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THE FORUM

FORUM: CONFLICT DELEGATION IN CIVIL WARS

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This forum provides an outlet for an assessment of research on the delegation of war to non-state armed groups in civil wars. Given the significant growth of studies concerned with this phenomenon over the last decade, this forum critically engages with the present state of the field. First, we canvass some of the most important theoretical developments to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the debate. Second, we expand on the theme of complexity and investigate its multiple facets as a window into pushing the debate forward. Third, we draw the contours of a future research agenda by highlighting some contemporary problems, puzzles, and challenges to empirical data collection. In essence, we seek to connect two main literatures that have been talking past each other: external support in civil wars and proxy warfare. The forum bridges this gap at a critical juncture in this new and emerging scholarship by offering space for scholarly dialogue across conceptual labels.

Este foro proporciona una salida a la evaluación de la investigación sobre la delegación de la guerra a los grupos armados no estatales en las guerras civiles. Dado el importante crecimiento de los estudios relacionados con este fenómeno en la última década, este foro aborda de forma crítica el estado actual del tema. En primer lugar, repasamos algunos de los desarrollos teóricos más importantes para demostrar la heterogeneidad del debate. En segundo lugar, ampliamos el tema de la complejidad e investigamos sus múltiples facetas como ventana para impulsar el debate. En tercer lugar, trazamos los contornos de una futura agenda de investigación destacando algunos problemas, enigmas y desafíos contemporáneos para la recopilación de datos empíricos. En esencia, tratamos de conectar dos literaturas principales que han sido incapaces de comunicarse entre sí: el apoyo externo en las guerras civiles y la guerra indirecta. El foro cubre este vacío en una coyuntura crítica de este nuevo y emergente estudio ofreciendo un espacio para el diálogo académico entre las etiquetas conceptuales.

Cette tribune offre un média pour une évaluation des recherches sur la délégation de la guerre à des groupes armés non étatiques lors des guerres civiles. Compte tenu de l'augmentation significative du nombre d'études consacrées à ce phénomène au cours de cette dernière décennie, cette tribune se penche sur l'état actuel du domaine. Nous commençons par passer en revue certains des développements théoriques les plus importants afin de démontrer l'hétérogénéité du débat. Ensuite, nous développons le thème de la complexité et étudions ses multiples facettes afin

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d'offrir une ouverture par laquelle faire avancer le débat. Enfin, nous traçons les contours d'un futur programme de recherche en soulignant certains problèmes, certaines énigmes et certains défis contemporains de la collecte de données empiriques. En substance, nous cherchons à rétablir une relation entre deux grandes littératures entre lesquelles il existait autrefois un dialogue: celle sur le soutien extérieur lors des guerres civiles et celle sur les guerres par factions interposées. Cette tribune comble cette lacune à un moment critique de ces nouvelles recherches émergentes en offrant un espace pour un dialogue intellectuel allant au-delà des étiquettes conceptuelles.

Keywords: conflict delegation, external support, proxy warfare, civil war, principal–agent theory
Palabras clave: delegación de conflictos, apoyo externo, guerra indirecta, guerra civil, teoría del principal–agente
Mots clés: délégation des conflits, soutien extérieur, guerres par factions interposées, guerre civile, théorie du principal–agent

Introduction

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Conflict delegation has been studied across several subfields—international relations, conflict research, and international security—under a myriad of labels. External support in civil wars, proxy war/warfare, state sponsorship of insurgency/terrorism, rebel patronage, indirect intervention, informal/transnational alliances, paramilitary operations, internationalized conflict, indirect interstate conflict, security assistance, subversion, substitution, and military aid are just some of the concepts employed in the ever-expanding semantic field of sponsorship of nonstate armed groups. Current research has developed within separate debates interested in largely the same phenomenon. Although significant analytical differences worth emphasizing exist,[1] there is ample space to think creatively and pluralistically about the present and future research on the topic.

In this forum, we offer a discussion by a collective of scholars situated at the intersection of two main literatures: external support in civil wars and proxy warfare. The two literatures straddle an intellectual boundary reinforced by the usual dynamics of knowledge production: employment of different concepts, methodological preferences, and theoretical traditions. To simplify: while a plethora of theoretical labels have been used within both literatures, research on external support tends to be more empirical, quantitative, and outcome-oriented, while that on proxy wars has been more conceptual, qualitative, and process-oriented. Notwithstanding the importance of such markers to the formation and consolidation of disciplinary identities, what distinguishes these two strands of research is, however, narrower than most often assumed. Instead of fragmentation, we observe compartmentalization,

[1] For instance, scholars differ in terms of explanatory and geographical focal points, the agency of various actors, the formalization of the relationship, the type of targets, the degree of interdependence between external actors, the type of support, and the use of principal-agent theory.

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visible most often in the different bibliographies accompanying studies of external support and proxy warfare. In short, what we see are efforts to pursue two specialized research enterprises interested in answering questions concerning a key security challenge in the twenty-first century: *conflict delegation*.

Conflict delegation refers to a strategy in which a foreign[2] government commits material resources or military expertise to a non-state armed group to target a perceived adversary. Delegation requires some degree of control—that is, state sponsors are likely to influence the aims, strategies, and tactics of rebel groups (Salehyan 2010, 501). This forum scrutinizes the development of research on conflict delegation at a key moment in time. Interest in the topic has grown in recent years because of the considerable external involvement in conflicts around the globe, along with its significant media exposure and the attention it has received by policymakers.

However, the delegation of war to non-state armed groups is not a new phenomenon, representing "a perennial strand in the history of warfare" (Mumford 2013, 1). Neither is it rare (Salehyan 2010, 497). San-Akca has estimated that almost two-thirds of all rebel groups active since World War II have benefited from resources from outside states (San-Akca 2016, 1) and Grauer and Tierney have shown that the likelihood of rebels receiving aid has increased considerably (Grauer and Tierney 2018). Examples are abundant. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the United States have channeled arms, equipment, and financial resources to various opposition groups in Syria (Baylouny and Mullins 2018; Rauta 2020, 2–3). Russia has provided vital support to rebels in Eastern Ukraine (Platonova 2021) while at the same time smuggling arms to the Taliban in Afghanistan (Byman 2020, 6). Iran's proxy relationship with Hezbollah has demonstrated significant persistence, with a wide range of assistance being provided for almost four decades (Borghard and Rapp-Hooper 2013, 85–86). Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Ivory Coast have backed rebel groups in neighboring Liberia (Hazen 2013, 107–37). Pakistan has aided several militant groups in Kashmir (Byman 2020, 6), Malaysia has supported groups in the Philippines, and Thailand has aided the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (Lee 2020, 136–37, 157–59). More than a dozen different states have provided support to various Palestinian groups in Israel over the years (San-Akca 2016, 70–79). This is still just a snapshot of some relationships of an otherwise global phenomenon, and by evaluating the progress and prospects in conflict delegation research we tap into the urgency proxy wars impress on policy makers (Benowitz and Ceccamese 2020; Plana 2020; Stark 2020a).

How do approaches to conflict delegation differ conceptually, analytically, and empirically? How do we bridge the theoretical and methodological traditions commonly associated with the terms? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the influential principal–agent theory? What are the best practices of translating the recent conceptual work behind proxy wars into the ongoing efforts toward clear operationalization and robust measures of external support? How do we compare and integrate the empirical insights from case study work on specific proxy wars with the patterns and trends in the provision of external support world-wide? Finally, how do we move forward by harnessing the potential of an integrated, future-oriented research agenda?

The contributions to this forum tackle these questions in an exchange that covers concepts, theory, data, and policy. We open the forum by canvassing some of the most important theoretical developments to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the debate. The first three contributions highlight different approaches to understanding conflict delegation. Idean Salehyan begins to reflect on how the field has evolved during the last decade since the publication of his article, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations." We have come to know a lot about the causes and consequences of conflict delegation, and, in the process, principal–agent theory

[2] This sets this literature apart from *domestic* delegation to progovernment militias within a country (Cohen and Nordås 2015; Eck 2015; Carey and Mitchell 2017; Biberman 2018; Fisk 2021).

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has become the dominant theoretical framework. This is followed by a discussion by Andrew Mumford advocating for closer conceptual integration between the literature on proxy warfare and civil wars. The starting point here is Mumford's *Proxy Warfare* monograph, which recast the study of proxy wars in the wider research on contemporary warfare, framing its relevance away from Cold War accounts and toward its many contemporary facets. Taken together, Salehyan and Mumford offer two visions of progress and integration that map onto two distinct directions of knowledge production: consolidation of research on external support in civil wars and the emergence of proxy war studies. Drawing on arguments made in *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*, Belgin San-Akca elaborates on the selection model. San-Akca's contribution provides an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing theoretical accounts. San-Akca then makes the case for refining the selection model as a theoretical alternative, itself a broader invitation to think differently about the delegation of war to non-state armed groups.

The following three contributions expand on the theme of complexity and investigate its multiple facets as a window into pushing the debate toward solving empirical, policy-relevant problems, while removing conceptual and theoretical hurdles. Niklas Karlén and Vladimir Rauta propose some extensions to the standard principal–agent model by discussing delegation in an integrated typology of alternative actor arrangements. They highlight that research on delegation in other disciplines has offered a much more comprehensive understanding of delegatory relationships by extending the standard principal–agent framework, which is equally relevant but entirely missing in research on conflict delegation. Alexandra Stark adds empirical weight to the complexity of delegation by focusing on the roles regional actors play in waging wars by proxy in the Middle East. Michel Wyss and Assaf Moghadam highlight the often overlooked ability of non-state armed actors to assume the role of patrons themselves in an argument that breaks with the orthodoxy of state sponsorship. This discussion of complexity then makes way for the next three contributions, which draw the contours of a future research agenda by highlighting a number of contemporary problems, puzzles, and challenges to empirical data collection.

Drawing on research in the context of political violence in Africa, Allard Duursma and Henning Tamm discuss *mutual interventions* whereby neighboring states respond in kind to rivals' provision of external support. Next, Erin Jenne, Milos Popovic, and David Siroky outline a robust argument linking great power politics and proxy warfare with a focus on *security hierarchies*. Vanessa Meier then highlights the challenges inherent to quantitative data collection efforts, in a contribution that relates conceptual and operationalization choices to the difficulties of organizing complex and, often messy, empirics. Finally, ways forward are outlined. Emphasizing theoretical plurality, methodological diversity, and a commitment to rigor, Alexandra Chinchilla, Kit Rickard, and Giuseppe Spatafora conclude by highlighting avenues for future research. In essence, they stress the need to further theorize proxy agency, to modify principal–agent theory, and to re-evaluate the international conditions surrounding the provision of support.

A Decade of Delegation

Idean Salehyan
University of North Texas

In 2010, I wrote "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," which appeared in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Salehyan 2010). This was not the first article to examine the issue of foreign support for rebel organizations or proxy warfare. Indeed, during the Cold War, observers noted that many armed conflicts were

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fueled by superpower support for combatants (Deutsch in Eckstein 1964; Dunér 1981; Bar-Siman Tov 1984). Rather, in that article I sought to bridge the divide between scholars of international and civil conflict as well as to introduce delegation theory (or principal–agent theory) as a way to think about this phenomenon.

In a nutshell, scholars of international war have vastly understated the level of armed conflict in the international system by ignoring indirect conflict strategies. Rather than open hostilities between the armed forces of states, a large number of international conflicts involve the provision of resources to rebel organizations. In other words, states provide support to domestic combatants within their rivals as a substitute for direct hostilities. Yet, in large-*N* studies, these are normally coded as civil wars with external involvement and do not appear in datasets on international disputes. Russian involvement in Ukraine, Iranian and Saudi proxy warfare in Yemen, and the wide array of state actors backing militants in Syria are but a few recent examples in which governments have empowered insurgents instead of fighting one another directly.

As I argued in "The Delegation of War", one theoretical framework that promises to shed light upon these relationships is principal–agent theory. Accordingly, a foreign government (the principal) delegates armed conflict against its rival by enlisting the support of a rebel organization (the agent). In doing so, the principal forgoes the costs of direct warfare, including lives lost, military resources, and international or domestic condemnation and gains a partner that may possess greater local information and popular legitimacy. Yet, the principal also loses some control over its foreign policy, particularly if it cannot adequately screen agents for reliability and competence or sanction them for bad behavior. For the insurgents, they must weigh the benefits of augmented resources against the potential for lost autonomy.

In "The Delegation of War", I pointed to the important distinction between delegation and intervention. However, delegation should also be theoretically distinct from the related concept of alliances (Hughes 2012, 11–14; Tamm 2016a, 151–52; Rauta 2021b, 15). For example, Tamm provides a broader usage of the term alliance, while my emphasis is on the distinction between arrangements that come with hierarchical control over the group versus those in which both parties retain autonomy. With delegation, the foreign state expects, to varying degrees, control over the rebel's agenda. It is a hierarchical relationship in which the principal provides funding and support, while the rebel group adapts its goals, strategies, and tactics to suit the needs of its patron. The rebels are dependent upon foreign resources and are asked to do their patron's bidding. Alliances do not involve the same hierarchical relationship. Rebels and external states may cooperate on the battlefield and resources may be offered, but with little control over the rebel's agenda. Empirically, while it is easier to ascertain whether or not a foreign government provides resources, it is much harder to measure the degree of hierarchy that exists in the relationship or how dependent upon external support the rebels are. While the line between a horizontal alliance and hierarchical delegation is often unclear in practice, they are not interchangeable concepts.

Recently, Abbott et al. (2020) have offered an expanded typology of indirect governance relationships, on which Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl (2021) expand in a comprehensive discussion of variation in control mechanisms. Central to this conceptualization, and my distinction between delegation and alliance, is the degree of hierarchy expected in the partnership between the sponsor and the rebel (Abbott et al. 2020, 14). Hezbollah is largely an Iranian creation and answers to Tehran; the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola in Angola was formed independently but was co-opted by the United States and South Africa and depended upon these governments for resources and direction. Non-hierarchical relationships afford the insurgents considerable freedom to use foreign resources to meet their own needs, even if the patron shares common goals.

Notwithstanding conceptual differences, several studies have sought to uncover the causes of foreign support for rebel organizations, building upon "The

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Delegation of War". Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) find that insurgents fighting states with an international rival and those embedded in transnational communities are more likely to receive foreign support. Moreover, while weak rebels (relative to the state) are less likely to receive support as they are not viable, the strongest groups also tend not to receive support as they would prefer to raise their own revenue, without foreign constraints. Maoz and San-Akca (2012) delve deeper into how international rivalries shape rebel support, finding that the weaker state in a rivalry is more likely to use indirect conflict strategies. As discussed below, San-Akca (2016) provides a rich theoretical and empirical analysis of state support for rebels, focusing on international interests, ideological/cultural similarity, and domestic incentives to empower rebels. Finally, Tamm (2016a) argues that support for rebels in the two Congo Wars was often driven by external leaders' desire to insulate themselves from a coup at home, including by securing resources to distribute to supporters.

Other studies have focused on the consequences of foreign backing of rebels. For instance, Tamm (2016b) finds that external resources can promote rebel cohesion or splintering depending on how funds are allocated among rebel elites. Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) find that insurgents supported by external states are more likely to kill civilians, although democratic sponsors tend to restrain the groups they fund. Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed (2017) show that rebels that receive highly fungible support, such as money and guns, are less likely to see conflict termination than rebels that do not. Karlén (2017) demonstrates that the presence of external support during a civil war increases the risk of conflict recurrence in the short term. Popovic (2017) examines the causes of rebel defection against their sponsors and finds that decentralized groups are less accountable to foreign patrons. We also now know that differences in the provision of external support are associated with the adoption of violent/nonviolent tactics (Petrova 2019), the likelihood of civil war negotiations (Karlén 2020), that gender framing impacts rebel efforts to secure support (Manekin and Wood 2020), and that foreign sponsorship affects groups' incentives to engage in rebel governance (Huang and Sullivan 2021). Finally, Stein and Cantin (2021) show that rebels sponsored by foreign states are more likely to participate in high-intensity inter-rebel conflicts than rebels receiving no support from external states.

Many of the articles cited above (including my own) infer delegation from foreign support. On the one hand, foreign funding may matter for conflict dynamics precisely because it is foreign, namely not derived from domestic sources such as civilians. Funding from wealthy foreigners or members of the diaspora may have similar effects, as it makes rebels less accountable to local populations. On the other hand, external resources given as a donation versus those given with the expectation of obedience may be vital for other matters. What is clear is that conflict delegation continues to be a promising research topic, and we should pursue these research questions and puzzles with the intellectual creativity, diversity, pluralism, and rigor outlined in the conclusion to this forum. In shaping the outlines of the future research agenda, principal–agent theory will surely inform scholarship on the international dynamics of civil wars for years to come. I look forward to seeing what the next ten years of research will yield.

In Search of Proxy War Studies

Andrew Mumford
University of Nottingham

This contribution attempts to bridge the study of proxy wars with the broader civil war literature, by focusing on the evolution of the proxy war scholarship since the publication of my book *Proxy Warfare* (Mumford 2013). I hope to encourage greater

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terminological clarity and theoretical integration between the strands of literature introduced by Karlén and Rauta at the start of the forum. This move is premised on the remarkable expansion of proxy war literature into something that can in the future become the subfield of proxy war studies (Rauta 2020).[3] On the one hand, this allows to take stock of new research into proxy wars and great power conflict (de Soysa 2017; Jenne, Popovic, and Siroky in this forum), counterterrorism (Larsdotter 2014; Cragin 2015, 2020), cyber war (Borghard and Lonergan 2016), and conflict mediation and management (Hellmüller 2021; Irrera 2021). On the other hand, it presents a genuine opportunity to answer de Soysa's question of "how might we incorporate the idea of proxy war in the study of civil war to broaden the general understanding of how civil wars occur and end?" (de Soysa 2017).

I observed in my book, *Proxy Warfare*, that the phenomenon had "not been an adept cross-disciplinary traveller" (Mumford 2013, 2). Research in subsequent years has done little to persuade me to revise that argument. The lack of *cross-* (or even *inter-* or *multi-*) disciplinarity in the study of proxy wars has led to the creation of methodological silos, which in turn has created alternative terminological discourses across different subfields (Rauta 2018). This terminological *déjà vu* is the product of major disciplinary and methodological challenges facing the study of proxy war. As a phenomenon, proxy wars are empirically ubiquitous yet still thought of as conceptually obscure. A recent article evaluated the analytical merits of *proxy war* starting from the paradoxical rejection of the concept in the absence of proper conceptual analysis (Rauta 2021b). What remains to be asked is: when is a proxy war not a proxy war? Conceptually, proxy wars seem to be sharing a fate with the famous American judicial interpretation of pornography, namely, we know what it is when we see it, but there is a wide spectrum of judgment involved in assessing its meaning. This resonates with Salehyan's remarks above about the differences between intervention, delegation, and alliance and Meier's observations on clarity in operationalizing external support.

There has been some excellent recent research on the role of third parties in intrastate conflicts, some of which have already been highlighted by Salehyan. This builds upon a wider body of civil war literature from the last two decades that has posited explanations of third-party interference in the conduct and cessation of such wars (Regan 2002; Regan and Aydin 2006). Yet much of this literature has focused predominantly on direct state intervention and not indirect means of external support channeled through proxies, creating a situation in which civil war studies and proxy war studies have been talking past each other. Some civil wars scholars do not classify indirect intervention as an act of proxy war. This reluctance to conceptually separate proxy wars (an indirect intervention) from overt state military interference (a direct intervention) lumps together two different forms of conflict intervention by third parties. Furthermore, it overlooks their very different strategic motives (plausible deniability versus show of strength) and their general method of undertaking (covert versus overt).

External support is, although widely used, perhaps not the most appropriate term to describe third-party interference as it does not adequately account for the dynamics of the relationship behind such support. The phrase external support is abound in many modern studies of third-party intervention in civil wars and is indeed integral to the conclusion of some works, but such interventions are rarely cast as being constitutive of a proxy–benefactor relationship. Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed, for example, find that "highly fungible external support is as likely, if not more likely, than a shift in military power to prolong conflict" (Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017, 1176). Karlén concludes that "external support to rebel movements increases the probability of conflict recurrence in the short term" (Karlén 2017, 500). These

[3] Whereas other subfields of the study of conflict, such as civil wars, have their own journals and dedicated academic fora, the idea of proxy war studies is tangibly in its infancy galvanized around the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* edited by some of the contributors to this forum.

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findings have significant implications for assessments of a third party's strategic options, especially if the aim is to prolong a conflict so that a relatively weaker proxy can reach a stalemate that would not otherwise have been possible or to destabilize a particular country or region through encouraging conflict recurrence. Future research should integrate more closely Regan and Aydin's observation according to which third-party efforts to compel victory or engender stalemate "would be consistent with some of the cold war rhetoric about proxy wars" (Regan and Aydin 2006, 743). We need not just see the connection but join the dots. This forum in general, and my contribution, in particular, is a rallying call to scholars across the civil war/proxy war studies divide to continue to see connections such as this and join the dots between the two related phenomena. It picks up on Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham's call for research on conflicts to "look closely at circumstances where the lines between civil and international war are blurred" (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 734–35). Proxy wars operate in this blurry conflict zone where internal wars are made more complex and intractable because of external intervention. Analysis of proxy wars needs to be cleaved apart from generic assessments of external intervention and given a consistent, independent platform of critical evaluation. To this end, thinking about, contributing to, and building on the idea of proxy war studies is key.

The Role of Agency in the Formation of State–NAG Alliances

Belgin San-Akca
Koç University

This contribution provides a critique of dominant approaches and propose an alternative theoretical framework to understand the relationship the relationship between external states and non-state armed groups (NAGs): selection theory. Recent conflicts have been complicated not only by the high number of armed groups populating the battlefield, but also by third-party states competing to influence the process and the outcome of these civil wars by allying with armed groups. Multiple states frequently found themselves competing to support the same NAG while NAGs were free to pick and choose their partners in the marketplace of supporters.

Neither the term proxy warfare nor conflict delegation is sufficient to capture this new nature of state–NAG relations. My approach is to examine these relations as alliances or partnerships since both states and NAGs have agency to accept or reject the formation of these partnerships. Since the end of World War II, almost 107 states fought a NAG, which pursued governmental and/or territorial objectives (San-Akca 2016). In almost 77 percent of these internal conflicts, there was a third-party state supporting the NAG side in the conflict by providing safe havens, training camps, guns, weapons, and/or funds. Out of 537 NAGs that emerged between 1946 and 2019, 52 percent were able to receive such third-party state support.[4]

Building on a central theme of this forum, there is little scholarly consensus on how to conceptualize the complex relations between states and NAGs. Most of the existing research examines these relations as part of states' foreign policies. The new form and nature of relations between states and armed groups that have emerged in the past three decades require us to develop more comprehensive conceptual, analytical, and empirical tools. Although there is a prominent body of research

[4] These figures are calculated using the latest updated version of the NAGs Dataset (ver. Dec 2020), which includes information on 537 armed groups and their state supporters for the period between 1946 and 2019. The data is available at https://www.armedgroups.net/about.html.

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examining external support of armed groups in detail, it still falls short in capturing the various dimensions of state–NAG relations. While the conflict delegation literature often limits the agency of NAGs, which can take action without the consent of their patrons, delegation theory starts telling the story if partnerships between the two fail. States delegate to armed groups to realize their foreign policy objectives, which might lead to a principal–agent problem. As Salehyan remarks in this forum, states settle for less-competent groups knowing that delegation to strong groups is risky since groups might abandon the supporter goals after they get necessary resources from their supporters. From the armed group's perspective, the delegation logic attributes agency to armed groups when the latter makes a choice between accepting external support or relying on its own resources, but it does not tell us much about the process through which armed groups actively search for state allies and choose among many.

Invaluable insights have been offered by framing state–rebel relations as germane to problems, such as moral hazard and/or agency slack and adverse selection. Divergent preferences, together with asymmetric information, create the possibility that agents will not perform as intended. The principal has no way of knowing ex ante whether it is selecting an agent that is competent and reliable; hence, it runs the risk of adverse selection. Agency slack, or moral hazard, refers to the risk that the agent can, once the relationship has been established, shirk its responsibilities by failing to devote optimal effort or that it can take actions that run counter to the preferences of the principal (Salehyan 2010, 502). The logic of delegation implicitly suggests that states just delegate rebels to conduct their foreign policy business and rebels tacitly agree to the tasks delegated to them. This perspective, though it helps capture when the relations between states and rebels are hierarchical, misses the details about the state–NAG interactions in the form of alliances or partnerships. We do not learn much about the conditions under which states select some NAGs while not others. By the same token, it is not sufficient to understand the complex mechanisms through which NAGs select their external supporters.

The selection theory offered in *States in Disguise—Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups* goes beyond the logic of proxy warfare and delegation (San-Akca 2016). NAGs are treated as potential allies or partners of states and the formation of partnership or alliances between the two is shown to occur as a result of a selection process on the side of both states and NAGs. In other words, NAGs are attributed agency in accepting or rejecting the offers of states. I proposed selection theory to emphasize a process of selection involving both the supporters and the groups. While principal-agent theory explains the complications after the alliance or cooperation between states and armed groups are established, I focus on the process prior to the decision to initiate a partnership through either delegation, alliance, or intervention by states and acknowledge that armed groups can and do also initiate such cooperation with states. I examine the role of interstate rivalry, ideational ties between supporters and target states as well as between supporters and NAGs, and the domestic political setting that motivates cooperation between states and armed groups. I build on conventional theories of international relations as informed by realism, liberalism, and constructivism to hypothesize about the onset and level of such cooperative arrangements between states and NAGs.

Moreover, the logic of selection theory helps us move beyond the recent scholarly focus on external state support of rebels, which is only one type of alliance between states and NAGs. NAGs are capable of choosing their supporters as well as going into the territories of other states to raise funds, recruit individuals, and spread propaganda. Through their own initiative, NAGs establish a form of de facto alliance with these states, even though the states have not directly created channels to support these groups (San-Akca 2014, 2016). The delegation logic does not speak to such cases since it is no longer possible to talk about a patron or a principal intentionally delegating tasks to the agent in question. Indeed, in the period between 1946 and 2019, 43 percent of all groups were able to raise funds, find safe

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havens, establish training camps, and acquire weapons within the borders of states independently. In other words, states do not always deliberately help NAGs, but NAGs nonetheless manage to acquire resources within other states' borders. I refer to these cases as de facto or tacit alliances between states and NAGs. NAGs do not only make a choice about whether to accept or reject a state's offer, but also actively seek outside sources of support in an effort to systematically diversify their supporter portfolio.

My goal is not to state that the delegation logic does not apply at all. Rather, it focuses on the subsequent process after a state–NAG alliance begins. Selection theory emphasizes the process at the onset of such an alliance and offers theoretical insights into how states and NAGs engage with each other through several forms of cooperation. The delegation logic falls short specifically when it comes to cases in which NAGs are able to acquire support without the backing of an external patron and no strings are attached by their outside patrons. We need more work to predict the patterns of behavior by such NAGs. Future research needs to engage in sophisticated analysis in order to enrich our understanding of why multiple states support the same NAG and why a NAG seeks support from multiple states. Both of these are intriguing since both states and NAGs end up competing over their potential allies. In addition, we should pay more attention to how many state–NAG alliances are formed as a result of the coincidental convergence of interests or deliberate choices on the part of both states and NAGs. The detailed analysis should include the role these alliances play in conflict instigation and resolution. Given that we are in the era of nuclear weapons, alliances between states and NAGs will continue to be one of the most popular instruments used by states that want to avoid the material and reputational costs involved in direct war-making.

Complex Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars

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In the last decade, principal–agent theory has almost completely dominated theorizing on conflict delegation (Byman and Kreps 2010; Salehyan 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Popovic 2017). Even scholars using alternative labels, such as beneficiary–proxy (Mumford 2013) or sponsor–insurgent (Tamm 2016a), adhere to many of its core assumptions. Although not without criticism (Borghard 2014, 25–31), it is fair to say that principal–agent theory has become the dominant framework through which we have come to study external support to non-state armed groups. This is not surprising as it speaks directly to the fundamental process of delegation, providing us with valuable insights into conflict delegation in civil war, as mentioned by the previous contributions.

However, despite the widespread use of this theoretical framework we have still not utilized it to its fullest potential. The current standard application of principal–agent theory has focused entirely on one direct relationship: that between principal and agent. This has been the model almost exclusively employed in the conflict delegation literature. Although suitable to address some research questions, it might cloud our vision in relation to other important issues. As San-Akca has already noted, one consequence of employing this theoretical perspective is that it limits the agency of non-state armed groups. Another issue is that we may overlook the central role of other actors in the delegation process as highlighted next by

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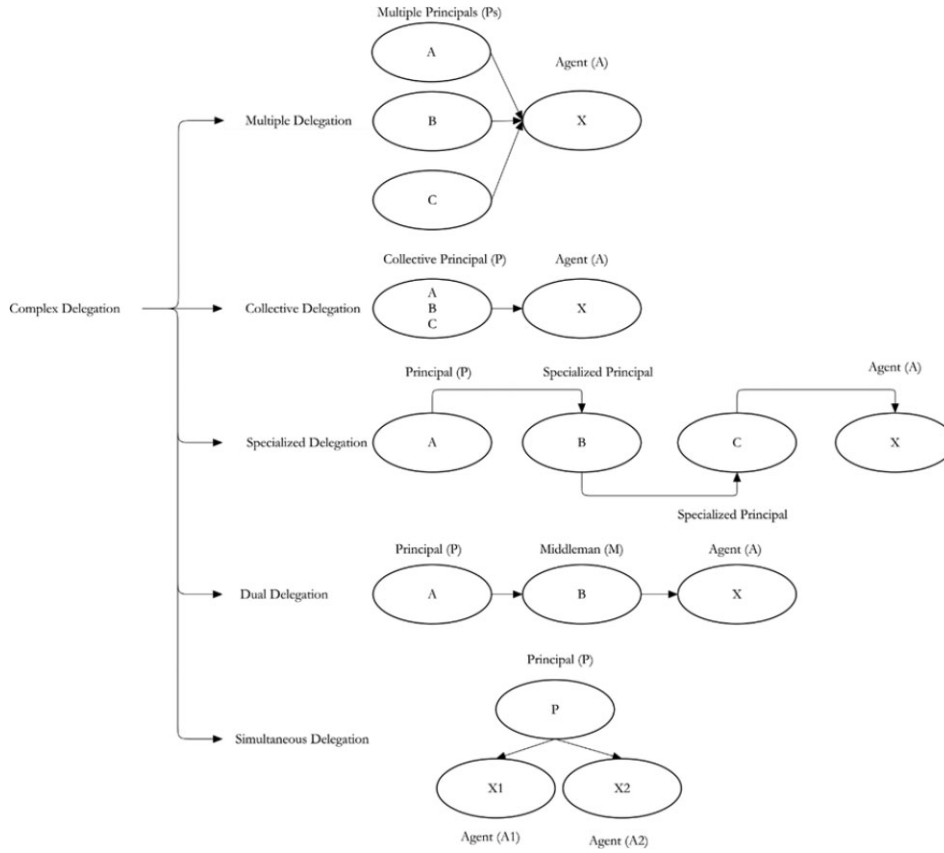


Figure 1. Complex delegation patterns

Stark. This may lead to an oversimplification as to how conflict delegation in civil wars works in practice.

To this end, we believe that we should engage more with complexity in relation to conflict delegation. This does not have to lead to a complete rebuttal of the current framework, as principal–agent theory offers a multitude of extensions that we so far have underutilized. More complex delegation chains have been extensively discussed in other literatures, such as in the study of international organizations (Nielson and Tierney 2003; Michaelowa, Reinsberg, and Schneider 2018), economics (Laffont and Martimort 1998), and bureaucratic politics (Bennedsen and Schultz 2011).

Adapting such insights to conflict delegation may yield important theoretical insights. In this contribution, we argue that by extending the complexity of conflict delegation beyond the usual two actors, principal and agent, we shift the focus onto more complex delegation patterns with the potential to open up a range of hitherto unexplored questions. In figure 1, we highlight a selection of five delegation patterns that extend standard principal–agent theory.[5] These extensions of the standard model offer other configurations as to the type of principal(s), the agent(s), and the nature of their relationships. Of these extensions, only *multiple delegation*,

[5] Given the extent to which this issue has been ignored in the literature on conflict delegation, the labels we propose are tentative and provide a first-cut mapping of complexity. Even in other sub-fields employing principal–agent theory, there is little conceptual agreement on exact labeling.

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that is, separate principals providing support to the same agent, has received attention in the literature on conflict delegation. Tamm (2016b) has looked at how multiple principals affect rebel cohesion and splintering, while Popovic (2018) has explored how this impacts inter-rebel alliances. Although other forms of delegation patterns have been less systematically explored, alternative arrangements are visible in empirical cases.

We identify four other types: *collective delegation*, *specialized delegation*, *dual delegation*, and *simultaneous delegation*. To begin with, *collective delegation* accounts for a situation in which several principals coordinate delegation efforts and jointly delegate authority. A contemporary example of this would be state sponsors working together to channel support to the Free Syrian Army in Syria through "military operation rooms" in Turkey and Jordan (Lister 2016, 24). *Specialized delegation* refers to tasks subsequently delegated along a chain of increasingly specialized agents. *Dual delegation* describes a process in which the delegation of authority is delegated to one agent who then further delegates this to another agent. In this situation, the principal–agent relationship is mediated by a middleman. This could, for instance, be great powers routing support through regional or local allies, with examples including United States support to the Mujahedin fighters in Afghanistan delivered through Pakistan (Hughes 2012). Lastly, *double delegation* is a simultaneous delegation to more than one agent. Syria has provided support to a range of Palestinian groups, such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (San-Akca 2016, 75), while the United States provided parallel support to various rebel groups in Syria, at times with unexpected consequences. In 2016, the CIA-armed militia Fursan al Haq, or Knights of Righteousness, clashed with the Pentagon-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (Bulos, Hennigan, and Bennett 2016).

Empirically, we can observe different types of delegation patterns as these examples demonstrate. Nonetheless, we have so far restricted most analyses to the standard model. By acknowledging complexity and its variation, we open several potential research avenues. First, why do principals employ middlemen? Second, do proxies assume different roles for different principals? Third, what are the effects of shorter and longer delegation chains? Future research needs to look deeper into how state sponsors coordinate and jointly channel support and how this affects rebel groups. Moreover, discussing complex conflict delegation presents a unique opportunity to evaluate the issue of control in the delegation of war to non-state armed actors, a key topic the debate has yet to address systematically.

Complicating the Proxy War Model

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As the contributions to the forum already identify, the proxy war literature models delegation relationships as an ideal–typical connection between an external state sponsor and a local non-state group proxy, where the external sponsor provides indirect support to local actors (such as financing, weapons, training, intelligence, and diplomatic support) in exchange for a degree of command over the proxy group (Hughes 2012; Mumford 2013; Rauta 2018; Groh 2019). However, Karlén and Rauta's discussion on complex delegation patterns invites a broader theoretical reconsideration of this simple sponsor–proxy model. While the standard model can be a useful heuristic, it fails to capture the much broader array of proxy relationships and types of interventions that we see in civil wars today. Specifically, there are two advances that the proxy wars literature must make to capture these dynamics: conceptualizing the role of regional actors in relation to both great powers and

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local actors, and understanding intervention as a menu of options rather than a two-dimensional spectrum.

The proxy war literature has not conceptualized the role of regional state actors in relation to both great powers and local actors, and it has not fully reckoned with the types of support that external actors can provide. While regional actors do act in the traditional proxy role by providing indirect support to local actors, they increasingly also act as both proxies and sponsors, receiving support from great powers while sponsoring local actors themselves. Regional states' interventions in some conflicts may be better thought of as one node in a chain of proxy relationships, where a regional state may both receive support from a great power sponsor and provide support to local proxies.

Regional actors also intervene in civil wars in ways that blend forms of indirect and direct support, providing funding, weapons, and/or intelligence support to local actors, for example, while at the same time deploying Special Forces on the ground to train and sometimes fight alongside local actors or conducting drone strikes or other types of airstrikes. Additionally, aspects of this kind of intervention are often covert or defy straight-forward attribution, making these relationships even more analytically complex than the straightforward sponsor–proxy heuristic. While intervention is sometimes conceptualized along a ladder or spectrum, ranging from indirect to direct forms of intervention, regional intervention in today's proxy wars may be better thought of as a menu of options from which policymakers may select.

The Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen beginning in 2015 is a useful theory-building case that illustrates these dynamics in action. The coalition of nine Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), intervened militarily in Yemen's civil war beginning on March 26, 2015, at the invitation of the internationally recognized government, after it had been driven out of the capital Sana'a by the Houthi insurgent group. A de facto division of labor had the UAE lead efforts to fight the ground offensive in the south and train an array of local militant groups there, while Saudi Arabia led an air campaign in the north. The coalition also blockaded air and sea routes into Yemen.

From the start of the intervention, the United States provided logistical support to the operation, including aerial refueling for aircraft engaged in airstrikes as well as targeting assistance and other forms of intelligence-sharing (the United Kingdom and France have also provided support). A joint US–Saudi planning cell in Riyadh coordinated support for the air campaign. In addition to these more direct forms of support, the United States also continued to provide Saudi Arabia and the UAE arms sales packages, military training, and other forms of support throughout the intervention. While this support is part of long-standing bilateral security partnerships, it both sustained these states' military capacities to carry out such interventions and demonstrated implicit US support for the intervention (Stark 2020b). While the UAE began drawing down its forces from Yemen in 2019, the coalition's air campaign continued. The United States has also intermittently engaged with the Houthis and more systematically in a counterterrorism campaign in Southern Yemen in partnership with the UAE. Since mid-2016, US Special Forces from Joint Special Operations Command have worked with Emirati Special Forces in Southern Yemen in what they say is an advisory capacity to counterterrorism operations and intelligence gathering against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). About a dozen US Green berets have reportedly also been stationed on the Saudi–Yemeni border since late 2017 to locate and destroy Houthi ballistic missiles and launch sites (Cooper, Gibbons-Neff, and Schmitt 2018). US forces also conducted missile strikes on radar facilities in Houthi-controlled territory in October 2016 in response to anti-ship cruise missiles launched at US Navy warships in the Red Sea (Stewart 2016).

First, throughout the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have acted as nodes in a complex sponsor–proxy relationship that

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links the United States indirectly with local actors. Each actor in this chain had their own interests behind intervening in Yemen, with some overlap in interests as well as considerable areas of divergence. The United States provided support to the coalition not because it had a strong interest in the outcome of the local conflict and who ultimately governed Yemen but because the Obama Administration (and later the Trump Administration) felt compelled to support their Gulf security partners in exchange for their acquiescence to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) among other issues. The United States' support for the intervention has meant, however, that it has substantial leverage over the coalition. At times, this has been used to affect the coalition's behavior: for example, United States' pressure reportedly pushed Saudi Arabia to sign the Stockholm Agreement in late 2018 and contributed to the UAE's decision to begin drawing down in 2019 (Stark 2020c). It is not possible to fully understand the motivations of sponsors or their intervention behavior in Yemen without locating Saudi Arabia and the UAE as nodes between the United States, on the one hand, and local actors, on the other. Second, Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not select options along a spectrum of intervention: rather, they chose to intervene both directly and indirectly in the conflict, deploying their forces not only to fight but also to train and provide other forms of indirect support to local actors. Similarly, it is difficult to place the United States' intervention in Yemen in such a two-dimensional spectrum: while most US assistance was indirect, it did engage sporadically with the Houthis and more systematically in a counterterrorism campaign in Yemen, working alongside security partners on the ground.

Future scholarship should build on more complex conceptualizations that expand our fairly narrow heuristics for understanding the relationship between sponsors and proxies as also suggested by Karlén and Rauta. As the Yemen case illustrates, these relationships and intervention options affect the decision to intervene and the conduct of the intervention itself. Scholarship needs to understand the degree to which global and regional actors are able to affect the behavior of proxies or, even better, the conditions under which they can affect this behavior. It also needs to engage with intervention decision-making so that we can build a better understanding of when and under what conditions an intervention or proxy sponsorship is likely to occur as well as how and why proxy wars end. Direct intervention and indirect proxy sponsorship are not mutually exclusive or even necessarily distinct options that exist on a two-dimensional spectrum of intervention in civil wars; rather, they often occur in tandem.

Conflict Delegation by Non-State Actors

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and

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A crucial aspect of conflict delegation in international affairs is the relationship between the sponsor and the proxy. However, a key puzzle remains unsolved: what types of actors can occupy these two roles? Complimentary to Stark's observations on the complexity of the sponsor–proxy relationship, this question has hitherto received an orthodox reply: the existing literature on proxy wars and conflict delegation suggests that the role of the sponsor is filled by states, while proxy roles are

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reserved for non-state actors (NSAs; Hughes 2012, 8–11; Groh 2019, 27–29).[6] Some scholars (Mumford 2013, 45) have challenged this conventional wisdom, noting that NSAs as varied as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or the People's Protection Units (YPG) have functioned as non-state sponsors that have utilized other NSAs as proxies (Moghadam and Wyss 2020).

Non-state sponsorship involves cooperation between at least two NSAs, which raises the question of how to distinguish this particular sponsor–proxy relationship from cooperation among militant actors more generally. Greater conceptual clarity about the similarities and differences of these obviously related phenomena would advance our understanding of an important aspect of contemporary conflict. Cooperation can be defined as formal or informal collaborative arrangements designed to pursue common interests between two or more parties. The main characteristic of cooperation is rather generic, centering on the notion that parties design or participate in a common endeavor from which they perceive to derive a mutual benefit. Without further attributes, however, the concept specifies neither the objects/domains of the arrangement nor the substance and nature of the relationship between the cooperating parties. The same applies to cooperation among militant actors, which, absent additional specifications, can take on a multitude of forms. The specific collaborative arrangement between militant groups can vary in terms of its expected duration (i.e., from short- to long-term) or with respect to the quantity, quality, and variety of activities that the agreement governs. Furthermore, the generic label of cooperation reveals little about such variables as the degree of interdependence between the cooperating militant groups, their relative power, their ideological compatibility, or their mutual level of trust.

How, then, do sponsor–proxy relations involving a set of NSAs relate to cooperation among militant groups writ large? We argue that the former is best understood as a subset of the latter. The use of proxies by non-state sponsors is a form of cooperation between militant actors in which two additional characteristics typically apply. The first is that the capabilities of the sponsor and proxy are asymmetric, with the sponsor enjoying privileged status. The second characteristic derives from the first: the sponsor's political and military objectives take clear precedence over those of the proxy. Looking at proxy relationships in general, sponsors typically provide a combination of financial and material assistance, as well as training and operational planning. Proxy assistance usually consists of some combination of fighting a common adversary, collecting intelligence, patrolling and holding rear areas, and/or exerting governance on behalf of the sponsor. Since the fighting capabilities of non-state sponsors typically outweigh those of their proxies, however, non-state sponsors are less concerned about using their proxies on the frontlines and instead have them carry out secondary security tasks. Non-state sponsors prize their proxies more for their political than their military value. Their proxies help them in gaining access to or liaising with local communities that typically share a constituency with the proxy but might be mistrustful of the non-state sponsor's intentions. In short, non-state sponsorship is mostly concerned with enhancing and maintaining the sponsor's legitimacy vis-à-vis domestic and/or external stakeholders (Moghadam and Wyss 2020).

How might we identify a sponsor–proxy relationship involving NSAs in practice? There are at least four factors that serve as good indicators that a given cooperative relationship between militant actors involves a sponsor–proxy relationship, although not all have to be present. In illustrating these four factors, we will contrast the sponsor–proxy relationship to what is arguably the most similar collaborative

[6] Although the contributions by both Stark, Jenne and Popovic and Siroky in this forum also mention governments as potential agents.

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partnership, namely the relationship between a militant or terrorist alliance hub (such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State) that delegates armed conflict to its local affiliates (Bacon 2018).

Coercion

Non-state sponsors will often seek to assert their dominance over their surrogates. For example, in the case of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish YPG prevented its proxies from becoming too powerful by fragmenting them, spreading discord, and detaining key leaders (Wilkofsky and Fatah 2017). Militant hubs, in contrast, will seek to enforce their strategic outlook on their affiliates but often lack the physical means to impose their will on their partners.

Physical Proximity

The ability to coerce is to a large degree contingent upon the distance between the non-state sponsor and its proxy. Physical proximity to their proxies is more critical for non-state sponsors than for state sponsors, because NSAs typically lack the military capability or financial leverage required to influence actors from afar. Practically speaking, non-state sponsors and their proxies will typically be colocated in the same theater. This distinguishes non-state sponsorship relations from some related—but nevertheless distinct—forms of cooperation, such as the relationship between Al Qaeda and most of its affiliates and associates. In the latter relationships, strategic headquarters, such as Al Qaeda's central leadership, are often hard-pressed to rein in their affiliates, who are out of their physical reach. Al Qaeda's Pakistan-based leadership, for example, never managed to control its Iraq-based affiliate (Fishman 2016).

Material and/or Financial Preponderance

Non-state sponsors typically command more resources than their proxies, thereby ensuring the proxy's dependence on their benefactors. Typical cooperative relationships between militant groups that do not amount to sponsor–proxy relationships do not always feature such a stark material or financial asymmetry. At times, the supposed junior partner in an alliance hub may even be in a better financial shape than the overall headquarters. In the case of the relationship between Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda in Iraq, for example, the Iraqi affiliate eventually surpassed Al Qaeda Central in financial strength, even providing financial support to the central leadership in Pakistan (Byman 2017).

External Support

In many instances, the non-state sponsor's superior resources will result from external support that it is enjoying. The Lebanese Hezbollah, for example, was able to establish its own proxy militia, the Lebanese Resistance Brigades, in large part thanks to decade-long Iranian financial and material support to the Party of God, in addition to donations from the Lebanese diaspora (Levitt 2013).

To date, scholars have presented only a handful of case studies of non-state sponsorship. For this reason, the list of factors discussed above is far from exhaustive. With scholarly interest in non-state sponsorship growing, additional factors are likely to be identified. We expect these contributions to offer additional insights into sufficient and necessary conditions of non-state sponsorships, thereby enabling a clearer drawing of conceptual boundaries between non-state sponsorship and related phenomena.

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Why Peace Rarely Trickles Down: The Settlement of Mutual Interventions and the Persistence of Civil Wars in Africa

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A *mutual intervention* involves two states that simultaneously intervene in each other's intrastate conflicts by supporting rebel groups (Cliffe 1999, 90). In previous research, we identified twenty-three mutual interventions in Africa between 1960 and 2010 (figure 2). Nine of them were reciprocal proxy wars in Mumford's sense of involving solely indirect interventions by both states. The other fourteen cases featured troop intervention by one state, similar to the blend of direct and indirect support Stark highlights in the Middle East. We also showed that more than half of Africa's mutual interventions terminated via negotiated settlements in which both states committed to ending their support for rebels (Duursma and Tamm 2021). Here, we reflect on why these peaceful interstate settlements rarely led to the termination of the associated intrastate conflicts.

Peace trickled down from the international to the national level in only three of the conflicts linked to mutual interventions. Perhaps most prominently, the Tripartite Accord that resolved the mutual intervention between Angola and South Africa in 1988 also laid the basis for the resolution of the civil war in Namibia. Crocker, the US diplomat who successfully mediated the Tripartite Accord, explained that the resolution of the conflict in Namibia was a result of "the right alignment of local, regional, and international events—like planets lining up for some rare astronomical happening" (quoted in Zartman 1989, 234).

The other two intrastate conflicts that can be said to have ended as a result of the prior peaceful settlement of mutual interventions occurred in Sudan. Following the resolution of the mutual intervention between Sudan and Ethiopia in March 1971, Ethiopia not only ended its support to the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) but also began to push for a mediated solution to end the war between the SSLM and the Sudanese government. This led to the first round of secret preliminary peace talks in Addis Ababa in November 1971 (Alier 1990, 80). Subsequent official negotiations mediated by Emperor Haile Selassie led to the conclusion of the Addis Ababa Agreement in February 1972 (Beshir 1975, 83–85). Another case is the resolution of Sudan's second civil war, which partly resulted from the negotiated settlements of the mutual interventions between Sudan, on the one hand, and Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda, on the other, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. During these mutual interventions, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda all worked toward regime change in Sudan. Yet, following the termination of the mutual interventions, the three neighbors played a constructive role in the peace process that led to the resolution of the conflict between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in 2005 (Brosché and Duursma 2018, 565).

So why do most intrastate conflicts persist after the resolution of a mutual intervention? One could expect that such a resolution makes the resolution of the associated intrastate conflicts more likely because the loss of external support should shift the balance of power in favor of the government side. This can not only lead to the defeat of the rebel side, but also widen the bargaining space because a lower

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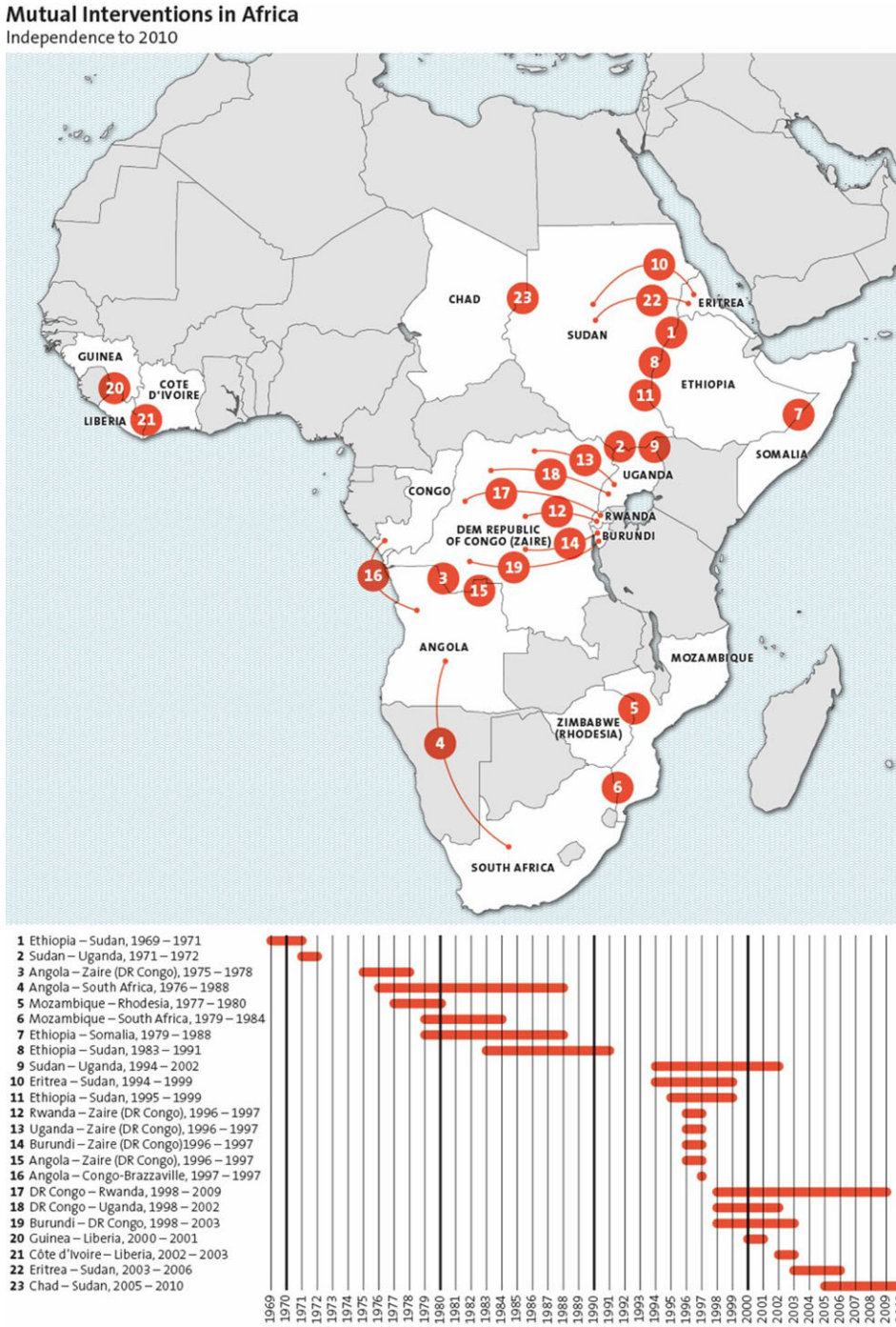


Figure 2. Mutual interventions in Africa

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likelihood of winning the war can force the rebel side to accept a negotiated settlement that it would otherwise have refused (Kydd 2010). However, rebel groups often rely on multiple sources of funding or even manage to find new sources of support after a patron ends its support. For example, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) turned to South Sudan for support after Chad resolved the mutual intervention with Sudan.

A second reason why one could expect that the resolution of a mutual intervention makes the resolution of an intrastate conflict more likely is that the former mutual intervention adversary can act as a mediator in the intrastate conflict, as illustrated in the mediation efforts to end Sudan's first and second civil wars. Yet, with the exception of these two cases in Sudan, this type of mediation effort has generally failed. South Africa did not succeed in its mediation attempt between Mozambique's government and the Mozambican National Resistance, following the termination of the mutual intervention through the Nkomati Accord in March 1984. Sudan's mediation effort between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government between 2006 and 2008 led to several partial peace agreements, but eventually also failed. Chad mediated between the Sudanese government and JEM following the termination of the mutual intervention with Sudan in 2010. While this led to the conclusion of a peace agreement, JEM continued to fight the Sudanese government. These failed mediation efforts are not that surprising when considering quantitative research on biased mediation. Biased third parties that previously supported the rebel side are significantly less successful than unbiased mediators or mediators biased toward the government side (Svensson 2007). Biased mediation is also unlikely to lead to durable settlements (Duursma 2020).

To conclude, a mutual intervention is a form of interstate conflict that by definition is linked to two intrastate conflicts, which raises the question of how mutual interventions influence these conflicts. We previously found that intrastate conflict dyads in Africa that were at some point involved in a mutual intervention experienced on average nearly six times as many battle-related deaths as other dyads (Duursma and Tamm 2021). However, mutual interventions that were resolved via a negotiated settlement rarely led to the resolution of the associated intrastate conflicts. Peace typically fails to trickle down because rebel groups rely on multiple sources of funding and because biased third parties are ineffective mediators. Overall, this suggests that mutual interventions have a greater impact on the severity of intrastate conflicts than on their termination.

Great Power Rivalry and Proxy Wars

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The term proxy war has acquired at least two distinct meanings. The first denotes all wars fought by a local proxy on behalf of a third-party sponsor (Mumford 2013; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; San-Akca 2016; Karlén 2017, 2019; Rauta 2018, 2020, 2021b). In the context of civil wars, this covers indirect armed interventions by foreign sponsors on behalf of non-state armed proxy forces as part of *offensive* interventions against the government. This definition can be expanded to cover

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a foreign sponsor's indirect armed support for the embattled *government* against the armed opposition as part of *defensive* interventions (in this forum, Stark likewise contends that states, not just non-state armed groups, can serve as proxies in sponsor–proxy relationships). This second meaning of proxy war, which we focus on in this brief commentary, covers the subset of proxy wars in which two or more rival states—often great powers—face off on opposite sides of a civil conflict in a third country (Deutsch 1964; Dunér 1981; Bar-Siman Tov 1984).

One of the earliest post-World War II examples of what we call *symmetrical* proxy wars (similar to what Duursma and Tamm call mutual interventions but between rival powers) was the conflict in North Yemen (1948 and 1962) in which the United Kingdom supported the royalists, along with Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, while the Soviet Union along with Egypt championed the republicans. Similarly, the United States and the USSR squared off in Nicaragua (1981–1989), El Salvador (1979–1991), and Angola (1975–1991). In both Vietnam and Thailand, meanwhile, the United States and China assisted opposing sides of the conflict (Carson 2016). While it is true that revanchist states and regional powers have been prolific interveners in the neighborhood (Jenne 2004, 2007, 2015; Popovic 2017), great powers[7] remain some of the most frequent and influential proxy warriors around the world, due to their global interests, power-projection capabilities, and status as the world's leading arms purveyors.[8]

In our book-in-progress, we analyze great power side-taking in ongoing civil wars from 1975 to 2015, and by examining how great powers "take sides" in the conflict, we follow Stark's admonition in this forum to examine both direct intervention and indirect foreign sponsorship. We show that great powers have provided weapons, logistical support, money, air support, and sometimes troops to their favored side in approximately 80 percent of all civil conflicts. Furthermore, by far, the most common side-taking configuration is *defensive*, where great powers support governments against armed opposition groups (figure 3). Offensive interventions, by contrast, make up only 8 percent, while symmetrical proxy interventions comprise only 11 percent of great power interventions in ongoing conflicts.

The book presents a theory of *security hierarchies* to account for these patterns in side-taking. Security hierarchies are composed of arms transfers and security commitments that flow from the great power to their allies and client states. *Great powers* preside at the top of these networks, and *allied states*—with whom great powers share close economic, political, and ideological ties—stand just below, playing auxiliary or support roles (such as collective delegation, using Karlén and Rauta's terminology) in military engagements. Finally, there are *client states*, which exist in a strictly subsidiary relationship to their great power patrons (this parallels Salehyan's insight in this forum that allies are not in the same hierarchical relationship with sponsor states as clients/proxies). Security hierarchies are arranged as a "series of parallel power hierarchies, each of which functions similarly to the others and to the overall international power hierarchy" (Lemke 2002, 48). Security hierarchies may change over time: new client states may be *acquired*, either voluntarily or involuntarily, through war, while others may be abandoned (Sylvan and Majeski 2009, 33).

How do these prior security relationships influence great power side-taking? Drawing on a patron–client logic, we argue that great powers intervene militarily primarily to support embattled governments that are already embedded in their or their allies' security hierarchies. Arms transfers establish a close security relationship between patron and client in which the client purchases security at the expense of some of its autonomy; subsequent servicing and support for advanced weapon systems may lock the seller into providing military support to the government in the

[7] We operationalize great powers as the permanent five members (P5) of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

[8] Great powers controlled nearly 90 percent of the global arms market in 2008–2016. The US share amounted to 40 percent (Theohary 2016, 21).

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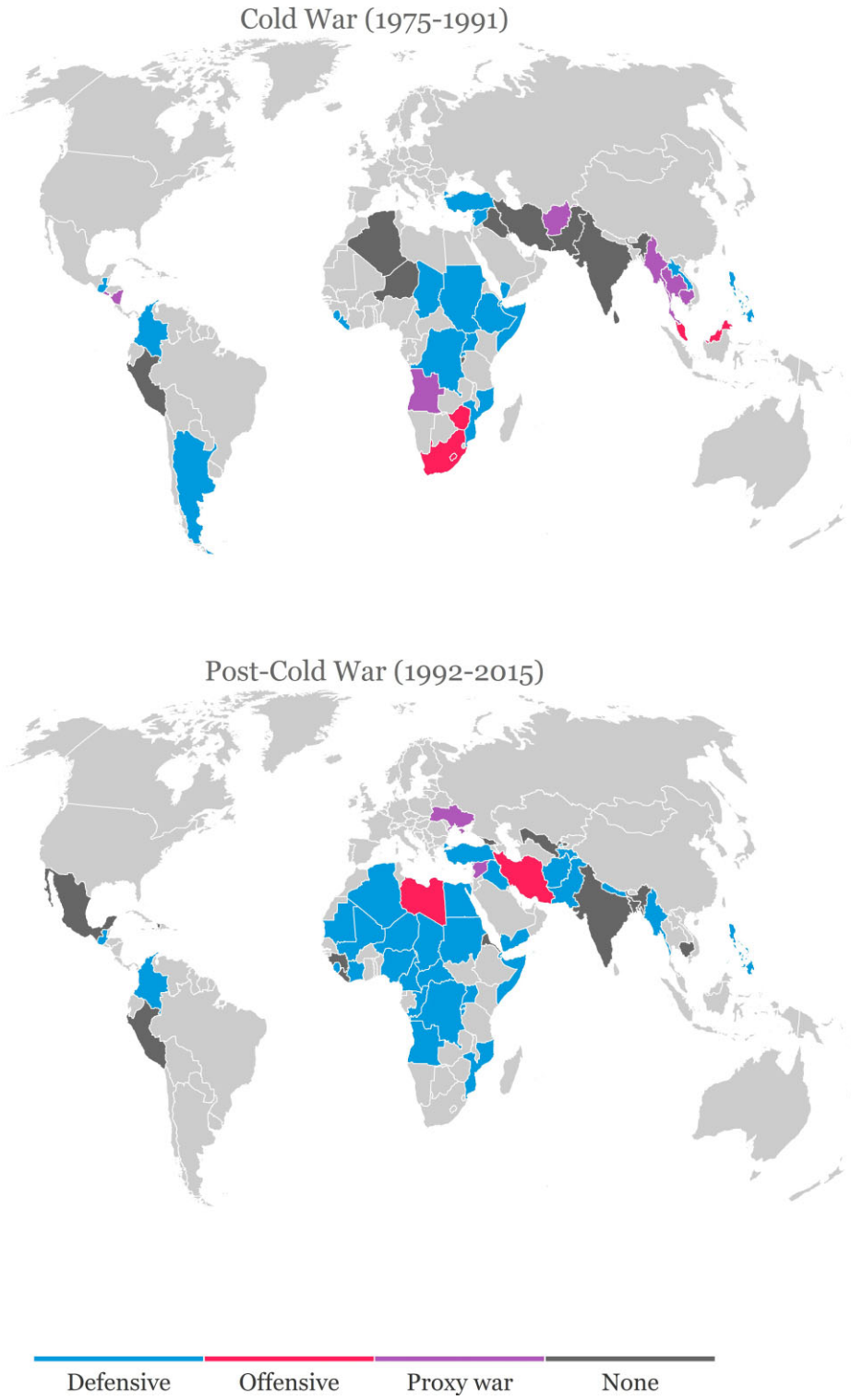


Figure 3. Great power side-taking configurations (1975–2015)

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event of a domestic armed challenge (Kinsella 1998, 9). For their part, great powers use their arms procurement to influence the foreign policies of their clients (Menon 1986, 214) or balance against a rival great power's influence (Krause 1991, 321–25).

Our analysis establishes a pattern of mostly *defensive interventions* in regime conflicts to support besieged governments with which they already have a security relationship. In marked contrast to most existing research on conflict delegation, this suggests the need to look more at governments rather than non-state armed groups as proxies. For democratic and nondemocratic powers alike, these ties impact side-taking choices more than gross human rights violations, regime similarity with the government, and several other commonly advanced explanations. Great powers are also more likely to support the embattled governments of former colonies. What this adds up to is that great power interventions are mostly aimed at defending client governments within their respective security hierarchies, the boundaries of which are marked by their and their allies' arms transfers. One central policy implication is that great powers ought to be less fearful of rival power interventions, since defensive interventions rarely elicit corresponding offensive ones from rival great powers that lead to proxy wars. Even during the Cold War, great powers assumed a generally defensive rather than offensive military posture when responding to civil wars around the world.

Making the Clandestine Public: Challenges in Collecting Data on External Support and Ways Forward

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Research on external support has been equally driven and limited by data availability. The type and quality of the data we have does not only affect how rigorously we can put our theories about external support to the test but also prescribe the very questions we can feasibly ask, at least in quantitative research designs. As such, the collection of data is never just a stock-taking exercise. Rather, it frames the academic debate and sketches possible paths for future research. This is why the *Third-Party Intervention* (TPI), *Non-State Actor* (NSA) and, more recently, *Non-State Armed Groups* (NAG) and *Uppsala Conflict Data Program External Support* (ESD) datasets have been so influential in shaping academic debate—both in the specialized study of external support and proxy wars, and the larger literature on armed conflict. Having worked extensively on the ESD, I believe there are a number of conceptual and methodological challenges that all data collection efforts on external support face.

Despite much academic interest, as Mumford remarks above, *external support* remains a vague concept with many of its key components poorly defined. In fact, a key theme of the forum is conceptual limitation, and *external support* shares this with the related notions of *proxy war*, *delegation*, and *alliances*. This begins with questions as elementary as which actors should be considered external to a conflict: For state supporters, this is usually a question of where the line between supporting a warring party and becoming a primary actor oneself lies. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, fights Rwandan rebels based predominantly on its territory, that only contest Rwandan and not Congolese rule, however. Similar problems arise when states support coalition efforts without offering direct support to a warring party as we see with United States' support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen as discussed by Stark. With non-state armed groups operating transnationally,

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splintering, and switching allegiances, it can be even more difficult to discern when support originates from the same group in a different location, a different group altogether, or an independent fraction of a group (e.g., foreign fighters). While rebel alliances *within* a conflict are not uncommon, they do not introduce fundamentally new resources to the balance of power and are rightly not included as *external* support.

Another key conceptual challenge arises from the need to distinguish external interference in armed conflict from the regular workings of the globalized economic and political order. Financial motives, for example, drive large parts of the sales of military equipment worldwide and sellers often show little interest in how their equipment is used. Including all weapon transfers would then risk *over*counting cases of external support. To guard against this, the ESD requires the intent to assist in a conflict as an inclusion criterion. As such, the United States is considered an external supporter to the Pakistani government in its fight against the Pakistani Taliban, whereas China—its number one source of weapons—is not. This approach, however, risks *under*counting the foreign-provided resources on the ground. Yet, it is inevitable to choose either a purpose-based or resource-based approach to the collection of data on external support.

Coding observations on civil war dynamics from media-based, open-source accounts introduces a number of potential reporting biases that have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Weidmann 2016). When coding external support, there is the additional challenge of clandestineness and desired deniability that can make it hard to find reliable information. With an increased interest in external support and the amplification of voices from conflict zones via social media and other web-based communication technologies, reporting on it has become more frequent and detailed over the last decade. Hence, data collection efforts are more likely to pick up on more recent cases of external support. At the same time, official government information is only released to the public long after the fact. Ideally, these countervailing forces balance each other out with time. In practice, it requires constant updating of existing data and great scrutiny when comparing the development of external support over time to distinguish variation in external support from variation in the availability of information on external support.

Although a plethora of data on external involvement in civil wars exist, a number of data "blind spots" remain. These include systematic, reliable, and consistent information on support before and after, and during inactive periods of civil wars, the termination of support (and reasons for the decision), the quantity and quality of support (measurements thereof still to be developed), and coalition contributions—all for both state and non-state recipients. Studies using network approaches to explore questions related to proxy relationships not only offer a particularly fruitful way forward but also create a demand for more relational data (Jackson, San-Akca, and Maoz 2020). The plurality of sources that contain information on these topics and the necessity to apply criteria, such as the intent of the supporter to distinguish them from closely related phenomena, suggest that automated coding remains, if anything, a distant possibility.

Addressing these data limitations offers numerous ways of moving forward, and the data collection efforts highlighted here have taken the first steps to accomplish these tasks. Yet, the discrepancy in coding criteria, scope, and units of analysis means that it is still nearly impossible to draw on the information in one unified framework.[9] Advances in data management that allow for the automated integration of conflict event data from multiple sources could facilitate the merging of external

[9] The NAG includes observations on inactive conflict-years and support termination, but only for rebel recipients. Extensions of the TPI data provide information for years with high risk of political instability, but no conflict (Regan and Meachum 2014). The ESD includes information on coalitions of state supporters, but not states supporting the coalition effort without providing direct support to the recipient.

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support datasets where operationalizations of concepts permit it. At a minimum, this would allow to cross-validate findings by running the same analyses on different datasets in a much-simplified manner. Ideally, it would expand to combine data on external support with data on other forms of foreign interference.

To tackle issues around reliability, it is further paramount to find ways to express the uncertainty that forms part of open source-based data, especially in politically fragile contexts. We need to develop systematic ways to express this uncertainty, for example, by training coders to assign uncertainty scores based on their knowledge of the conflict and the sources, by incorporating expert surveys into review processes, or by reporting divergent accounts in the data (Weidmann and Rød 2015). Tools from latent variable models may also be used to formally estimate measures of uncertainty using various sources of information. Scholars can then model the inherent uncertainty, rendering estimations more robust. Still, the work of qualitative researchers to put these conjectures to the test in case work remains key and greater collaboration on mixed-methods research designs could help alleviate some of the data-quality concerns that persist even when the discussed challenges are addressed.

Ways Forward: A Research Agenda on Conflict Delegation

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As the authors of this forum have shown, conflict delegation is a rich and diverse field of inquiry, be it conceptualized as proxy wars, external support, interventions, or alliances. However, the forum also shows that there is still a lot that is undertheorized that future research should consider. Mapping out the likely evolution of the field can help answer several questions: What should we know about conflict delegation that we do not know yet? What has received little attention? How can new research challenge or confirm current understandings? In the concluding piece of this forum, we propose new avenues for research on conflict delegation in civil war.

Existing research overwhelmingly conceptualizes the delegation of war as a fundamentally dyadic relationship between a principal/sponsor and an agent/proxy, which is nested within dyadic international rivalries between states (usually, the sponsor and the target). However, as several of the contributions in this forum allude to, both the sponsor and the proxy are embedded in overlapping systems that are significantly undertheorized. Further, the preferences and strategies of the principal typically receive the most attention in the existing literature. This draws attention to three important points. First, future work should focus more on the agency of the recipient of external patronage, as existing theories are predominantly developed from the point of view of the sponsor. Second, not only should future work determine when and how delegation takes place, but it should also focus on the changing interaction over time and the tools employed by both actors to maximize their goals. Finally, the opportunities and risks of providing support from the point of view of the principal can only be understood by developing theories incorporating the international dynamic that influences whether and in what form intervention takes place.

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Theorizing Proxy Agency

Some of the most acclaimed studies in proxy warfare explore the ways in which external states accept, address, or circumvent the problem of agency slack (Hughes 2012; Mumford 2013; Groh 2019). Agency slack refers to the risk that the agent can, once the relationship has been established, shirk its responsibilities by failing to devote optimal effort or that it can take actions that run counter to the preferences of the principal (Salehyan 2010, 502). However, we lack the same degree of attention to the proxy. While scholars readily acknowledge that local actors have agency, they usually characterize them through an external lens: as insubordinate actors that need to be controlled (Rauta 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2021). Hardly ever do we see a more direct focus on the recipients of support, their goals in seeking sponsorship, and their incentives to shirk or go against their patrons' interests. Proxies exhibit significant agency to choose their sponsors as well as decide how much they will accede to pressure from their sponsors to change their policies or behavior. San-Akca's contribution in this forum speaks directly to this.

Future research must pay more attention to the role of the proxy actors as the main object of research. Specifically, we need to know more about what proxies hope to gain out of their relationship with a sponsor. It may not always be material factors, such as aid and arms, but rather political support against other political elites, advice, prestige, or protection from other external actors. Proxies may also employ multiple strategies to manage their sponsor(s), such as threatening to seek another sponsor or threatening to collapse, altering their rhetoric or ideology, or strategically choosing to comply with some demands of the sponsor. Future work should develop a holistic picture of what the proxy and the various military and political factions within it want out of the sponsor—and from one another—and the reciprocal demands they make of the sponsor. Ultimately, proxies are not merely the pawns of external powers. They have means and strategies to reassert their autonomy.

Revising principal–agent theory

Once we recognize the agency of proxies, we must also reconsider when sponsors have more control as well as expand our conceptualization of the tools available to sponsors to reign in their proxies. Part of this argument is made here by Karlén and Rauta, starting from the common assumption that the sponsor is thought of as the principal retaining the ultimate say over support (Salehyan 2010). However, in reality, the proxy has the ability to accept or reject sponsorship (San-Akca 2016); the sponsor, on the other hand, often lacks a market of available rebel groups to choose between and will have to content itself with the actors at hand. In some cases, the proxy will *do the job* of fighting with or without the principal, who eager to gain influence in a conflict often must work with the available proxy on terms largely set by the proxy. In addition, unlike classical principal–agent theory, information asymmetries are not especially important in determining when sponsors support, and continue to support, suboptimal proxies. Sponsors often spend substantial time learning about a prospective proxy before supporting it and invest heavily in monitoring to observe the proxy's effort and performance after initiating support. As a result, supporters will often sponsor proxies with eyes wide open about their incompatible interests and continue to support proxies despite ample evidence of disagreements. In other instances, proxies and sponsors begin their relationship closer together but then drift apart, which sometimes leads to abandonment of the proxy and sometimes escalation of the sponsor's involvement. Future scholarship should then investigate the ongoing and dynamic relationship between sponsors and proxies. It should also investigate the conditions under which sponsors have more control over proxies, which may not always be the conditions of complete information and enforceable contracts like principal–agent theory suggests.

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Future work should also expand our conceptualization of the tools available to the sponsor to exert greater control over the proxy. How can sponsors manage their relationship with the proxy and induce it to pursue the sponsor's priorities? Some work has begun to address when and what kind of incentives are used, and when they are successful (Elias 2020), but more is needed in this vein. A better alternative to conceptualizing aid conditionality as the main means of management is to recognize that different types of support provide different sets of opportunities and constraints. Sponsors may rely on additional tools besides aid conditionality, such as energetic diplomacy, civilian and military advisors, and different kinds of weapons or aid. In short, the study of the reasons behind the form that external support takes and variation in the effects of assistance on proxy–sponsor cooperation represents an untapped opportunity for research, which can significantly advance our understanding of the sponsor–recipient relationship.

The international community

Appreciating that there are different relationships between sponsors and proxies draws attention to our final point. If certain forms of support ensure greater degrees of control and compliance, then why do states not always opt for these options? Key in this are constraints and opportunities provided by the international system, which should urge future work to focus on understanding the risks associated with the provision of different forms of support. Mitchell (1970) claimed that in order to understand why and how external states become involved in civil wars, analysts must explore four sets of factors: (1) within the conflict state, (2) within the external state, (3) the links between the previous two, and (4) the international system. While the first three factors have received the bulk of attention since, too little is known about the fourth. Future work should seek to understand how changes in the international system account for the complex patterns of external involvement in civil wars "in nonobvious, yet decisive ways" (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010, 427).

Existing scholarship has focused predominantly on the use of external support or proxy conflict to target international rivals. While this is important, the targets are often not directly the international rivals themselves. For instance, in 2020 the Libyan conflict hosted regional competitive dynamics that had little to do with rivalries between external states and the Libyan government, but between Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan, versus the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Communities of states coordinated their support to counter other communities of states. Yet they are more than dyadic relations—they are networks. Future work has much to gain by employing network theory to understand changing structures of the international network of states. The decision to provide external support to a rebel group targeting another state is interdependent and strategic, that is, it is conditioned on the actions and expected actions of other states, whether they occur, are expected to occur, or, even, do not occur. A network understanding of intervention and external support can shed light not only on why and how states become involved in foreign civil wars, but also on the sometimes confusing patterns of external intervention. In the future, scholars should develop theories to further understand the mechanisms driving relations between the international system and the process through which wars become internationalized.

To conclude, the work on conflict delegation that this forum surveys and to which it adds has increased our understanding of why states support non-state actors as well as begun to address the problems and management of disagreement between the external supporter and the proxy. However, future scholarship still has to tackle many important questions on delegated war. We suggest three avenues: shift focus to the proxy as an agent whose goals and strategies can significantly alter the sponsor–proxy relationship, reexamine the conditions when sponsors have more control over their proxies and disaggregate the tools that sponsors can use to achieve their

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sponsorship goals, and re-evaluate the international conditions under which support happens. Finally, all of these avenues need to be empowered by comprehensive and systematic data collection efforts that tackle the empirical blind spots identified while at the same time building and improving on existing scholarship.

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