Conflict and the Need for a Theory of Proxy Warfare

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Introduction

Environments in which powers pursue its interests through surrogates dominate contemporary conflict. To be sure, the United States' wars in the Middle East, The Philippines, and Africa through the 21st century illustrate this point. However, the idea of war-through-surrogate is not exclusive to the United States. Russia's use of intermediaries in eastern Ukraine is a high-profile example of this concept in action. Delving beyond the surface, the student of war and international relations finds Iranian proxies interwoven in almost every political and military movement in the Middle East.

That is not to say conventional conflict is over, or to argue that proxy wars are fundamentally guerrilla-driven insurgencies. To be sure, the conventional character and destruction of the campaigns to defeat the Islamic State, highlighted by the leveling of cities like Ramadi and Mosul in Iraq, Raqqa, and Aleppo in Syria, or Marawi in the Philippines, demonstrates that land armies are willing and able to stand and fight to further their military and political ends. Shifting to Ukraine's Donets River Basin, one finds Russian proxies and regular forces meeting in battle in ways similar to those found in the Second World War.

Understanding that proxy war is not unique to one method of warfighting, but instead possess its own nuance, it is instructive to note that the United States lacks a coherent theory of war or related doctrine to support proxy war. The United States Army, the service charged with leading the Department of Defense's land wars, is all but absent any mention of proxy wars, proxies, or the use of intermediaries.[1] Further, the American joint doctrine fails account for proxy war, as noted by the absence of any reference to proxy environments, proxy wars, or proxy forces within *Joint Publication 3-0, Operations*.[2] This is problematic given the dominance of proxy wars in contemporary conflict.

The United States Department of Defense sidesteps proxy reality and repackages the concept of operating through intermediaries in an idea known as *by, with, and through* and *security force assistance*. In addition to publishing a new security force assistance manual, United States Army General Joseph Votel, and United States Army Colonel Eero Keravuori, recently advocated that by, with, and through approach is the solution to

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operating in environments in which the United States operates through surrogates.[3]

Votel and Keravuori posit that United States Central Command's 'by, with, and through' technique is useful in pursuing American interesting in Central Command's area of responsibility and as a result, "The U.S. military must organize, resource, and train the joint force to operate by, with, and through with greater efficiency and effectiveness with various types of partners and whole-of-government involvement."[4] Further, they contend that the 'by, with, and through' approach will become increasingly useful on a global scale. Therefore, they recommend the adoption of a 'by, with, and through' approach as the standing operational approach and that the joint force develop an associated doctrine to support of this concept.[5]

Votel and Keravuori's argument is useful is starting the discussion environments in which a dominate partner works through an intermediary. It is useful because it reflects current narratives regarding proxy environments. Nevertheless, several problems exist with Votel and Keravuori's advocacy for the 'by, with, and through' approach. First, they provide a solution without defining the problem they are attempting to solve. If one can make their way through euphemism of phrases like 'by, with, and through' and security force assistance, they will see that the problem is that of proxy environments, or environments in which one actor works with or through another actor to achieve its self-interest or national security objectives.

Second, they suggest that the character of 'by, with, and through' is universal and should, therefore, serve as the foundation for a joint force doctrine when operating through intermediaries. Specifically, Votel and Keravuori state that, "To capitalize on this approach, the joint force must deliberately engage in developing doctrine for partnering, resourcing, organizing, educating, training, and transitioning in a 'by, with, and through' operational approach."[6] The problem with this argument is that it fails to address the uniqueness of proxy environments it relates to the relationship between partners. The argument also falls short because proxy environments have discrete nuance and therefore are not universally transferable. To be sure, Central Command's proxy situation is not the same as those found in other theaters. U.S. European Command,

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U.S. Africa Command, and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command are addressing proxy conflicts that are distinct from those facing U.S. Central Command. As a result, a Central Command-specific approach, such as by, with, and through, are illogical. Further, operating through intermediaries is not unique to the American perspective, and an approach that focuses on American predilections at the expense of proxy truths, is short-sided and results in environment blind spots.

Third, the 'by, with, and through' approach has not provided tangible victory beyond the tactical level. While the United States and the Iraqi Security Forces were able to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq physically, strategic and political victory slipped away during the summer of 2018. Furthermore, none of the United States military's recent or on-going proxy conflicts, such as Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom, has concluded on terms favorable to the United States.

The thrust of this work is to clarify the problems found within Votel and Keravuori's argument. In doing so, this essay looks to push beyond euphemistic and misleading phraseology and instead speak plainly about proxy warfare. When framing the proxy conflict, the illumination of three distinct features is apparent. The first feature that dominates proxy conflicts is that of principal-agent problems. Second is the role of power in proxy relationships. The third and final feature is the dominant role of time in proxy conflict. These features drive two distinct models of proxy environments – a transactional and exploitative model. This essay then concludes by providing a set of principles, deduced from the aforementioned analysis, to set the foundation for a general theory of proxy warfare. This general theory of proxy warfare should serve as the basis for a proxy warfare doctrine.

A Deeper Examination of the Problems with the By, With, and Through Approach

The first problem with the 'by, with, and through' approach articulated by Votel and Keravouri is that it is a solution looking for a problem. The closest Votel and Keravouri come to stating a problem is in suggesting that, "Regional conflicts can arise when…actors do not have the capacity and resources to resolve their conflicts locally, potentially putting U.S. interests in the region at risk."[7] This statement, and the remainder of their

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argument, provides almost no context to support their argument for why the BWT approach. This begs the question, what is the problem Central Command is attempting to solve?

The military problems plaguing Central Command are manifold. From countering the Islamic State across the area of responsibility to keeping the Taliban at bay in Afghanistan, the problems span the geographic expanse of the area of responsibility. The United States Government and Department of Defense, in most cases, have resolved to face those challenges through a limited liability approach, meaning that instead of putting United States military personnel at the front of these fights, they elect to operate through proxies. In addition, this—proxy environments and proxy warfare—is the problem not articulated in Votel and Keravuori's argument. While course and distasteful, it is worth being forthright about those concepts because they dominate contemporary war and are at the heart of what 'by, with, and through' attempts to address.

American strategic theorist, Everett Dolman, contends that if one only communicates in the language of the system they inextricably bound by that system's rules.[8] In the case of the United States military, being unwilling to speak openly about proxy environments and proxy warfare, and instead speaking through its approved euphemisms, has created a situation in which the United States military has no unifying theory or doctrine for the environment in which it most often finds itself. Similarly, a recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in which they state that, "The United States lacks a common government-wide policy or doctrinal definition for characterizing different security partnerships in implementing a "by, with, and through" approach."[9] But again, the manner in which the United States military speaks about proxy warfare, using phrases such *as security force assistance, working through partners, and working by, with, and through*, is good for softening the coarseness of proxy warfare's reality, but it does little to illuminate the concept.

Additionally, the 'by, with, and through' approach fails to advance a war-winning technique. While definitions of victory are dubious, British military theorist, B. H. Liddell Hart offers that, "The object in war is to attain a better peace—even if only from your own point of view. Hence it is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire."[10]

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Prussian general and military theorist Colmar von der Goltz reinforces this position in writing that, "After shattering the hostile main army, we, therefore, still have the coercion of a peace as a special, and, under certain more circumstances, more difficult, task to consider, the solution of which should, however, have been carefully weighed before deciding upon war."[11] Goltz reminds the practitioner of war that tactical victory, such as Operation Inherent Resolve's battle of Mosul, are hollow victories if we fail to secure the peace or if we fail to link the those tactical victories to the maintenance of our strategic objectives. Moreover, in the case of proxy environments, the pursuit of one's strategic ends has to be sensitive and responsive to both oneself, and to the proxy force's government, especially in transactional relationships.

To be sure, the Votel and Kervouri provide ample tactical examples that illustrate the utility of the 'by, with, and through' approach allowing the United States military to operate through and alongside proxies, but to date, the concept has failed to deliver tangible victory—a better peace—at the operational or strategic level.[12] Of its recent proxy campaigns, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq, have terminated; however, strategic victory slipped away following each operation due to the inability to effective manipulate the proxy environment.

Defining the Shape of Proxy Environments and Proxy Relationships

If one accepts that 'by, with, and through' is just a euphemism for proxy warfare, which forms the basis of this essay's argument, then it naturally follows that proxy environments must be explained in detail. In order to comprehend proxy environments, it is imperative to understand that Central Command's version of proxy warfare is not universal, nor is proxy warfare something uniquely American. Therefore, it follows that proxy warfare is:

a) A form of warfare that possesses nuance
b) That its nuance is relative to the geographic theater
c) That its nuance is relative to the principal force in the proxy relationship

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d) That its nuance is relative to the proxy, or agent, in the proxy relationship.[13]

Before moving on it is important to highlight a few other points and to offer a definition of proxy environments and proxy warfare. First, varying degrees of proxy warfare exist.[14] This is a valid argument; however, as will be described later, this can be better understood with two models of proxy warfare. Second, proxy warfare and coalition warfare share similar characteristics, if not overlap a bit, especially as one moves away from the exploitative end of the proxy warfare spectrum. This is where a definition for the concepts becomes useful.

For the purpose of this essay, a proxy environment is defined as an environment characterized by two or more actors working towards a common objective; the relationship between the two actors is hierarchical and the principal actor is working by, with, and through another actor (an agent, or proxy) to accomplish its objective. By default, the principal's objective becomes the agent's objective. Proxy warfare, on the other hand, is the associated theory of action for proxy environments. Proxy warfare is the physical manifestation of a dominant actor, or the principal, operating by, with, and through a non-dominant actor (the agent, or proxy) against an adversary to achieve the dominant actors' military objectives.

Relationships between parties are either tight or loosely-coupled. The relationship's tight or loose-coupling results from its environmental and internal conditions. A tight-coupled relationship is one in which both parties have many variables in common or the variables they have in common are strong. In tight-coupled relationships bond between actors is strong and the non-dominant actor is highly responsive to the dominant actor. Conversely, in loose-coupled relationships the bond is weak because either the actors have few variables in common or those that are in common and are weakly aligned.[15] A quick scan of a few current proxy environment demonstrates this supposition.[16]

Russia has long been one of the leaders of proxy warfare. British military historian John Keegan notes that the Romanov dynasty, which ruled Russia from the seventeenth century until the Russian Revolution of 1917, recurrently solicited the Cossacks to serve as its proxy and to augment its own combat power.[17] Similarly, Russia dominates modern proxy hotspots

by achieving access and influence with pliable local nationals, mercenaries, and foreign nationals sympathetic to its cause. Various forms of Russian proxies exist throughout Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region, but two of the most interesting examples of Russian proxies endure in the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine's Donets Basin and in Syria.[18]

In Ukraine's Donets Basin, Russian proxies have been doing Russian bidding since the spring of 2014. The proxies, manifest as Russian-aligned Ukrainian separatists, carved out a foothold in eastern Ukraine, and have maintained quasi-independence from the government in Kyiv courtesy of Moscow's support. While direct Russian military involvement in the conflict is well known, recent reports suggest that Russian generals are at the top of its proxy army.[19] Along the way, Russian forces, both proxy and its own military, have killed over 10,000 Ukrainians in the Donets Basin and wounded an additional 24,000.[20]

In Syria, Russia has a friend in President Bashar Al-Assad. Russia, to bolster Assad, leverages Syrian proxies, private military companies, and Chechen client forces, in coordination with its own armed forces. Further, Russia practices strategic and operational ju-jitsu by using the Syrian civil war and the mission to defeat the Islamic State in the Levant against the involved parties, while offering to mediate the chaos they create. General Votel has spoken about Russia's approach, stating that in Syria and the Central Command area of responsibility, Russia plays both the arsonist and the fireman.[21]

As mentioned previously, the U.S. military makes frequent use of proxy forces. See Table 1. Operation Inherent Resolve is perhaps the most obvious example of American proxy warfare in which United States forces, in conjunction with coalition members, fought through Iraqi and Kurdish intermediaries to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq militarily. Currently, United States forces are still working to do the same in Syria, albeit with a different proxy force.

Operation Inherent Resolve is not the only example of American forces engaged in proxy environments. The United States employed proxies to defeat the Islamic State in The Philippines militarily, as the battle of Marawi illustrates.[22] In Saudi Arabia, American forces are working through proxies to assisting the Saudis against the Houthi rebels.[23]

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Afghanistan, the United States Army's longest running proxy hotspot, has seen both direct combat and war through proxy since 2001. Most recently, the United States Army deployed its first security forces assistance brigade to spearhead its proxy war against the Taliban and other enemies in the region. Meanwhile, in Africa, the United States reportedly has over 5,000 soldiers leveraging local proxies to counter Islamic State expansion on the continent.[24]

Table 1: Known United States Proxy Wars, 2001-Present				
Principal	**Proxy**	**Conflict**	**Theater**	**Date**
United States	Afghan Defense Forces	Operation Enduring Freedom / Resolute Support	Afghanistan	October 2001-present
United States	Iraqi Security Forces	Operation Iraqi Freedom / New Dawn	Iraq	March 2003-December 2011
United States	Iraqi Security Forces	Operation Inherent Resolve	Iraq	October 2014-May 2018
United States	Syrian Democratic Forces	Operation Inherent Resolve	Syria	October 2014-present
United States	Filipino Defense Forces	Counter-Islamic State Campaign	The Philippines	Fall 2016-present
United States	Saudi Arabian Defense Forces	Operation Yukon Journey	Saudi Arabia, Yemen	Unknown-present
United States	Multiple African defense forces	Counter Islamic State Campaign	Africa	Unknown-present
Note: The researcher reviewed all data listed in this table. All sources are found in the footnotes and come from open-source information sources.				

Source: Author.

Given the diversity of proxy environments, developing a general theory of proxy environments logically follows. This theory must then form the basis for a doctrine for proxy warfare. Both the theory of proxy environments and doctrine of proxy warfare must be rooted current and historic examples, such as those from the preceding paragraphs. Further, the theory and doctrine cannot gravitate around an American-centric point of view, but rather, from a position that explains the uncolored character of each.

With that in mind and given the cursory discussion on proxy environments in the previous paragraphs, a handful of axioms on proxy environments illuminate themselves. At the most rudimentary level, the following tenets bound proxy environments:

- All proxy environments are driven by political interest; this forms the basis for military partnership and aligned military objectives;
- Proxy environments are based on a relationship between a principal and a proxy, or agent;
- Proxy relationships are transactional or exploitative;
- Proxy relationships, being either transaction or exploitative, have a limited duration;
- Not all political, strategic, and operational decisions come with a noticeable or overt change at the tactical level;
- Battles won accelerates divergence, while battles lost weaken the principal-agent relationship;
- Proxy hot spots are not unique to one type of warfare, but exist anywhere along the war's continuum;
- The base of power within a proxy (principal-agent) relationship can shift if:
    - The proxy grows strong enough stand on its own,
    - The proxy gains or mobilizes power from actors that are not the principal partner,
    - The proxy accomplished the goals that brought it in line with the principal

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These axioms, or bookends to proxy environments, provide a point of departure in which to extrapolate a theory of proxy environments further.

Expanding Existing Models: The Components of Proxy Environments

British historian, theorist, and soldier, J.F.C. Fuller offers astute advice in the argument for rigor in developing doctrine. Fuller posits that, "Method creates doctrine, and a common doctrine is the cement which holds an army together. Though mud is better than no cement, we want the best cement, and we shall never get it unless we can analyze war scientifically and discover its values."[25] With that point in mind, the following section seeks to develop the 'science,' or theoretical underpinning, that Fuller suggests is so important to developing a solid doctrine. This section, which builds upon the previous noted axioms, seeks to build a general theory of proxy environments through exposing the components of proxy environments—the impact of time, fallacy of limited liability, and the principal-agent problem.

Time: The Governing Condition of War

Given proxy warfare's character, driven by shifting political winds; it is fair to argue that a running clock dominates proxy environments. American military theorist, Robert Leonhard, argues that the inability to manipulate time effectively, above all else, is what most plagues commanders.[26] More to the point, Leonhard asserts that, "Military conflict—whether in wars, campaigns, or battles—seeks to summon that failure (or delay it) and is therefore, when reduced to its fundamentals, a contest for time."[27] Perhaps more appropriately, J.F.C. Fuller contends that, "Superiority of time is so important a factor in war that it frequently becomes the governing condition."[28] Time, being a salient component of proxy warfare, warrants further analysis.

Time operates at varying rates across the levels of war, as well as across the social and political spectrum. Furthermore, time varies based upon a society's level of involvement in a specified conflict. For instance, the Iraqi social and political clock, as it related to the defeat of the Islamic State, moved much quicker than did the social and political clock in the United States. As a result, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi was quick to declare victory

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over the Islamic State and shifted his messaging to U.S. troop reductions following his pronouncement of victory in December 2017.[29]

Further, social, and political clocks operate quicker than does a military's clock. Military commanders tend to press for more time, while societies and political leaders urge the military to conclude military activity, as recent U.S. political-military discussions on Syria illustrate.[30] In proxy environments, military commanders need to appreciate that they must balance the time on all these clocks.

More importantly, leaders in proxy environments must focus on the the social and political appetites of their proxy because as Thucydides reminds the student of war, actors wage war out of fear, honor, or self-interest.[31] When the proxy aligned with the principal—because its interests have shifted, it no longer feels threatened or dishonored to the degree that its needs external support—it will seek to distance itself from the principal. However, failure to see that and accept that these relationships, by their transactional or exploitative character, have a finite duration can result in the principal-agent relationship turning foul. See Figure 1, Time's Effect on Proxy Relationships. The May 2018 national elections in Iraq provide an instructive example of this argument.

Figure 1: Time's Effect on Proxy Relationships
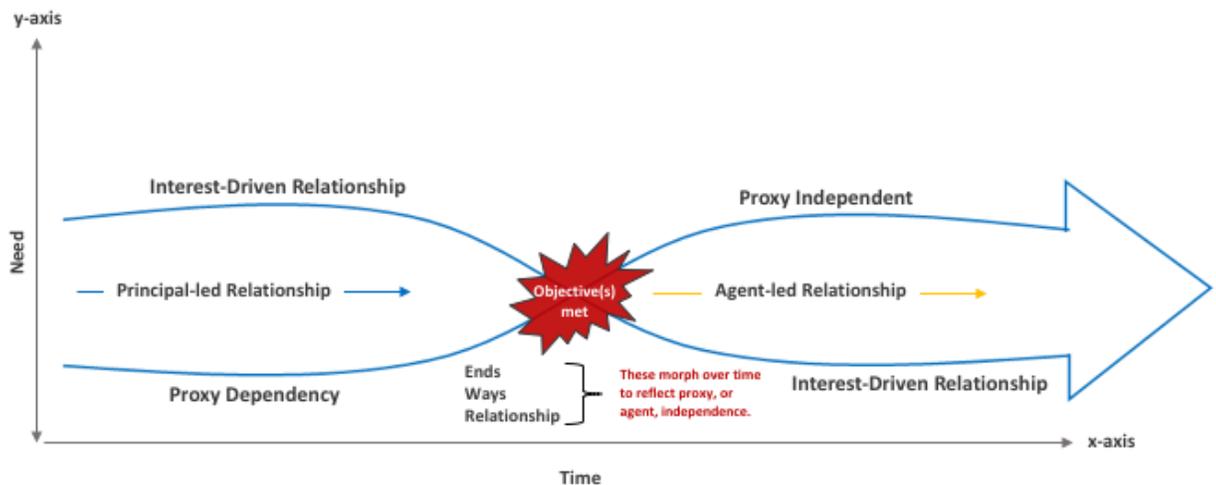
Source: Author.

The success of Shia nationalist, Muqtada al-Sadr, at the expense of Prime Minister Abadi, in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections is perhaps representative of the role time plays in proxy environments. Prior to the

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election Abadi led the defeat of the Islamic State, stymied Kurdish independence, and held the country together when it was teetering on collapse. However, Abadi and his government were unable to force the United States to reduce its presence in the country following that series of success. Causality being difficult to discern, the Iraqi electorate turned out to support Sadr's pro-Iraqi, Shia nationalist platform in the election, resulting with Abadi and his bloc coming in third place.[32] The strategic effect of the election is still unclear, but it is decidedly easy to forecast a dramatic change in the relationship between the two countries.[33]

The Limited Liability Fallacy and the Increasing Use of the Siege

Another misconception about proxy warfare is that it is an economy of force mission that results in a limited liability approach to warfare. Votel and Keravouri articulate as much in stating, "By, with, and through is a way of conducting military activities and operations with less direct combat employment of U.S. forces."[34] While the economy of force is true to varying degrees, the limited liability aspect is short-sided and disingenuous.

Modern proxy conflict is dominated by death and destruction; however, it just so happens that the death and destruction affect the proxy to almost an equal degree as that of the enemy. More to the point, in recent year's proxy warfare has resulted a drastic increase in the number, duration, and lethality of sieges across the globe.[35] Sieges, like those in Mosul and Marawi, from an American perspective, or Donetsk airport and Debal'tseve from a Russian perspective, illustrate the close bond between fighting through proxies and the increased risk for the principal's proxy. The resultant effect is that the character of proxy warfare increases the cost and risk for the proxy force and its government, therefore creating the conditions that can accelerate divergence in the relationship between the partners.

The Principal-Agent Problem: The Root of Transactional and Exploitative Relationships

The principal-agent problem is essential in proxy environments. Organizational theorist, Kathleen Eisenhardt, argues that principal-agent problems arise in situations "In which one party (the principal) delegates work to another (the agent) who performs that work."[36] Further, Eisenhardt states that two primary problems arise in this dynamic – 1) the problem of agency and 2) the problem of risk sharing.[37] Eisenhardt defines the agency problem as a situation that occurs when, "The desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict," while she defines the problem of risk sharing as a situation that arises when the principal and agent possess dissimilar prerogatives towards risk, resulting in divergent action as contact with risk continues.[38] However, the problem of agency and risk sharing is not new. Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz highlighted this concept two hundred years ago in writing that, "One country may support another's cause, but will never take it as serious as it takes its own."[39]

The American military tends to see the proxy, or agent, possessing limitless will to work with its forces. In most cases, it fails to see that cooperation is fleeting because as the agent becomes more capable or as other actors are able to identify vulnerabilities and manipulate those to their own end, the agent becomes gradually less interested in working with the principal. To put it differently, as time progresses and objectives are accomplished, each parties' self-interest begins to supplant the objectives and end states that brought the principal and agent together in the first place. See Figure 2, Principal-Agent Problem. Operation Inherent Resolve provides an instructive model in support of the principal-agent problem.

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Figure 2: Principal-Agent Problems
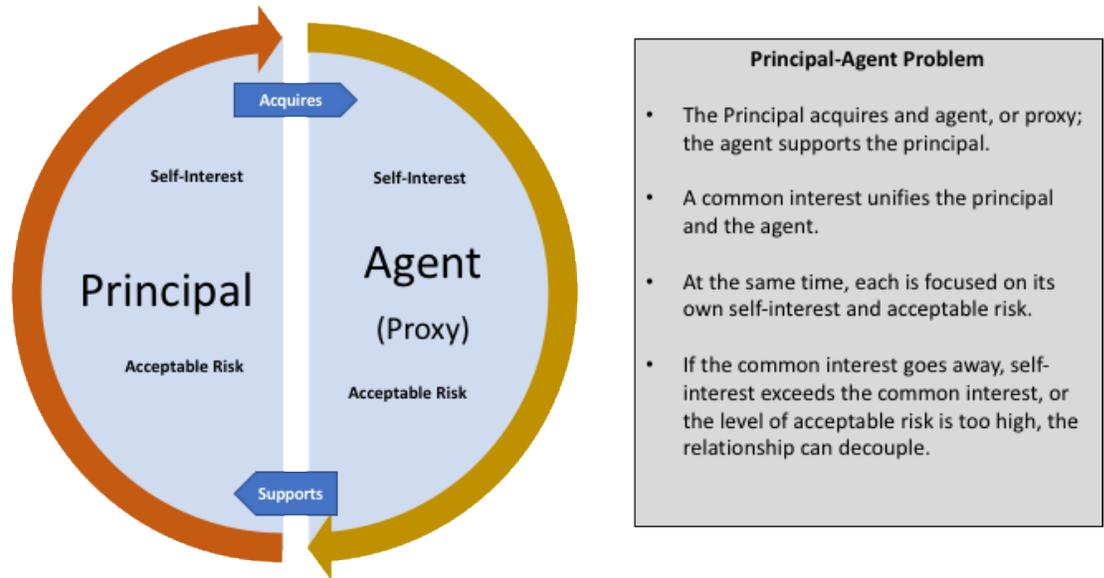
Source: Author

Following Operation Inherent Resolve's devastating battle of Mosul, a several tactical objectives remained. These objectives included defeating residual Islamic State forces in Tal A'far, Hawijah, and along Iraq's Euphrates River Valley, from Fallujah to the Syrian border.[40] Given the 2,000 Islamic State fighters estimated to be in Tal A'far, the battle of Mosul's savagery and devastation served as the template for the remaining battles.[41]

The Iraqi Security Forces (the agent) and the American-led coalition (the principal) commenced hostilities against the Islamic State in Tal A'far on August 19, 2017, but Islamic State resistance did not fully materialize and the battle ended within eight days.[42] Casualties on both sides were relatively low, especially when contrasted with those from Mosul. Prime Minister Abadi, as well as many leaders within the Iraqi Security Forces, appeared to have taken two major points from this time. First, the battle of Mosul had a decisive effect on the Islamic State. The organization's military wing within Iraq was physically defeated, leaving little force for the Islamic State's political wing to continue large-scale combat operations.

Two, Mosul had hardened the Iraqi Security Forces and increased its steadfastness. These two effects resulted in the government of Iraq and the Iraqi Security Forces (the agent) losing interest in maintaining pressure on the Islamic State. In effect, the success of Mosul and Tal A'Far accelerated the divergence between raison d'être and the agent's self-interest.

With the threat of the Islamic State marginalized, and the Iraqi Security Forces self-confident, the government of Iraq reoriented on the Kurds. In September 2017, Iraqi Kurdistan, led by Marzoud Barzani, voted for independence from Iraq. Prime Minister Abadi, unwilling to accept Kurdish independence, launched an offensive in mid-October 2017 to thwart the movement.[43] Sidestepping his coalition partners, Abadi's Kurdish operation was unilateral and a clear signal of divergence between the principal and the agent in Iraq.

In Syria, another example of the principal-agent problem exists, although this one finds the United States as the principal and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces as the agent. Turkey, upset with growing Kurdish strength in Syria, accelerated pressure on the Syrian Kurds by attacking Kurdish territory along the Turkey-Syria border. This weakened the strategic bond between the principal (the United States) and the agent (the Syrian Democratic Forces) because the risk to the Kurdish people in northern Syria and the loss of their traditional territory was of higher concern to the Syrian Kurds than maintaining pressure on the Islamic State in Syria's eastern desert. As a result, the Syrian Democratic Forces temporarily broke contact with the American-led coalition to defend its people and territory in Afrin and other areas of northern Syria, which drove a two-month operational pause in the counter-Islamic State mission in Syria during the spring of 2018.[44] A similar situation occurred in the fall of 2018, resulting in another operational pause in the campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Syria.[45]

Operation Inherent Resolve provides two examples of the principal-agent problem, but the problem exists anywhere proxy warfare is conducted. As long as one actor seeks to work through another actor, problems of agency and risk will always exist. The components of proxy environments described above form the basis for understanding two theoretical models of proxy warfare: The Exploitative Model and the Transactional Model.

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The Role of Power in Proxy Warfare

Power—its principles, components, and influence—lies just below time and principal-agent problems in understanding proxy warfare. Historian Sir Michael Howard offers that, "Power, to the statesman, is…that capacity to control their environment on which the independent existence of their states and often the cultural values of their societies depend."[46] Moving to a more practical level, political scientist Robert Dahl, provides a useful model for understanding the discreteness of power.

Robert Dahl argues that power exists in a relationship between two or more actors; that, "*A* has power over *B* to the extent the he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do."[47] Dahl continues, stating that power is not self-perpetuating, but that in most cases it has a base. The base of power consists of all the resources from which an actor draws to affect the behavior of another actor. Dahl posits that the base of power is a similar to potential energy in that it requires activation to generate its desired effect. Dahl states thatto manipulatingone's base of power effectively is the primary means for maintaining power over another actor.[48] Dahl notes that a delay exists between *A*'s exertion of power and *B*'s ability to react. This delay, which Dahl refers to as "lag," represents the processing and action time associated with *A*'s power and *B*'s ability and willingness to be overpowered.[49] Lag influences proxy environments because if often hides or distorts an actor's true intention. This creates dissonance for actors, across the levels of war, as they attempt to maintain power and influence within their relationship. See Figure 3: Graphical Representation of Lag.
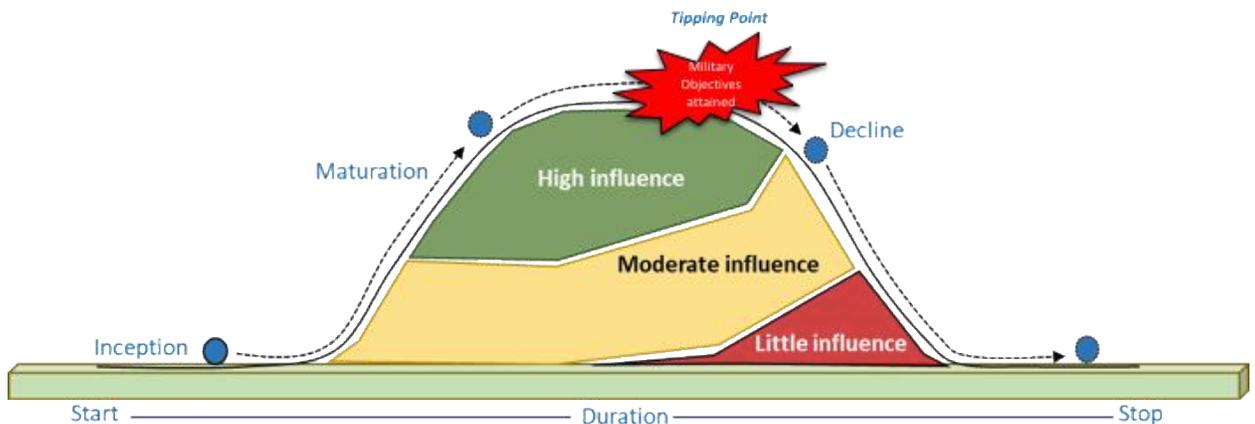
Figure 3: Graphical Representation of Lag
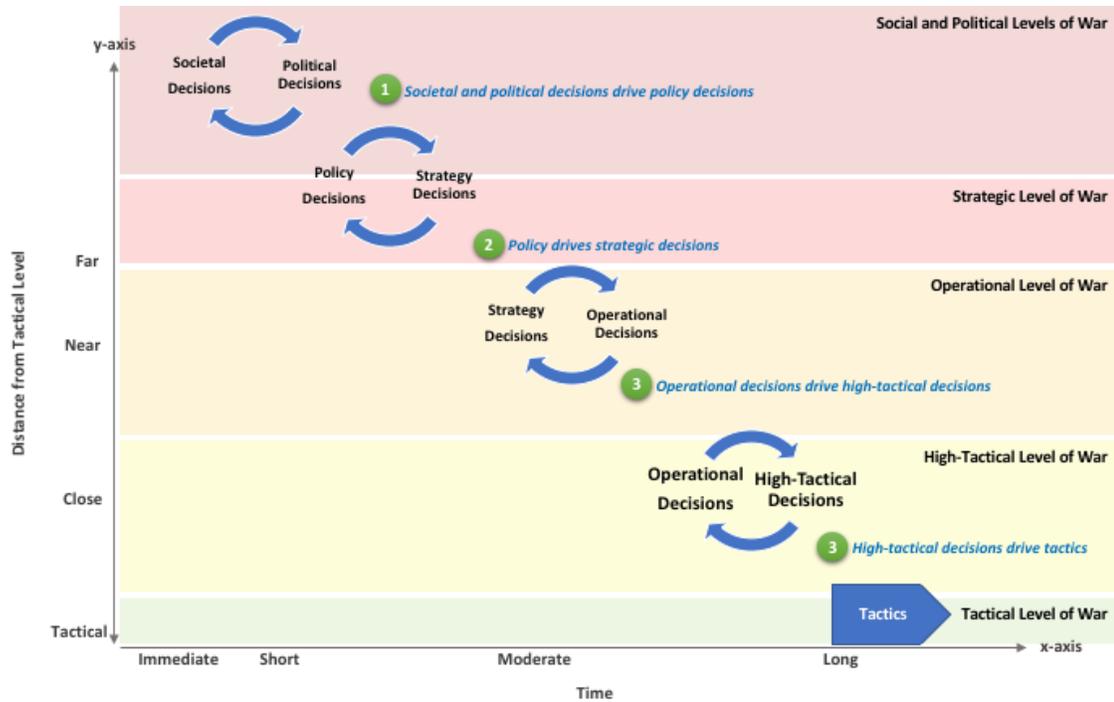
Source: Author

Equally important, Dahl argues that a relationship between two actors must exist, otherwise there is no vehicle to enact power.[50] See Figure 4: Wave of Influence in Proxy Relationships.

**Figure 4: Wave of Influence in Proxy Relationships**

Source: Author

These relationships are not static but morph as conditions change, time passes, and other actors enter or depart a given situation. This idea, that associations change, thus increasing or decreasing one's relative power, is

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a central tenet in proxy warfare. However, this idea is often overlooked in applied relationships—when *A*, guided by its own interests, attempts to maintain power and influence over *B*—like those found in proxy wars. See Figure 5*:* Wave of Influence in Adversarial Context.

Figure 5: Wave of Influence in an Adversarial Context
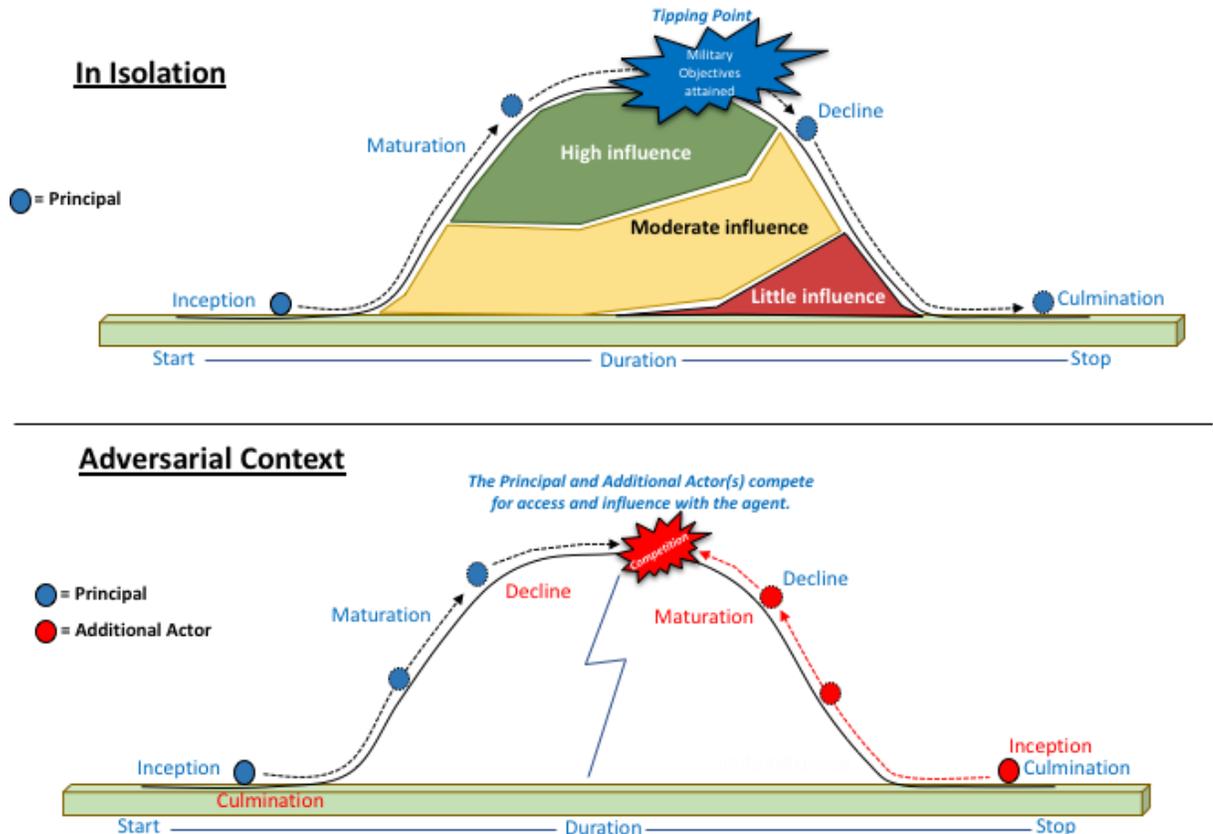
Source: Author

Tying Dahl's theory of power to the principal-agent problem, one can argue that Dahl's A equates to the principal, while B is the agent. Therefore, the principal possesses power of the proxy, or agent, insofar as it can make it do something it would not otherwise do. Dahl's principles of power forms the basis for understanding two theoretical models of proxy warfare—the Exploitative Model and the Transactional Model.

Theories of Proxy Warfare

Theories serve to set the course for doctrine. Harkening back to Clausewitz, we find that,

> The primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled. Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply and expect the read to share one's view.[51]

In the spirit of Clausewitz's musing, and viewed in relation to components of proxy environments depicted above, two models of proxy warfare come to the fore. These models represent the idea of 'varying degrees of proxy warfare' in a tangible way that makes the idea useful for the practitioner of war.

The Exploitative Model: Principal Leads, Agent Follows

Two similar, yet distinct models characterize proxy environments: The Exploitative Model and the Transactional Model. From the outside, these models look quite similar, but their inner-workings differ. A proxy force being completely dependent on its principal for survival characterizes the Exploitative Model; the relationship could almost be viewed as one between a parasite and a host. The principal provides the lifeblood for the parasitic proxy to survive. This dependency creates a strong bond between the proxy and the partner, resulting in the partner possessing almost unlimited power and influence over the proxy.

Further, the Exploitative Model is usually the result of a stronger actor looking for a tool—a proxy force—to pursue an objective. As a result, the proxy is only as useful to the principal as is its ability to make progress towards the principal's ends. This results in a temporal relationship between the principal and the agent. Once the principal's ends have been achieved, or the proxy is unable to maintain momentum towards the principal's ends then the principal discontinues the relationship or distances itself from the proxy. See Figure 6, The Exploitative Model of Proxy Warfare.

Figure 6: The Exploitative Model of Proxy Warfare

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Exploitative Model: Principal Leads, Agent Follows
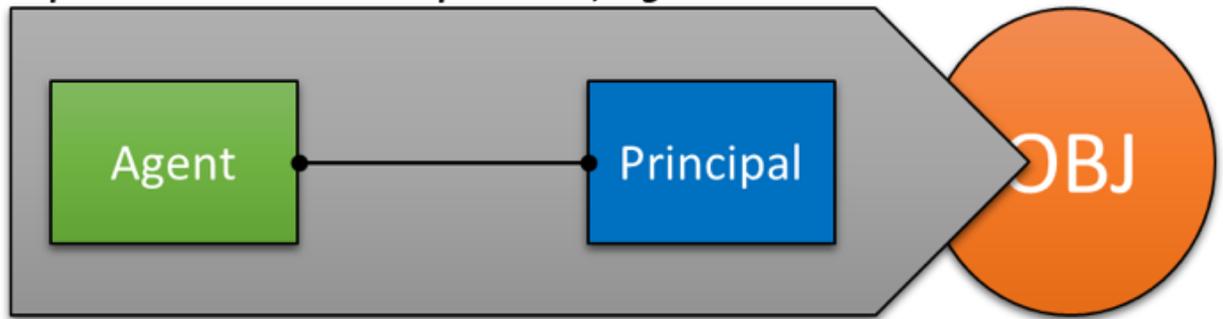
Source: Author

Europe provides one of the best contemporary examples of this model, embodied in the relationship between Russia and the separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region. The existence of the Russian-leaning separatists, the funding and materiel backing of its army, and its pseudo-political status are all Russian foundations.

The Middle East also provides several examples of the Exploitative Model. Perhaps the two most noticeable examples are the U.S. military's ongoing relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Iraqi Security Forces throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Syrian Democratic Forces are a creation of the United States military and their status as an American partner will likely only last as long as they are able to maintain pressure on the Islamic State in Syria. Similarly, the Iraqi Security Forces, rebuilt from the ashes of Saddam Hussein's army after Paul Bremer's dismissal of the Iraqi Army in May 2003, was the United States' intermediary in combating al Qaeda, Shia militia groups, Iranian proxies, and other adversaries in Iraq until policy changes formally ended the principal-agent relationship in December 2011.

In each case, the agent is vitally dependent on its principal. However, success can cause the power relationship to change between the partners. A successful proxy force can generate enough legitimacy or support that it grows powerful enough to need backing from its partner. Similarly, the political apparatus the proxy supports can gain sufficient power and legitimacy that it elects to no longer serve as an agent, as the Iraqi Security Forces' independence following the United States' departure in December 2011 highlights. See Figure 7, Proxy Success and the Evolution of Partnered Relationships. If, through battlefield success, political

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wrangling, or other actors seeking to undermine the existing principal, the proxy can also find itself in the second model, the Transactional Model.

**Figure 7: Proxy Success and the Evolution of Partnered Relationships**
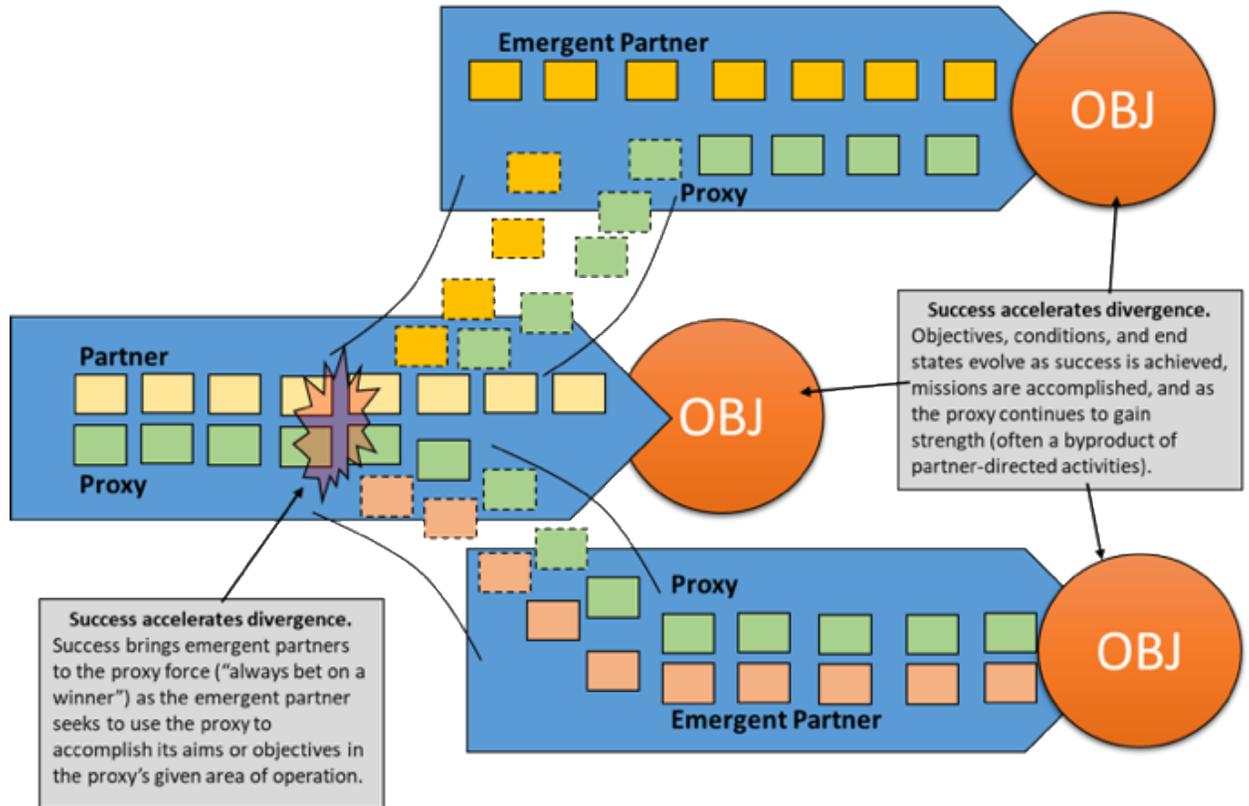
Source: Author

The Transactional Model: Agent Leads, Principal Follows

The Transactional Model is proxy warfare's second model. Again, Clausewitz provides the foundation for understanding this model, as he writes, "But even when both states are in earnest about making war upon the third, they do not always say, "we must treat this country as our common enemy and destroy it, or we shall be destroyed ourselves." Far from it: The affair is more often like a business deal."[52] The point being that an exchange of services and goods that benefits all parties—defeat of a mutual threat, training of the agent's force, foreign military sales and finance—is at the heart of the Transactional Model. See Figure 8, The Transactional Model of Proxy Warfare.

Figure 8: The Transactional Model of Proxy Warfare

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Transactional Model: Agent Leads, Principal Follows
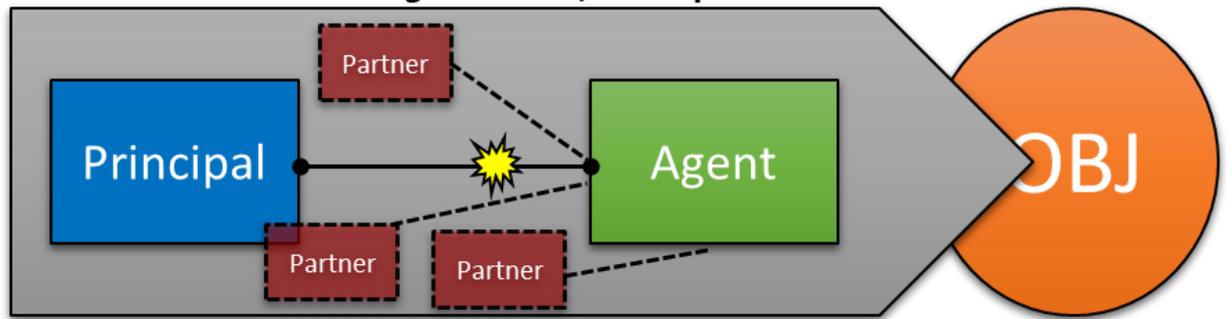
Source: Author

Yet, this model is a paradox because the proxy is the powerbroker in the relationship. In many cases, the proxy government is independent but looking for assistance in defeating an adversary; it is not interested in political or military subjugation by the principal. Moreover, the proxy possesses the power in the relationship because its association with the principal is wholly transactional. Given the transactional character of the relationship, the clock starts ticking on the duration of the bond when the first shot fired. . As a result, the agent's interest in the principal recedes at a comparable rate to the attainment of the two actors' common goal. The government of Iraq's 2014 request for American and coalition assistance to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq is an example of this dynamic.

A mental picture to support this model is to view the proxy in the lead, while the partner follows and supports the proxy. Unlike the Exploitative Model, this model sees the proxy force's government request support from other nation(s) to defeat a given threat. In doing so, the proxy force's government places parameters on the partner, to include such things as force caps, a unambiguous mission, and time lines. The proxy issues parameters to align the principal with its own political and military objectives. Additionally, the proxy constrains the principal in order to limit the ability to influence the proxy beyond the defined parameters of the affiliation. It is also important to note the fact that the proxy has fixed political and social interest in the principal; it is likely that the proxy will look to end its dependency on the principal upon the attainment of its goals.

At the same time, the Transactional Model is extremely vulnerable to external influence. The Transactional Model is vulnerable because the proxy's commitment to the principal is based self-interest more than survival, meaning it can divorce itself from the principal whenever it no longer profits from the relationship. This provides advantage for adroit actors seeking to drive a wedge into a principal-agent relationship. Russia and China's activity in Iraq provides an instructive example of this dynamic. See Figure 6, Wave of Influence in an Adversarial Context. Seeking to weaken the America-Iraqi bond, both have managed to wedge themselves into the foreign military sales and foreign military finance realm, which was the bulwark of American political and military strategy in Iraq.[53] In doing so, both Russia and China have managed to gain strategic access, influence, and tactical in-roads across the country. Similarly, clever external actors will undercut the principal by providing support with fewer caveats on the support they provide the agent in order to exploit gaps in the principal's policy and relationship strategy, and thus cleave away the principal.

It is critical to understand the model in which one is operating. Hubris, inattentiveness, or naivety in the Transactional Model can result in the decoupling of the principal and the agent. An assessments program and an exit plan are important when operating within the Transactional Model. The assessments program allows the principal to see itself in relation to its agent and determine where it sits in relation to the culmination point of its relationship with the agent. The exit plan is simply that – the plan to conclude the relationship and move forward on favorable terms. Failure to have an assessment program and exit plan can result in the agent bilking the principal, or the principal ruining the long-term political relationship between the two. This exploitation can come in the form of requests for monetary assistance, feigning bureaucratic incompetence to outsource its bureaucratic requirements to the principal, and a number of other ways.

Conclusion

The point of this essay has been to provide a professional critique against the argument for the utility of the 'by, with, and through' approach. This essay has argued that the 'by, with, and through' approach has yielded limited tactical and operational success, but it has not generated tangible strategic victory in any of the recent conflicts. Further, and more

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importantly, the 'by, with, and through' approach is a euphemism for proxy warfare. By speaking euphemistically about proxy environments, the United States military undercuts its own understanding of how to succeed in those environments. As such, the United States military and the defense industry must change its attitude towards proxy warfare and speak openly about those types of conflict. Doing so will generate improved results as leaders at all levels better understand the linkage between tactical action and political objectives, but also, the paradoxes that dominate proxy environments.

Moreover, commonalities dominate proxy environments. These commonalities enable the student of war to frame proxy environments. These commonalities result in a series of axioms that bracket proxy warfare. Principal-agent problems, the limited liability fallacy, and the domineering character of time command proxy environments. These characteristics result in two models of proxy warfare, the Exploitative Model and the Transactional Model. These models yield a handful of principles of proxy warfare, which viewed in conjunction with the models of proxy warfare, should serve as the basis for a proxy warfare doctrine.

A number of proxy warfare principles emerge from the discussion thus far. These principles, while not all-inclusive, should serve as the starting point for articulating a universal proxy warfare doctrine. The proposed principles of proxy warfare are:

- Principals, agents, and actors will act in a manner aligned with their respective political objectives;
- Proxy relationships will expire; therefore, it is important to identify one's own termination criteria and transition plan;
- Because of the lag between the tactical level and higher echelons, one should take tactical feedback as not wholly representative of operational, strategic, and political direction;
- A principal's continued presence beyond the end of the principal-agent relationship can cause the agent's political, social, and military entities to turn against its former partner;
- It is better to face one opponent than it is two; therefore, opponents will attempt to dislocate principal-agent relationships;
- Savvy opponents will seek to fracture the principal-agent alliance by:

- o attacking the relationships bonding or
  - o introducing existential threats that challenge that livelihood of one the partners
- Due to the lag in tactical feedback, red teaming and assessments are critical to monitoring a principal-agent dynamic.[54]

These principles, plus the Exploitative and Transactional Models of proxy warfare, provides a starting point for t to begin constructing a comprehensive proxy warfare doctrine. This approach, embracing proxy warfare, and moving beyond modern narratives, like that of the 'by, with, and through' approach are warranted given the lack of qualitative and quantitative results in the United States' recent proxy wars.

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Endnotes

[1] This statement includes reviews of Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Operations*, ADRP 3-05, *Special Operations*, and Training Circular (TC) 7-100, *Hybrid Threat*, Army Training Publication (ATP) 3-96.1, *Security Force Assistance Brigade*, and ATP 3-07.10, *Advising Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Advising Foreign Security Forces*. FM 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018); ADRP 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017); ADRP 3-05, *Special Operations*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018); TC 7-100, *Hybrid Threat* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010); ATP 3-96.1, *Security Force Assistance Brigade* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018); ATP 3-07.10, *Advising Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Advising Foreign Security Forces* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017).

[2] Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018).

[3] Joseph Votel and Eero Keravuori, "The By-With-Through Operational Approach," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89, 2nd Quarter, 2018: 40, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89.pdf?ver=2018-04-19-153711-177.

[4] Votel and Keravuori, "The By-With-Through."

[5] Votel and Keravuori, "The By-With-Through."

[6] Votel and Keravuori, "The By-With-Through," 47.

[7] Votel and Keravuori, "The By-With-Through," 40-41.

[8] Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (New York: Routledge Press, 2005), 5.

[9] Melissa Dalton, Daniel Mahanty, Jenny McAvoy, Hijab Shah, Julie Snyder, and Kelsey Hampton, *Civilians and 'By, With, and Through': Key Issues and Questions Related to Civilian Harm and Security Relationships* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2018), 4.

[10] B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, (New York: Meridian Books, 1991), 353.

[11] Colmar von der Goltz, *The Conduct of War* (Berlin: 1901; reprint, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 25.

[12] Votel and Keravouri, Votel and Keravuori, "The By-With-Through," 41-44.

[13] Based on the principal-agent concept, articulated later in the paper, the author uses the terms 'agent' and 'proxy' interchangeably throughout this essay.

[14] Courtesy of the author's dialogue with The Dupuy Institute.

[15] J. Douglas Orton and Karl E. Weick, "Loosely Coupled Systems: A Reconceptualization," *The Academy of Management Review* 15 no. 2 (April 1990): 203, http://dimetic.dime-eu.org/dimetic_files/OrtonWeickAMR1990.pdf

[16] The author intends the following paragraphs to provide context to proxy environments. The paragraphs are not an inclusive list of proxy engagements. The author acknowledges the absence of Iranian proxies, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and many others. The author did this to keep the examples succinct, while providing sufficient examples to support the author's argument.

[17] John Keegan, *The History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 7-11.

[18] Russian proxies are operating in Ukraine, Crimea, and Transnistria in Eastern Europe. In the Southern Caucasus Region Russian, proxies are working in Georgia's breakaway regions on South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

[19] Maria Tsvetkova, "'Fog' of Ukraine's War: Russian's Death in Syria Sheds Light on Secret Mission," *Reuters*, January 29, 2018, , https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-ukraine-syria-insight/fog-of-ukraines-war-russians-death-in-syria-sheds-light-on-secret-mission-idUSKBN1FI12I?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Social.

[20] *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, August 16 to November 15*, 2017 (New York: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018), 8, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UAReport20th_EN.pdf.

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28 Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War*, 180.

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31 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 76.

32 Jessa Rose Dury-Agri and Patrick Hamon, "Breaking Down Iraq's Election Results," Institute for the Study of War, accessed May 27, 2018, http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2018/05/breaking-down-iraqs-election-results.html.

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34 Votel and Keravouri, "The By-With-Through," 41.

35 Amos C. Fox, "The Reemergence of the Siege,"*Landpower Essay*, July 3, 2018, 4-6, https://www.ausa.org/publications/reemergence-siege-assessment-trends-modern-land-warfare.

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37 Eisenhardt, "Agency Theory."

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operational and tactical level, it seems clearer that the ISF was the proxy and the U.S.-led coalition was the principal.

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[44] Idrees Ali, "Turkish Offensive in Syria Leads to Pause in Some Operations Against IS: Pentagon," *Reuters*, March 5, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-pentagon/turkish-offensive-in-syria-leads-to-pause-in-some-operations-against-is-pentagon-idUSKBN1GH2YW.

[45] Ryan Browne, Key U.S. Allies 'Temporarily' Halt Campaign Against ISIS in Syria Following Clashes with Turkey, *CNN*, October 31, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/31/politics/sdf-halt-syria-isis-turkey/index.html.

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[47] Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 3, no.2, (July 1957), 202-203, http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830020303.

[48] Dahl, "The Concept of Power,"203-205.

[49] Dahl, "The Concept of Power,"204-206.

[50] Dahl, "The Concept of Power,"202-206.

[51] Clausewitz, *On War*, 132.

[52] Clausewitz, *On War*, 603.

[53] See Jonathon Marcus, "China Helps Iraq Military Enter the Drone Era," *BBC News*, October 12, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34510126; John C. K. Daly, "Russia Reemerging as Weapons Supplier to Iraq," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 43, (March 21, 2018), https://jamestown.org/program/russia-reemerging-weapons-supplier-iraq/.

[54] The author notes a paradox exists within this principle. If the high-tactical, operational, and strategic levels fail to properly monitor and assess the status of the principal-agent relationship then actions at the tactical level can appear to be indicators or signs in changes in the relationship. However, this is only a result of overlooking indicators and warnings at the political, strategic, or operational levels.