Local Partners Are Not Proxies: The Case for Rethinking Proxy War

Description

Despite being a scholar of â??proxy warsâ?• in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, I rarely use the term. Hereâ??s why.

Work on security partnerships is expanding in response to a shifting US defense posture emphasizing the benefits of working â??by, with, and throughâ?• allies and partners. This research is essential, but it is worth reconsidering if we should call strategic military engagements fought in coordination with local forces â??proxy wars.â?• While the term is pervasive, it is conceptually problematic, at least in the post-colonial era. Describing local partners as â??proxiesâ?• minimizes complex coalition bargaining dynamics, risks overemphasizing the influence of US resources, and insufficiently accounts for US political dependencies.

This argument is not meant to discredit existing scholarship on proxy wars, much of it rigorous, important, and insightful. But it is worth collectively considering if the terms we tend to reach for in the proxy war literature are misleading. Are â??proxiesâ?• really proxies, or do Americans just hope thatâ??s what small local security forces partnered with the United States will be? Or if policymakers and academics rightly expect local partners to pursue their own interests and impose costs on sponsors, then why call local allies â??proxiesâ?• if they arenâ??t? The term â??strategic local partnersâ?• seems to better reflect the empirical record of small allies in direct and indirect interventions. The term â??proxyâ?• seems more aspirational than descriptiveâ??it implies that small state or nonstate actors can be readily manipulated by the provision (or removal) of resources. But the degree to which local partners are faithful to the agendas of their foreign patrons is a multifaceted variable that changes across and within warsâ??it is not a defining constant in these strategic coalitions, and the language policymakers and academics employ to describe this category of strategic engagements should better reflect this variation to avoid oversimplifying complex partnerships or overestimating US control within coalitions.

While scholars disagree about the criteria and universe of â??proxy wars,â?• there is general consensus that proxy war describes a sustained strategic relationship involving the provision of significant foreign military support for a local partner or agent, and the delegation of â??some authority over the pursuit of strategic war aims to [this] proxy-agent.â?• Foreign resources are invested in local labor in the pursuit of a foreign patronâ??s political-military objective. According to current definitions, a

local proxy is a â??conduitâ?• for foreign partners, â??a subordinate charged with some task,â?• a local operator acting â??on behalf of another.â?• Foreign resources are exchanged for local action. Proxies are thus often modeled as imperfect employees, commissioned for a set of important tasks as a cost saving measure for important foreigners. Political influence follows money, and academic research tends to largely focus on influence in one direction from foreign power to local proxy. Too often the agency of the proxy is minimized and patrons are assumed to hold the balance of power through their purse strings in these partnerships. Proxy war studies often imply that competent patrons can and should set and enforce the political agenda. This stands in contrast with more expansive studies on alliance politics which model coalition policymaking as a collective bargaining process that is not necessarily determined by the richest member.

Indeed, insightful research on proxy wars has repeatedly determined that getting proxies to implement patron agendas is consistently more complicated than patrons anticipate. Seyom Brown, for example, argues that policies of proxy war should be approached with utmost caution because they provide patrons with â??illusions of flexibility and controlâ?• but often deliver neither. Geraint Hughes powerfully observes that what unites patrons engaging in proxy wars, whether â??the USA or Libya, Pakistan or Rwanda is the flawed assumption on the part of policymakers that nonstate actors can be persuaded to fight and die for third partiesâ?? interestsâ?¦â?• as the patron-proxy â??relationship becomes fundamentally a dysfunctional one when combat is subcontracted to a third party whose interests are often barelyâ??if at allâ??compatible with those of its patron or patrons.â?• In other words, proxies often do not behave like proxies, and there are significant costs for sponsors that maintain overly optimistic expectations of how closely local agents will follow their instructions.

To solve the defiant proxy problem the literature on proxy war offers two main solutions for patrons to get their proxies in line: 1) manipulating resources to incentivize compliance and 2) pressing for greater interest alignment between patron and proxy. While logical, these methods are likely limited and overlook several important dynamics.

The Limits of Aid Conditionality and Interest Alignment

Often without explicitly acknowledging it, the scholarship on proxy war alliances tends to focus on resource asymmetries between foreign patrons (donors) and local clients (recipients) as the defining political dynamic embedded in these strategic partnerships. Local agents depend on foreign principals for cash, logistics, and training that are often vital to local force success or even group survival. Important studies have focused on ways patrons can leverage military aid to get compliance by threatening to reduce or withhold support. But the material dependency of local partners varies and is only one of many embedded asymmetric dynamics in these partnerships. In patron-proxy partnerships there are also often significant asymmetries in interests, willpower, and local knowledge which shape

these coalitions. Often overlooked are patron dependencies on the local partner for key non-material factors, including local knowledge, action, and legitimacy. For example, the United States must work through local political partners to pass legislation or hand off security duties lest occupation continue indefinitely.

The dependencies of powerful patrons deepen when local partners cannot be readily replaced, which diminishes the credibility of patron threats to withhold aid as a way of pressuring proxies to comply with their demands. The 2014 US Counterinsurgency Field Manual observes that the â??host nation is the primary actorâ?¦ the conclusion of any counterinsurgency effort is primarily dependent on the host nation and the people.â?• This description differs significantly from the idea of the host nation as â??a subordinate charged with some task.â?• Dropping the idea that local partners are proxies may help empower analysts to better account for the dependencies and compromises that transpire within a coalition.

The second often-discussed method for patrons to get proxy compliance is working to ensure local interests align with the patronâ??s agenda. This has led many studies of proxy partnerships to suggest that the United States must be more discerning in its choice of partners, only investing when there is significant interest alignment that extends beyond combatting a shared enemy. But my research indicates this logic ignores how local partners, at least in high-commitment interventions like Iraq and Vietnam, often readily defied US policy requests. Even when US and local allied interests aligned, structural incentives allowed local allies to free-ride and benefit from US efforts without contributing their share. Interest alignment was only one of several variables motivating local action, and not in the linear ways predicted by many proxy war models which tend to suggest that interest alignment will lead to local cooperation. I observed that when the United States has unilateral capacity to implement a proposed policy, shared interest in that policy motivated local partners to defy its requests in the hopes that the United States would pick up the slack. This is not a surprising feature if we look to the literature on small allies and burden sharing in NATO from economics and political science. Analyses of strategic behaviors among NATO members does not presume that small states are the conduits for the agendas of larger members and has explicitly documented the â??big influence of small alliesâ?• in coalitions. This is important to keep in mind as the Pentagon increasingly refers to integrated deterrence as a nimble and tailored approach to leverage a set of highly diverse and multifaceted military coalitions with local partners. Success will require a clear-eyed understanding of the shifting bargaining dynamics within strategic partnerships and an appreciation of the potential political influence local forces will have in coalitions.

A More Complete Picture: Resource-Deficient Allies

David Galula wrote that â??in a fight between a fly and a lion, the fly cannot deliver a knockout blow and the lion cannot fly.â?• While Galula was commenting on the contest between insurgent and counterinsurgent, foreign and local actors offer different assets and will each see their contributions (foreign resources or local capacity) as a source of leverage within the alliance. This bargaining is case-specific and goes both ways. David Baldwin cautioned that studies in international relations should avoid modeling power or influence as a possession of wealthy states, because this assumption fails to acknowledge the scope, domain, and context that can make wealth more or less persuasive. Influence cannot be estimated without specifying the conditions that make certain factors significant at any given time. As Baldwin noted, you cannot simply claim to have an excellent hand of cards without first knowing what game you are playing.

Instead of modeling local partners as â??proxiesâ?• or conduits of larger states, a better approach considers local allies to be resource-deficient, but politically important, collaborators. This is similar to relevant work on economic statecraft, bargaining, alliances, military interventions, civil wars, small state politics, and coalition warfare. Scholars should not overlook material dependency but incorporate aid as one of several key variables. Vladimir Rauta smartly advocates that proxy war scholarship should better integrate other literatures and rethink constants as variables. But unlike Rauta, I hesitate to try to reinvigorate the field by relying on the term â??proxy war,â?• because the term itself implies a constant hierarchy of political influence that is variable.

Depending on whether foreign forces are engaged in direct combat or not, â??foreign military interventionâ?• or â??foreign military sponsorshipâ?• may be better classifications for the types of strategic engagements examined in proxy war scholarship. These terms create space for bargaining within coalitions, as opposed to â??proxy warâ?• which reflects the desired, but not necessarily established, subordinate political role of local partners. Recent US experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria demonstrate that local partnerships can fall seriously short of US expectations. It is worth considering if labels like â??proxy warâ?• contain entrenched assumptions that contribute to misunderstandings of the politics of coalition warfare with asymmetric partners. For practitioners, seeing local partners clearly as allies means being more clear-eyed from the outset about how much local partners will reform according to US wishes. For scholars, taking care to regard inter-alliance politics as an interactive bargaining process will better account for a wider variety of dependencies embedded in these partnerships, rather than a singular focus on material ones. In most contemporary cases, local partners are strategic actors, not foreign agents. We need to update our terminology and models to reflect this reality.

Barbara Elias is the Sarah & James Bowdoin Associate Professor of Government at Bowdoin College. She was a 2022 Nonresident Fellow with the Irregular Warfare Initiative, and the former Director of the

Afghanistan/Pakistan/Taliban Project at The National Security Archive. Her 2020 book, Why Allies Rebel: Defiant Local Partners in Counterinsurgency Wars *was awarded the 2022 â??Best Bookâ?• prize by the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association, and named â??Best International Security Bookâ?• 2021 by the American Political Science Association.*

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Date Created
2023/04/20