How to Think about Proxy Wars in the Twenty-first Century

Description

The recently published Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars invites a reconsideration of the transformation of proxy wars, from ostensible Cold War relic to reality of war and warfare in the twenty-first century. As one of the editors of the handbook, I offer some reflections on the thinking behind the thinking about proxy wars, as this field has changed over the last decade and matured into what we call proxy war studies. In this short essay, I hope to tease out some key takeaways. Three observations preface this discussion. First, edited together with Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, the handbook owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to the nearly 50 contributors whose work amounts to an intellectual reset of our thinking about proxy wars. Second, while the handbook directly addresses an audience of scholars, practitioners, and students of proxy wars and conflict delegation, it hopes to engage skeptics too. Third, the handbook is tasked with answering questions about a contentious yet undeniable reality of warfare in the twenty-first century. In line with recent data on external support and proxy wars, the handbook does not make claims that the future of war is proxy and that all war is delegated. Rather, it strikes a balance by looking at where proxy wars â?? and their study â?? are today and where they might be going. With this in mind, I discuss the nature of the problem the handbook addressed, the relevance of the debate, and what puzzles lie ahead.

Conceptually, we chose the label â??proxy war.â?• This was a deliberate choice grounded in recent work that robustly and rigorously explained what the concept is and is not, its utility, and how it might be developed typologically. We saw no need to pursue novelty through neologisms. As we wrote in the introduction to the handbook, the term is â??emotive and evocative, provocative and pejorative, often commended and criticized, renamed and reified, rejected and replaced.â?• It has been excessively politicized and used for ideologically charged commentary, but this is not unique to proxy war. It is, of course, not without its faults, but what concept of war today is? In fact, one can simply look at â??civil war,â?• one of the most established categories of conflict, for conceptual competition and disagreement. We dispensed with conceptual debates not because they do not matter â?? they most certainly do and I have written about this at length â?? but because the charges brought against proxy war were often superficial and driven not by an honest engagement with the notion, but by the desire to introduce a rival term. On this, I am firmly of the opinion that if the adjective â??proxyâ?• has limitations, they are shared equally and entirely by â??ally,â?• â??partner,â?• or whatever preposition counterinsurgency and irregular warfare rest on these days.

Instead, we used the conceptual space in the handbook more productively by rejecting the need for a single definition and by presenting a level of analysis framework aimed at integrating existing arguments and facilitating future research. We then took a step further and gave space to critiques of the notion of proxy war against two benchmarks: international law and colonial politics. We used these to take the debate â?? and us â?? to task on limitations, presuppositions, and hidden biases. As a result, the handbook applies the conceptual framework, and several chapters discuss proxy wars as a logic of indirect intervention that substitutes foreign policy options; others focus on the relationship between actors and some on the processes behind proxy wars. We were not concerned with a trendy and fashionable label or with coining the next buzzword, but rather with answering questions about a reality of the spectrum of war in the twenty-first century that comes in many guises and with significant consequences. Note that, of the International Crisis Groupâ??s Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2023, eight are shaped by proxy war dynamics. The exceptions are Haiti and Taiwan, but one could speculate that a potential Chinese invasion of the island will see a flurry of â??arm/donâ??t arm Taiwanese rebelsâ?• articles in the early days of the conflict. In the context of the handbook, our conceptual setup worked for our research aims, and we were clear that it is *one* way of thinking, not *the* way of thinking. We hope that our framework is a conversation starter because its intellectual strength lies in the ability to be the point at which scholars meet, and also, from where scholars depart.

Intellectually, the handbook aimed to give the debate a sense of self. This meant going big and calling for a (sub)-field of research, rather unimaginatively called proxy war studies. At its core, this captures the enormous transformation of a debate that a decade ago was denied a narrative in international relations, strategic and/or security studies. I have written elsewhere about how the debate developed across generations of scholarship, yet the handbook was an opportunity to make the following as clear as possible: proxy wars are not under-studied; proxy wars are not under-conceptualized; proxy wars are not under-theorized. In fact, our definitions have largely settled on what empirical problems we seek to address, and our theories constructively compete to present causal arguments about the drivers and dynamics of proxy wars. This must come as a shock to some pundits and think tanks, several of whom have recently discovered the topic, although not the existing scholarship. It is not groundbreaking to conclude that proxy wars are waged because of risk, deniability, and cost considerations; to present case studies on Russia and Iran; or to extoll the virtues of the Mujahideen and the Contras. What is remarkable, however, is how much we have indeed come to know from a diverse cohort of scholars (for a review of the debate see this exchange). The handbook tapped into this genuine collective effort at bridging different traditions of research, marrying quantitative research with its qualitative counterpart, and embracing an interdisciplinary approach. Herein comes the call for proxy war studies: its aim is to â??make the study of proxy wars specific, identifiable, comparable, and researchable from different perspectives and methodologies, while outlining a vision for the future of a debate that takes its motivation from the challenges proxy wars pose to international security in the

twenty-first century.â?• And regardless of whether we make proxy war studies happen, the handbook is an attempt to shape and foster an epistemic community, actively and consciously preoccupied by questions and puzzles emanating from proxy wars. On this, we were clear: â??our proposed field is fundamentally about a scholarly community pursuing knowledge as a collective achievement.â?•

If we achieved so much, then, whatâ??s next for proxy wars in the twenty-first century? Proxy war has been labelled â??the most successful kind of political warâ?• being waged today, but what does success look like in indirect warfare? This is one crucial area of interest future research should consider. The handbook offers a useful starting point with discussions of how to engage and control proxies. Of the two, control is a key dynamic of the sponsor-proxy relations and one we need to further conceptualize and theorize beyond the carrot-and-stick approach. In addition, any assessment of successful proxy wars should discuss their consequences, not least if we consider that the C.I.A.â??s review of its own practice of aiding rebels fuelled the Obama administrationâ??s initial skepticism about arming Syrian rebels. Analysis has also concluded that â??war by proxy is a strategy depended on now as never before,â?• and the corollary to this is to expand the empirical terrain of the study of proxy wars. We know they overlap with civil wars, yet what about inter-state conflict or the broader â??peacefulâ?• great power competition, in its short-of-war guise? The Russian invasion of Ukraine found itself at the center of politicized arguments about whether it falls short of being a proxy war, underscoring the need for further work on the intersection of indirect war and military and security assistance. As was argued recently, â??supporting and arming a sovereign government is conceptually and practically different from arming an insurgency, in terms of international norms as well as how that support proceeds in practice.â?• We need to know more about this, not least in the context of another problem, escalation. The policy relevance of this issue cannot be overstated, and the Russian invasion of its neighbor, starting in 2014, presents a spectrum of escalation and de-escalation in which threat of and use of direct and indirect war blocked and thwarted attempts at conflict resolution. These are just some ideas about a policy problem that cuts across geostrategic contexts, involves a wealth of actors in complex configurations, and appeals to states of greater or lesser power.

The Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars is the first volume of its kind to make sense of the challenges of proxy wars in a comprehensive way. At minimum, it reflects the state of the art in research about proxy wars, one of the most critical challenges for contemporary international security. At maximum, it sets the stage for a debate that will assist students, scholars, and practitioners interested in this problem. As editor, I hope and believe that the volume will shape our understanding of the future evolution of proxy conflicts.

Vladimir Rauta is an Associate Professor in International Security at the University of Reading. He researches conflict delegation to proxies and has published in International Security, International

Main image: A firing line of Syrian Democratic Forces soldiers take aim and fire at targets during a marksmanship training exercise to prepare for Operation Roundup, an SDF-led campaign to clear the last ISIS strongholds in the country, near Shaddadi, Syria, May 27, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Timothy R. Koster)

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