests in Iraq following the assassination of its leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020, demonstrates that cultural proxies tend to stick by their principal despite increasing levels of risk.[57]

## The Contractual Model—Mercenaries and other Guns for Hire

The contractual model is perhaps one of the oldest relational models between principal and agent. This model carries such historic significance that Niccolò Machiavelli makes mention of it in his classic political and military treatise, *The Prince*.[58] In the contractual model, the principal subcontracts the work of warfighting to an existing firm or business that possesses the military means to obtain the principal's goals.

Contractual proxies afford several benefits to the principal. First, it increases the distance between the principal and the horrors of war, thus decreasing its domestic and political risk. Second, contractual proxies negate the deployment of large military formations, thereby increasing operational secrecy and deniability. Third, contractual proxies are a quick and easy way to get quasi-military forces on the ground, increasing the principal's tactical options and hastening its response time.

Contractual proxies loom large in modern wars in the Middle East. Companies such as *MPRI*, *Aegis*, *Blackwater*, and *Triple Canopy* became household names during the early years of American-led Operation Iraqi Freedom. Personnel from these companies were found fighting alongside U.S. military personnel. One example, 2004's battle of Najaf, saw *Blackwater* personnel help turn the tide of battle in favor of the U.S. Army and Marines with whom they were fighting.[59] In March 2004, the murder of four *Blackwater* personnel provided the impetus for the First and Second Battles of Fallujah, which burned hot through the remainder of 2004.[60] Later, in 2007, *Blackwater* was involved in the indiscriminate killing of more than 20 Iraqis in Baghdad's Mansour Square. The slaughter stoked the fire of an increasingly deadly and out of control insurgency, further complicating the American mission in Iraq.[61] Rebranded several times since its troublesome days in Iraq, *Blackwater* and its head, Erik Prince, continue to offer contractual proxy solutions to state-based problems in armed conflict, as his 2018 push to privatize the war in Afghanistan illustrates.[62]

Russia's *Wagner Group* is the most visible example of this model today. A brief battle with American Special Forces and SDF proxies in February 2018 at Dier ez-Zor, Syria pulled the *Wagner Group* out of the shadows and thrust it into the international community's watchful eyes. The battle

13

was short, lasting only a few hours, but savage, resulting in the death of over 200 *Wagner* contractors.[63]

*Wagner's* employment extends well beyond the Syrian desert. The group is reported to operate in Ukraine, South America, and Africa; however, its reach is likely broader than that.[64] The arrest of 33 *Wagner* contractors during the height of political upheaval in Belarus on July 29, 2020 is a clear indication of this broader reach.[65]

The Taliban in Afghanistan offer another example of how contractual proxies are employed. Russia and Iran, looking to further bog down the United States in Afghanistan, and continue to discredit America's ability to effectively manage the Afghan war, are both guilty of enlisting the Taliban to serve as a proxy on its behalf. In the summer of 2020, reports surfaced that both Russia, through its intelligence service the GRU, and Iran, through several Kabul-based front companies, paid bounties to the Taliban and its associates to kill American and NATO soldiers.[66] The Taliban—Russia and Iran's de facto proxy—allowed both countries to wage a low-scale, low-cost proxy war against the United States and NATO in Afghanistan.

The bond between principal and agent in a contractual relationship is high because the proxy would not accept the contract if it were uncomfortable with the agreement's inherent risk, nor would the principal hire the agent if it were not willing to assume a high degree of risk. Nevertheless, the dyad possesses a two-hold decoupling point. A contractual proxy will distance itself or nullify the contract if it finds itself butting up upon existential crisis. Second, the principal will nullify the agreement if that proxy's presence cuts against the principal's strategic goals. The *Wagner Group* and *Blackwater* illustrate these concepts. Wagner's defeat at Deir ez-Zor is within a contractual proxy's capacity to absorb.[67] However, situations such as *Blackwater's* continued presence in Iraq following its slaughter of innocent Iraqis in Baghdad's Mansour Square, increase strategic risk for both partners to the point in which the relationship is toxic for both partners, and must be culled.[68]

14

## The Transactional Model—The Business Deal Amongst Strategic Actors

The transactional model is the most challenging to comprehend because it is often misconstrued as either a coalition, an alliance, or a partnership. The transaction model roughly equates to a business deal amongst strategic actors. The character of the transactional model of relationship within proxy war is long understood. To be sure, theorist Carl von Clausewitz commented on this idea in his classic treatise *On War*. Clausewitz writes 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.[69]

The mutual exchange of services and goods, which provides reciprocated benefit for the principal and proxy, is the transactional model's harmonizing feature. This model is unique because political negotiation amongst strategic actors drives the arrangement of the principal-proxy dyad from the strategic to tactical levels. In this model, mutual interest often brings strategic actors together. However, the deliberation on how to achieve their mutual interest impacts how and who becomes the principal and the proxy at the levels of war. In most instances, the stronger of the two actors tends to fill the principal vacancies, whereas the weaker actor serves as the proxy. The recent campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq serves as a useful example to explain the transactional model. In 2014 the government of Iraq sought international help from the United States, among others, to combat ISIS.[70] Politically, both the United States and government of Iraq set the war's major policy objectives. Strategically and operationally, however, the government of Iraq and the Iraqi military set the military objectives but were supported and advised by the United States and its coalition partners. At the tactical level, American forces fought a proxy campaign against the Islamic State through Iraqi regular and irregular forces.

As the name implies, this model is based on a transactional relationship between actors. This results in a relationship that has a fixed duration, and the life expectancy of a transactional relationship begins to erode once the

15

first shots in combat are fired. Subsequently, the proxy's interest in the principal recedes at a comparable rate to the accomplishment of the two actor's common interest. Harkening back to the Iraq example, one finds that the United States began to rapidly lose influence with the government of Iraq and Iraqi military following victory at Mosul in July 2017 and Tal A'far in August 2017.[71] There was no bigger signal of this divergence and loss of influence than Iraq's campaign to stymy Kurdish independence in October 2017, which was conducted against the recommendations or support United States.[72] Moreover, Prime Minister Haider Abadi's calls for the redeployment of American troops in the wake of the government of Iraqi's declaration of victory against ISIS in December 2017 further illustrates this concept.[73]

As the U.S.-Iraq example suggests, the transactional model sees the proxy force's government request support from other strategic actor(s) to defeat a threat. In doing so, the proxy force's government places parameters on the principal and on the duration of the mission. The proxy government issues parameters to align the principal with its own political and military objectives. It is also important to note that the proxy has fixed political and social interest in the principal, therefore it attempts to terminate the partnership upon attainment of its goals.

Proto-states or polities vying for legitimacy appear on the other side of the transactional proxy spectrum. Harkening back to the Cossacks and the Great Northern War's battle of Poltava, both Sweden and Russia offered varying degrees of support to the Cossack Hetmanate in exchange for assistance battling the other.[74] Sweden mustered approximately 5,000 Cossack proxies for the battle, while Russia drew support from around 15,000 Cossacks.[75] Each Cossack group made different deals with their respective principal, but once the Tsardom of Muscovy achieved victory over Sweden, the Tsardom severely curtailed the rights and independence of all Cossacks within its realm.[76] Similar to the previous example, this version of the transactional relationship is also a business deal with the relationship metered against a running clock. This variation differs from the previous example in that the principal is solely in the lead, whereas in the first variation, the proxy has much more power.The transactional model is fraught with potential danger for the principal because the agent is not entirely dependent on the principal, making it susceptible to external influence. The proxy's comment to the principal and their

16

common interest is tied to self-interest and not necessarily survival, opening it up to break its pact with the principal when it no longer profits from the relationship or finds danger in the relationship.
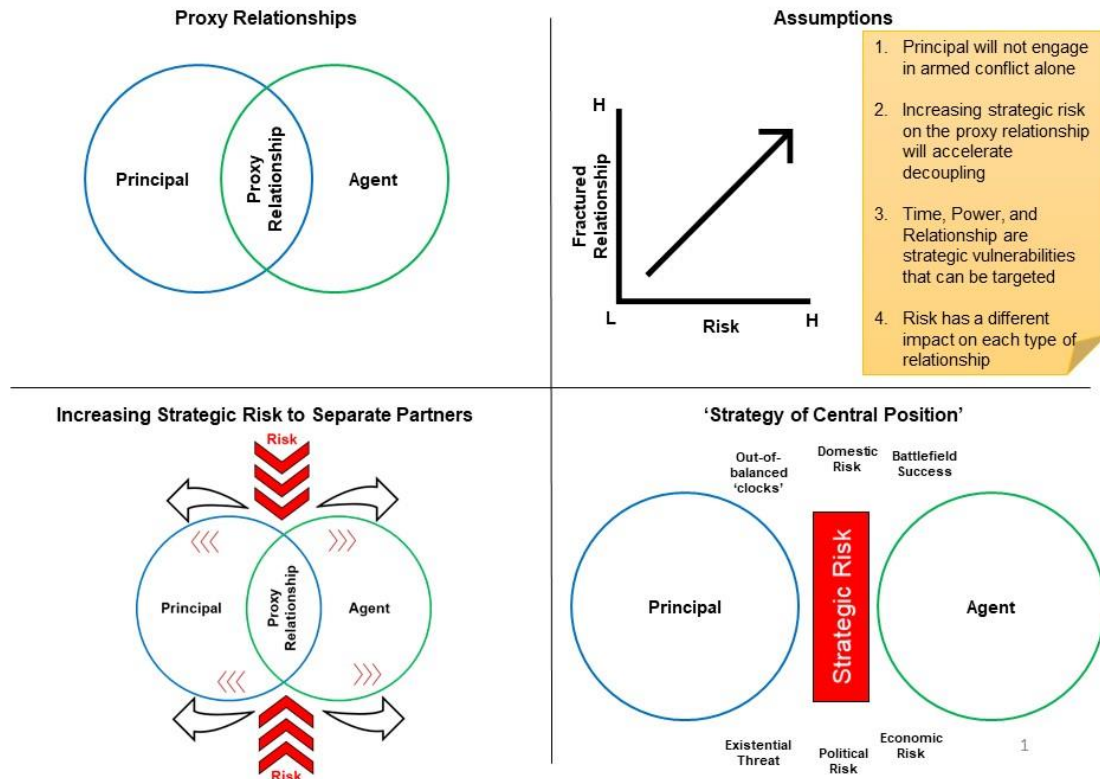
## Risk in Proxy War

This survey of relationships in proxy war reveals that risk is the glue that binds a proxy dyad, but risk is equally the wedge issue to separate actors in a principal-proxy relationship. Both tactical and strategic risk affect the relationship in different ways. The impact is dependent on the dyad's bond and on the character, or type of relationship between the principal and agent. While not scientific because it is nearly impossible to measure intangibles such as commitment, it is useful to identify the relative strength and weakness of proxy partnerships based upon their tolerance for tactical and strategic risk. Doing so provides a useful model for further examining and forecasting proxy wars.

Risk also stimulates the transition between a short-term and long-term proxy war. If tested, coerced, contractual, and transactional proxy relationships will unravel far quicker than exploitative or cultural proxy relationships when presented with moderate to high levels of existential or strategic risk.[77] This is because the coupling in the first three models is not as tight as that found in the latter two.[78] Exploitative or cultural relationships tend to continue longer because they are willing to carry higher degrees of risk than the other three models.

Risk, serving as a proxy relationship's exploitable cleft, can be used to separate and defeat a proxy relationship. Proxy relationships can be addressed in a similar manner to the Napoleonic strategy of central position. By that, an actor seeks to separate, or maintained dispersion between converging forces, in order to fight one adversary at a time, and thus, defeat the opponents in detail.[79] Bonaparte's employment of the flexible corps system throughout the Wars of the Third and Fourth Coalitions' campaigns are useful example to keep in mind when thinking about the utility of this concept.[80] See Figure 2, Risk in Proxy War.

Figure 2: Risk in Proxy War



**Proxy Relationships**

**Assumptions**

1. Principal will not engage in armed conflict alone
2. Increasing strategic risk on the proxy relationship will accelerate decoupling
3. Time, Power, and Relationship are strategic vulnerabilities that can be targeted
4. Risk has a different impact on each type of relationship

**Increasing Strategic Risk to Separate Partners**

**'Strategy of Central Position'**

Source: Author

## Conclusion

Proxy war's frequency and pervasiveness in modern armed conflict reveals its political and strategic viability. While insurgencies or partisan wars are motivated by individual political interest, today's proxy wars are an expression of great power competition. Resultantly, the insurgent or partisan is important to understand in small wars, but not so in proxy wars. An appreciation for what fixes partners in a principal-agent relationship is the important thing to understand about proxy wars. The bonding amongst partners is germane because it is the catalyst and the lubricant within the engine of proxy war.

Two variables are critical to account for when analyzing proxy relationships. The first is agency, or which partner owns the problem.

Second, and more important, is risk-sharing. Risk-sharing, from a broader perspective, is the defining variable in principal-proxy relationships because it serves as the adhesive between two cooperating parties. In most cases risk-sharing is what determines the duration of any principal-agent relationship and the tight or looseness of the bond between partners.

Analyzing risk as it relates to a principal and its agent is central to understanding proxy relationships. This analysis provides the framework for strategists, planners, and leaders to either defeat a principal-proxy on the battlefield or protect one's own principal-agent relationship. Theorist Thomas Schelling provides useful counsel on risk when thinking about risk-sharing in proxy relationships. He posits that, "The questions that do arise involve degrees of risk—what risk is worth taking, and how to evaluate risk involved in a course of action...It adds an entire dimension to military relations: the manipulation of risk."[81] Schelling's proposition, when viewed in relation to the bond between principals and proxies results in the acknowledgement that risk is a wedge issue between actors. This, in essence, results in the five models of relationship in proxy war— exploitative, coercive, cultural, contractual, or transactional.

Exploited proxy relationships are short but the bond amongst actors is strong. Coerced proxy relationships result in weak bonds between partners and the proxy's commitment is causally linked to the principal's physical presence as an occupying force. Cultural proxy relationships are extremely strong and the duration prodigious because of the stalwart cultural bond between principal and agent. Contractual proxy relationships, on the other hand, are firm because of the inspiration provided by the profit motive. Moreover, the contractual proxy knowingly accepts the strategic and tactical risk before entering a principal-agent relationship. This results in a tight tactical bond, but that bond loosens at the strategic level. The relationship tethers because a principal will divorce itself from its contractual proxy if that proxy jeopardizes its (the principal's) strategic aims. Conversely, the contractual proxy will craft an exit plan if it approaches existential crisis. Importantly, contractual proxyism dominates today's proxy wars. As analyst Sean McFate notes, private military companies and mercenaries operate globally and transparent to the public.[82] As long as this continues, contractual proxies will continue to loom large in proxy war.[83] Furthermore, as war pushes further into the Grey Zone via hybrid means, the demand for contractual agents will

19

increase. Lastly, transactional proxy relationship is akin to a business deal and they last as long as their mutual interests serve both actors. Resultantly, the bond between the actors in a transactional proxy relationship is weak and unravels upon completion of the unifying strategic aims.

Proxy war is here to stay. Proxy wars will continue to dominate armed conflict so long as nuclear weapons cast a long shadow over great power and medium power conflict. Additionally, proxy war will continue to dominate armed conflict so long as governments are interested in decreasing their political risks associated with war. Proxy wars abstruse involvement in war by deferring the cost to surrogates, who do the fighting and dying for a thankless and unknowing public far away from the battlefield. This arrangement makes war a more pervasive tool for policy makers and strategists.

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22

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