

Danish Political Science Association
Annual Meeting

October 25-26 - DPSA

Paper Title:

On Proxy War

A work in progress

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Note to reader

First let me apologies for the very fractured and slim form of this contribution. This “paper” is the very preliminary outlines for what will be a chapter in my PhD dissertation on *the use of non-state proxies* and will be defining proxy war, proxy warfare, proxies and patrons. The main concerns that I have is in relation to the types of proxy warfare where participation by the sponsor/patron is occurring, but not equal of a total commitment of armed forces. Conventional proxy war would not include conflicts that had participation by the sponsor but in situations like Afghanistan and Libya we saw an participation by US and NATO forces that was not equal to full use of their armed forces at the same time there was a significant use of local armed entity as substitutes for boots on the ground. During the Cold War the term proxy war was used and misused to such extend that all wars during this period was denominated as a proxy war. But while the idea of having a specific terminology would make little sense if their was no difference to regular war it is my intend to try and classify uniqueness of proxy war and define the different types of proxy war, how these differ for patron (strategy) and for proxy.

Intro

The conventional understanding of the term Proxy War or War by Proxy was defined during the Cold War period as a confrontation between two great powers by the use of substitute actors such as to avoid direct confrontation (Bar-Siman-Tov 1984). For the most part such substitutes were minor states but in some instances also non-state actors served as proxies for superpowers, as in the case of the Mujahidin fighters in Afghanistan (Linschoten & Kuehn 2012). It was deemed that the main reason for superpowers to use proxies, was the invention of nuclear weapons and that as a result a superpower confrontation could potentially escalate into the devastating mutually assured destruction (MAD) scenario. The assumption was, that using third parties would reduce the risk of a direct conflict between the superpowers i.e. the risk of an all out war. Proxy War however is hardly a new phenomenon with roots in the superpower rivalries of the Cold War. Throughout history there has been examples of states hiring mercenaries, employing other countries to fight their opponents and empires using conquered peoples to assist in defending territory. While the use of third parties on the battlefield could not be regarded as a new thing, the Cold War¹ saw superpowers that financed, armed and aided proxies, without getting directly involved in the fighting, on a larger scale than any other in recorded history (Towle 1981).

Superpower proxy support was part of an overall strategy of securing and supporting allies throughout the world in an effort to increase their sphere of influence. Through the means of arms supply, intelligence, training and finance the Soviet Union and the United States would compete for allies (Schelling 1966). The continued superpowers support meant that local conflicts took on a new dimension resulting in fueling violence and prolonging wars. Any potential for conflict resolution was undermined by the nature of the bipolar power competition, where assurances of victory lead to prolonged wars (Brewer 2011). The superpower rivalry did not hinder lesser powers from engaging in Proxy Wars, or though these were on a different scale and were not influenced directly by the MAD scenario, they took on many of the same characteristics as the superpower variant. Reminiscent of the classical ways of using proxies these were used either in relation to fighting

¹ Some scholars suggest that the tendency towards a new way of employing this kind of strategic tool has its origins in the beginning of the 20th century and that nuclear weapons were not the cause but merely an accelerator to strengthening this tendency (Towle 1981).

along side ones own forces, as the case of Israel and the Phalangists in Lebanon (Byman 2011), or in relation to indirect intervening in civil war (Dunér 1981). The lesser powers sought to alter the regional balance in their favor but without offsetting the superpower balance and resulting in unwanted international attention. The use of proxies was a virtual *war on the cheap* as the expense in arms, finances and political standing was minimal in contrast of going to war.

As the Cold War came to an end the expectation was that the new world order would make war ever more unlikely and that the US hegemony would mean the end of superpower driven proxy wars (Brewer 2011). Post-Cold War history tells a quite different story. Not only has Proxy War survived as a strategy by lesser powers but the US still use proxies as part of their strategic toolbox. With an outset in the Cold War definition of Proxy War this chapter will seek to categories the different types of Proxy War as this will help determine the strategic purposes for great powers and lesser powers to employ proxies and for state actors and non-state actors to be them. States that chose to empower and employ proxies during the Cold War did so to offset the different constraints placed on them, yet the post-Cold War world has quit a different set of constraints but how has this influenced the ways of using proxy war. For the two Superpowers these constraints where that of rivalry and of nuclear weapons, while for the lesser powers the restraints derived from the bipolar dynamics of the Cold War. If this were the case one would have expected the bipolar dynamics and the power rivalry to be the main reason for the widespread use of proxies. Yet understanding patron-proxy relations, as an endeavor by the actors to obtain new abilities that systemic circumstances would otherwise deny them, have to be taken into consideration when trying to understand the persistence and evolution of the Proxy War phenomenon.

Defining Proxy Warfare

To define what Proxy War is, it becomes essential to look at how this phenomenon differs from other types of warfare. Since the nature of proxy warfare has only barely been described and at that in quite different ways it becomes an ever more challenging task. The most basic attributes refer to the employment of a third party to engage in war on ones behalf, the reasons for this could be as mentioned before the fear of a possible MAD scenario but is by no means limited to this as will be discussed later. The next basic assumption is that there is a patron-client relationship in play. This entails that there is an unequal power relation between the actors, that there is an exchange of special services (supplying weapons, other resources or protection in exchange for military services) and that both parties find the relation beneficial. Using these two assumptions it would be natural to assume that wars where the third party fights along side a patron falls outside the definition of Proxy War, yet this is problematic. During the Cold War it was not uncommon for superpower allies to act as proxies and engage in operations that would entitle them to fight wars along side other proxies. It is widely recognized that the Cuban interventions in Angola and Ethiopia was supported by the Soviet Union and that by using their Cuban proxy they evaded potential condemnation on the international arena (Towl 1981).

Another classification of this type of conflict was that it differed from traditional conflict in being situated somewhere between inter-state and intra-state warfare (Brewer 2010; 138). Brewer sees this conflict type as a hybrid, an inter-state conflict fought through intra-state means.