





# Time, Power, and Principal-Agent Problems

## Why the U.S. Army is Ill-Suited for Proxy Warfare Hotspots

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Popular Mobilisation Forces fighters (mostly Iraqi Shia militia) ride in a tank near the Iraqi-Syrian border 26 November 2018 in al-Qaim, Iraq. (Photo by Alaa al-Marjani, Reuters)



Chinese statesman and military theorist Mao Tse-tung reasoned, “Unless you understand the actual circumstances of war, its nature, and its relations to other things, you will not know the laws of war, or know how to direct war, or be able to win victory.”<sup>1</sup> Mao’s argument, written almost a century ago, clearly captures the essence of understanding the war in which one is engaged. More recently, there has been a substantial amount of literature written about modern and future evolutions of conflict; however, the U.S. Army flounders at seeing operating environments beyond binary conventional conflict and counterinsurgencies.

Nevertheless, a proxy war is arguably the leading operating environment in modern war. A quick scan of current events shows proxies fighting on behalf of partners from Ukraine’s Donbass region to the Euphrates River Valley in Syria and Iraq, and all points in between. To highlight this issue, one needs to look no further than the recent posture statements by multiple U.S. combatant commanders. Certainly, discussions of proxy warfare dominate the posture statements of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and the U.S. European Command (EUCOM). Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of CENTCOM, has an entire section of his testimony dedicated to proxy warfare’s role within CENTCOM’s area of responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, commander of EUCOM, highlighted the influence Russian proxies are achieving across EUCOM’s area of responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

A proxy war is favorable for a variety of reasons, but most notably, it provides the principal actors a degree of standoff and limited liability. Retired Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster reflected on this phenomenon while discussing the Mutual of Omaha’s *Wild Kingdom* fallacy, one of his many works on the continuities and changes of future war. The fallacy posits that the U.S. military, and more specifically, the U.S. Army, can empower other forces—proxies—to do its fighting, just as *Wild Kingdom* host Marlin Perkins would have his assistants do the close-in work with the dangerous animals on the show. The problem with outsourcing fighting to proxies, as McMaster noted, is that these forces often are insufficiently resourced and possess limited will due to dissimilar interests.<sup>4</sup> McMaster only scratches the surface of proxy hot spots, but his position serves as a point for starting the discussion.

Given the ubiquitous nature of proxy environments, the U.S. Army demonstrates a poor understanding of how to achieve success within these environments. The U.S. Army has achieved a modicum of success in Iraq (2014–2018) and the Philippines (2017), but its overall track record in proxy hot spots, including Afghanistan (2001–present), Iraq (2003–2011), and Syria (2014–present), illustrate this point. Notwithstanding the absence of empirical research, one can surmise that the U.S. Army poorly performs in these environments because it lacks a taxonomy for understanding proxy warfare. Furthermore, contemporary parlance obfuscates the true character of proxy hot spots through the use of terminology like *security force assistance*, *advise and assist*, and related language.

To take the argument a step further, the U.S. Army is ill-suited for warfare in the proxy environment because it mismanages the fixed time and the finite power it possesses over a proxy force in pursuit of waning mutual interests. Fundamentally, the salient features of proxy environments—available time, power over a proxy force, and mutual interests—are fleeting due to the fact that proxy relationships are transactional in nature; they are marriages of convenience in which a given force works through another in pursuit of provisionally aligned political or military ends. This dynamic is not discussed in doctrine but is vital to those directing activities in proxy hot spots.

In order to better position itself to succeed in the proxy environment, the U.S. Army must clearly understand the background and components of proxy warfare. The purpose of this article is to educate the reader about the proxy environment by providing a basic theory on proxy warfare. This is accomplished by addressing three major areas: (1) the U.S. Army’s unpreparedness for proxy warfare (which will be illustrated by probing U.S. Army doctrine as it relates to this type of warfare); (2) key ideas—principal-agent problems, a theory of power, and a theory of time—which are germane to understanding the character of proxy warfare but are absent from doctrine; and (3) a framework for understanding proxy environments. Lastly, this article will provide basic principles for proxy warfare to help guide future thinking, planning, and activities in hot spots. The proposed framework is focused at the high-tactical, operational, and strategic levels.<sup>5</sup>

## Doctrinal Review: Inadequacies in the Race of Relevance

A recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies argues that the U.S. government and military lack a doctrinal definition for working through proxies and instead rely on interpretations of a “by, with, and through” approach.<sup>6</sup> A scan through U.S. Army doctrine supports this position. Current U.S. Army doctrine makes only a passing reference to the role of proxy environments. The much-ballyhooed Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, makes only one reference to proxy warfare.<sup>7</sup> Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Operations*; ADRP 3-05, *Special Operations*; and Training Circular 7-100, *Hybrid Threat*, each make a single ephemeral comment on the role proxy war plays in the modern battlefield.<sup>8</sup> Aside from those cursory mentions, proxy warfare is all but absent from U.S. doctrine.

From a U.S. perspective, proxy warfare is further obfuscated through the use of a more palatable array of words and phrases. Instead of plainly speaking about this type of warfare—something rife with negative connotation—the U.S. Army instead speaks of working *by, with, and of partner forces*. This terminology works well for softening the coarseness of proxy warfare, but it does little to illustrate the realities of it. Modern conflict, on the other hand, demonstrates widespread examples of proxy warfare.

## Modern Proxy Warfare—Limited Liability War

Russia, historically speaking, has been one of the unequivocal leaders of proxy warfare. John Keegan, a preeminent British historian, noted that the Romanov dynasty, which ruled Russia from the seventeenth century until the Russian Revolution of 1917, regularly enlisted the Cossacks to serve as its proxy or to augment its own combat power.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Russia today dominates modern proxy hot spots by achieving access and influence with pliable local nationals, mercenaries, and foreign nationals sympathetic to its cause. Various forms of Russian proxies can be found throughout Eastern Europe and the southern Caucasus region, but one of the most interesting examples can be seen in the ongoing conflagration in Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Russia has a friend in Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Russia, seeking to support al-Assad, is leveraging Syrian proxies, private military companies,

and forces from its Chechnian client in coordination with its own armed forces. Furthermore, Russia practices strategic and operational jiu-jitsu by using the Syrian civil war and the mission to defeat the Islamic State (IS) against the involved parties while offering to mediate the chaos they create. Votel commented on Russia’s approach, stating that Russia plays both the arsonist and the fireman in Syria and the CENTCOM area of responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

The United States is also well-versed in the use of proxies. Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) is perhaps the most obvious example of U.S. proxy warfare in which U.S. forces, in conjunction with coalition members, militarily defeated IS in Iraq and are working to defeat IS in Syria. In each case, the United States employed a proxy to do the preponderance of fighting. In Iraq, the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish security forces were the agents; while in Syria, the proxy forces have predominantly been the Syrian Democratic Forces.

OIR is not the only example of U.S. forces engaged in proxy hot spots. The United States employed proxies to militarily defeat IS in the Philippines, as the Battle of Marawi illustrates.<sup>12</sup> In Saudi Arabia, U.S. forces are working through proxies to assist the Saudis against the Houthi rebels.<sup>13</sup> Afghanistan, the U.S. Army’s longest running hot spot, has seen both direct U.S. combat and war since 2001. Most recently, the U.S. Army deployed its first security forces assistance brigade to spearhead its fight against the Taliban and other enemies in the region. Meanwhile, in Africa, the United States reportedly has over five thousand soldiers leveraging local agents to counter IS expansion on the continent.<sup>14</sup>

Although absent from doctrine, a handful of axiomatic certainties reappear in proxy hot spots. At the

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most rudimentary level, proxy environments appear to be bound by the following tenets:

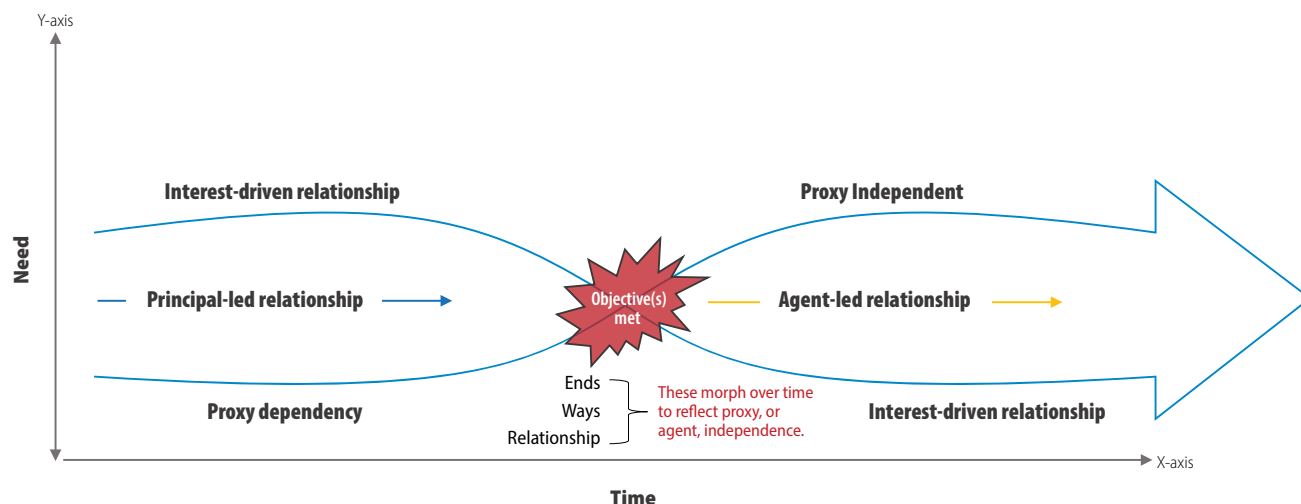
- All proxy environments are driven by political interest; this forms the basis for military partnership and aligned military objectives.
- Proxy environments are based on a relationship between a principal and a proxy, or agent. The relationship between principal and agent is bound by a power-dynamic.
- Proxy relationships can be transactional or exploitative, but they all have a limited duration.
- Not all political, strategic, and operational decisions regarding a proxy relationship come with a noticeable or overt change at the tactical level.
- Battles won accelerate 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 who are not the principal partner, or the proxy accomplished the goals that brought it in line with the principal.

Pro-Russian separatists from the Chechen "Death" battalion stand in a line 8 December 2014 during a training exercise in the territory controlled by the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, eastern Ukraine. They said their "Death" unit fighting Ukrainian forces had three hundred people, mostly former state security troops, in the mainly-Muslim region where Moscow waged two wars against Islamic insurgents that is now run by a Kremlin-backed strongman. (Photo by Maxim Shemetov, Reuters)

Given proxy warfare's dominance and its axiomatic certainties, it reasons to delve deeper into its conceptual underpinnings in order to develop a basic theory of proxy warfare. The purpose of this theory should effectively prepare U.S. Army forces for the reality of the world's proxy hot spots. The unifying themes—the problem of agency, understanding power relationships, and the impact of time—are examined in the following sections.

## Framing the Proxy Warfare Environment

Time is an inescapable dimension of war. Given the character of proxy warfare, which is driven by the principal and agent's shifting political winds, it is fair to say that proxy hot spots are dominated by a running clock.



(Figure by author)

## Figure 1. Time's Effect on Proxy Relationships

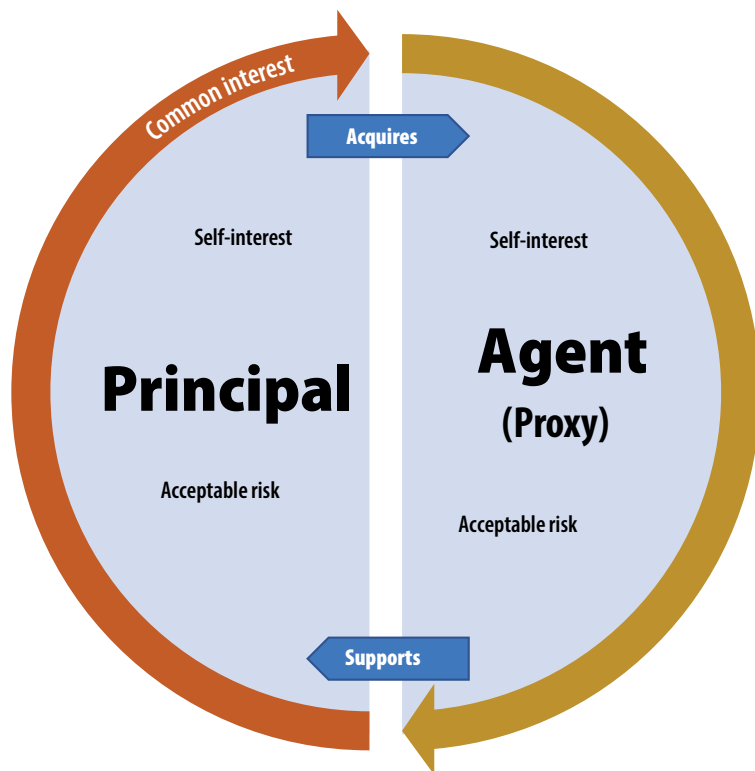
Robert Leonhard, a preeminent U.S. military theorist, argues that the inability to effectively manipulate time, above all else, plagues most commanders.<sup>15</sup> More to the point, Leonhard contends, “Military conflict—whether in wars, campaigns, or battles—seeks to summon that failure (or delay it) and is therefore, when reduced to its fundamentals, a contest for time.”<sup>16</sup>

Time operates at different rates across the levels of war, as well as the social and political spectrum. Furthermore, time operates at different rates given 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 IS, churned much quicker than did the social and political clock in the United States. As a result, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was quicker than the United States to declare victory over IS and discuss U.S. troop reductions in Iraq.<sup>17</sup>

Further, social and political clocks operate quicker than a military's clock. Military commanders tend to press for more time, whereas societies and political leaders urge the military to conclude martial action, as recent U.S.

political-military discussions on Syria illustrate.<sup>18</sup> In proxy hot spots, military commanders must balance the time being kept on all of these clocks. More importantly, leaders in proxy environments must be keenly tuned in to the social and political appetites of their proxies because, as Thucydides reminds us, actors wage war out of either fear, honor, or self-interest.<sup>19</sup> Otherwise, leaders run the risk of turning the principal-agent relationship foul. Therefore, they must not allow their tactical predilections to get in the way of strategic and political imperatives (see figure 1).

The success of firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr, at the expense of al-Abadi, in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections was perhaps representative of the role time plays in proxy environments. For all intents and purposes, al-Abadi and his bloc should have fared better in the election. Prior to the election, they defeated IS, stymied Kurdish independence, and held the country together when it was teetering on collapse. However, al-Abadi and his government were unable to force the United States to reduce its presence in the country. The Iraqi electorate turned out to support al-Sadr's pro-Iraqi,



#### Principal-Agent Problem

- The principal acquires an agent, or proxy; the agent supports the principal.
- A common interest unifies the principal and the agent.
- At the same time, each is focused on its own self-interest and acceptable risk.
- If the common interest goes away, self-interest exceeds the common interest, or the level of acceptable risk is too high, the relationship can decouple.

#### Example

Operation Inherent Resolve's operational pause, from March to May 2018, in which the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) broke away from the U.S.-led coalition forces in eastern Syria is an example of the **Principal-Agent Problem**.

The U.S. and its coalition, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, were the principal. The SDF were the agent. Defeating the Islamic State in Syria was the common interest that bound the two.

Turkey's February 2018 **Operation Olive Branch**, an offensive into northern Syria to stymie growing Kurdish strength in Syria, proved to be a grave threat to the Syrian Kurds and SDF self-interest. Turkey's offensive triggered a strategic shift for the Syrian Kurds and SDF—they temporarily left the principal because their common interest did not outweigh the self-interest it had at risk by Turkey.

This resulted in an operational pause from March 2018 to May 2018, as the SDF departed eastern Syria to shore up its lines in Afrin, Manbij, and other areas threatened by the Turks. Thus, self-interest and acceptable risk caused the agent to step-away from the relationship, which hindered the principal's interest.

(Figure by author)

## Figure 2: Principal-Agent Problems

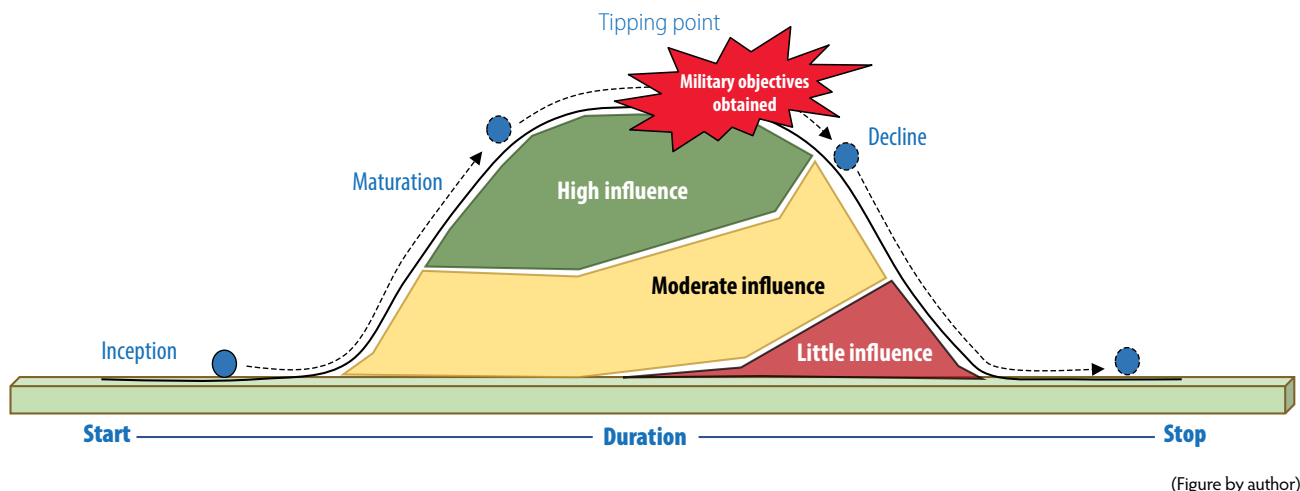
Shia nationalist platform in the election, thus resulting with al-Abadi and his bloc coming in third place.<sup>20</sup> The effect of the election is unclear, but it is decidedly easy to see that the relationship the United States wants with Iraq will change in the future.<sup>21</sup>

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

Understanding the principal-agent problem is essential to understanding proxy hot spots. Stanford

University professor and organizational theorist Kathleen Eisenhardt offers a sound characterization of the principal-agent problem. She argues that principal-agent problems arise in situations “in which one party (the principal) delegates work to another (the agent) who performs that work.”<sup>22</sup> Further, Eisenhardt states that two primary problems arise in this dynamic: (1) the problem of agency and (2) the problem of risk sharing.<sup>23</sup> She defines the *agency problem* as a situation that occurs when “the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict.”<sup>24</sup> She defines the problem of risk





**Figure 3. Wave of Influence**

sharing as the principal and agent possessing dissimilar prerogatives toward risk, resulting in divergent action as contact with risk continues (see figure 2, page 34).<sup>25</sup>

Eisenhardt's elucidation on principal-agent problems is at the root of the U.S. Army's unpreparedness for proxy hot spots. The U.S. Army tends to see the proxy, or agent, as possessing unlimited willingness to work with its forces; however, as the agent becomes more capable, or as other actors are able to identify agent vulnerabilities and positively manipulate those to their own end, the agent becomes gradually less interested in working with U.S. forces—a fleeting cooperation that the Army fails to see. To put it differently, as time progresses and objectives are accomplished, each party's self-interest begins to supplant the objectives and end states that brought the principal and agent together. OIR provides an instructive model in support of the principal-agent problem.

Following OIR's pulverizing Battle of Mosul, a series of additional tactical objectives remained. These objectives included defeating residual IS forces in Tal Afar, Hawija, and along Iraq's Euphrates River valley, from Fallujah to the Syrian border.<sup>26</sup> Given the two thousand IS fighters estimated to be in Tal Afar, the ensuing battles were expected to parallel the ferocity of that found in Mosul.<sup>27</sup>

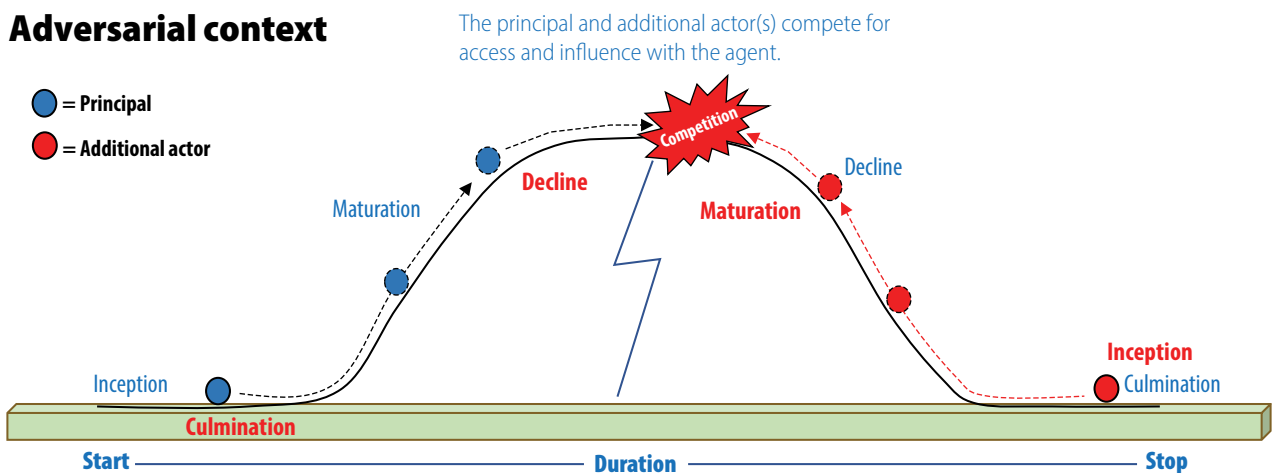
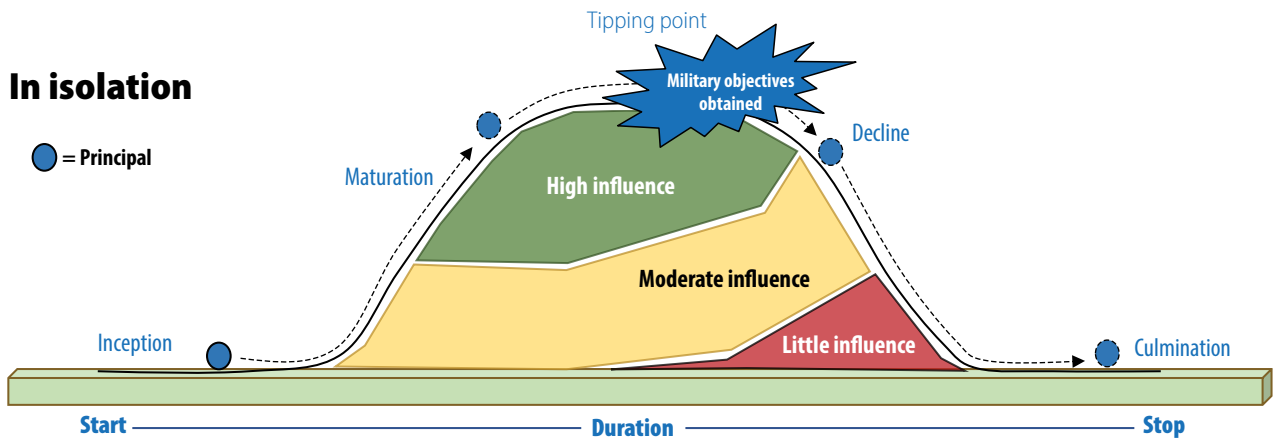
The Iraqi security forces (the agent) and the U.S.-led coalition (the principal) commenced hostilities 19 August 2017 against IS in Tal Afar, but in a strange turn of events, IS quickly evaporated.<sup>28</sup> Within eight days, the contest was over.<sup>29</sup> Casualties on both sides were relatively

low, especially when contrasted with those from Mosul. Al-Abadi, as well as many leaders within the Iraqi security forces, appeared to have taken two major points from this time period. First, the Battle of Mosul had a decisive effect on IS. The organization's military wing within Iraq was physically defeated, leaving little force for IS's political wing to continue large-scale combat operations. Second, Mosul 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 IS; or, in essence, following the battles of Mosul and Tal Afar, the principal's *raison d'être* and the agent's interest were beginning to rapidly diverge (see figure 3).

With the threat of IS marginalized and the Iraqi security forces self-confident, the government of Iraq reoriented on the Kurds. In September 2017, Iraqi Kurdistan, under the tutelage of Marzoud Barzani, voted for independence from Iraq. Al-Abadi, unwilling to accept Kurdish independence, launched a limited offensive in mid-October 2017 to thwart the movement. Sidestepping his coalition partners, al-Abadi's Kurdish operation was unilateral and a definitive gesture of divergence between principal and agent.<sup>30</sup>

While OIR provides examples of the principal-agent problem, there are just as many additional examples as there are proxy hot spots across the world. As long as one entity seeks to work through another, agency and risk problems will always exist. Nineteenth-century Prussian general officer and





(Figure by author)

**Figure 4. Wave of Influence in Adversarial Context**

military theorist Carl von Clausewitz understood the problem of agency. He argued, “One country may support another’s cause, but will never take it so serious as it takes its own.”<sup>31</sup> Nations or countries may no longer be the sole proprietor of warfare today, but Clausewitz’s position is no less valid today than it was upon publication. In the absence of strong bonded interests, *power* unifies the principal and its agent.

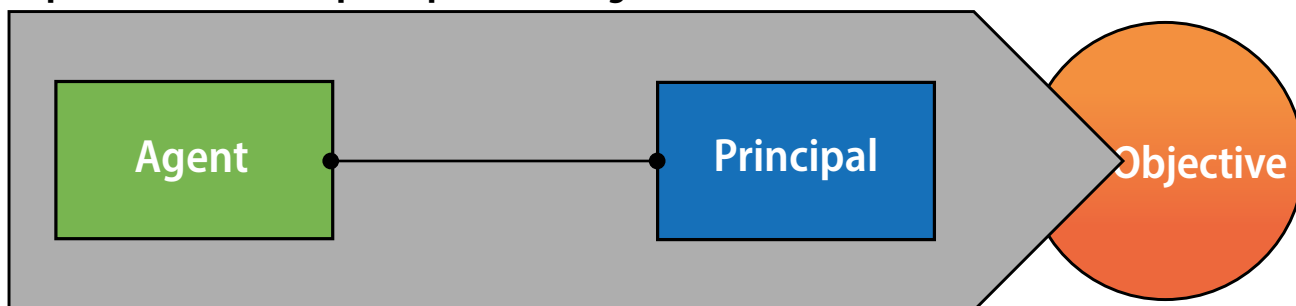
## The Role of Power in Proxy Warfare

The role of power is critical in proxy hot spots. Robert Dahl, a twentieth-century political scientist, postulates that power exists in a relationship between two or more actors. He states, “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not

otherwise do.”<sup>32</sup> Dahl continues, stating that power is not self-perpetuating but in most cases possesses a base that is a potential energy that requires activation in order to generate a desired effect.<sup>33</sup> The base, or power base, consists of all the resources that can be harnessed to affect the behavior of another actor. Dahl argues that being able to effectively manipulate one’s power base is the primary means for maintaining power over another actor. He notes that a delay exists between A’s exertion of power and B’s ability to react. This delay in reaction time, which he refers to as “lag,” represents the processing and action time associated with A’s power and B’s ability or willingness to be overpowered.

Equally important, Dahl argues that a relationship or connection between two actors must exist, otherwise

## Exploitative model: principal leads, agent follows



(Figure by author)

**Figure 5. Exploitative Model**

there is no vehicle for power to be enacted between A and B.<sup>34</sup> These relationships are not static but evolve over time as conditions change and other actors enter or depart a given situation. This idea, that associations change and increase or decrease one's relative power, is a central tenet in proxy warfare environments. However, it is often overlooked in applied relationships like those found in proxy wars, when A, guided by its own interests, attempts to maintain power and influence over B (see figure 4, page 36).

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 form the basis for understanding two theoretical models of proxy warfare: the Exploitative Model and the Transactional Model.

### The Exploitative Model: Principal Leads, Agent Follows

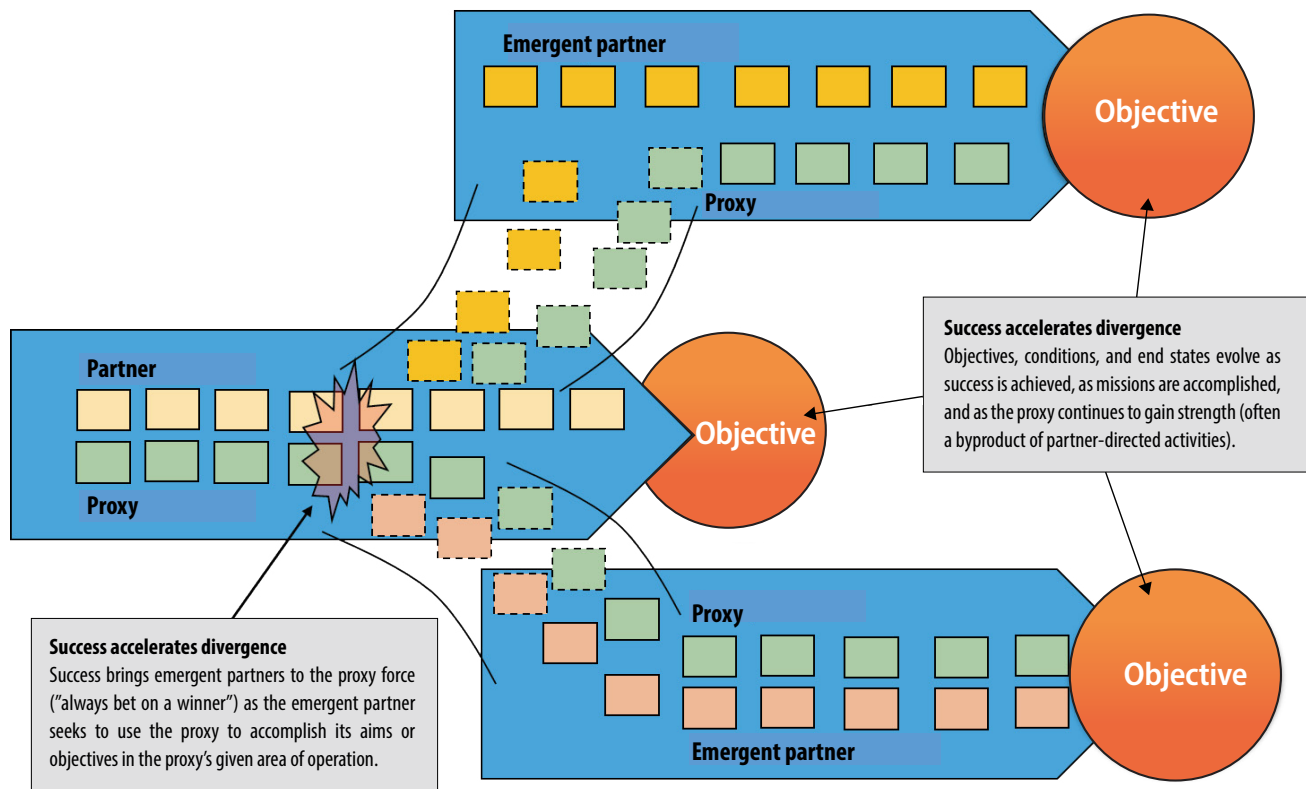
Proxy hot spots can be characterized by two similar, yet distinct models—the Exploitative Model and the Transactional Model. From the outside, these models look quite similar, but their inner workings differ. The Exploitative Model is characterized by a proxy force being completely dependent on its principal for survival—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 latter possessing almost unlimited power and influence over the proxy.

Furthermore, the Exploitative Model is usually a 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 its ability to make progress towards the principal's ends. As a result, the agent's utility for the principal is temporal. Once the ends have been achieved, or the proxy is unable to maintain momentum toward the principal's ends, the principal discontinues the relationship (see figure 5).

The relationship between Russia and the separatist movement in Ukraine's Donbass region is an example of this model. The existence of the Russian-leaning separatists, the funding and materiel backing of its army, and its pseudo-political status are all Russian creations. Reports also indicate that Russia has its own generals at the head of the separatist army.<sup>35</sup> The U.S. relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Iraqi security forces—during Operation Iraqi Freedom—are also examples of the Exploitative Model in proxy warfare.

In each case, the agent is dependent on its principal; however, success can cause the power relationship to change between the partners (see figure 6, page 38). A successful proxy force can generate enough legitimacy or support to grow powerful enough to gain independence from its partners. Similarly, the political apparatus that the proxy supports can gain sufficient power and legitimacy, resulting in the proxy electing to no longer serve as an agent, as highlighted with the Iraqi security forces' independence following the U.S. departure in 2011. Through battlefield success, political wrangling, or other actors undermining the existing principal, the proxy can also find itself in the second model, the Transactional Model.





(Figure by author)

**Figure 6. Proxy Success and the Evolution of Partnered Relationships**

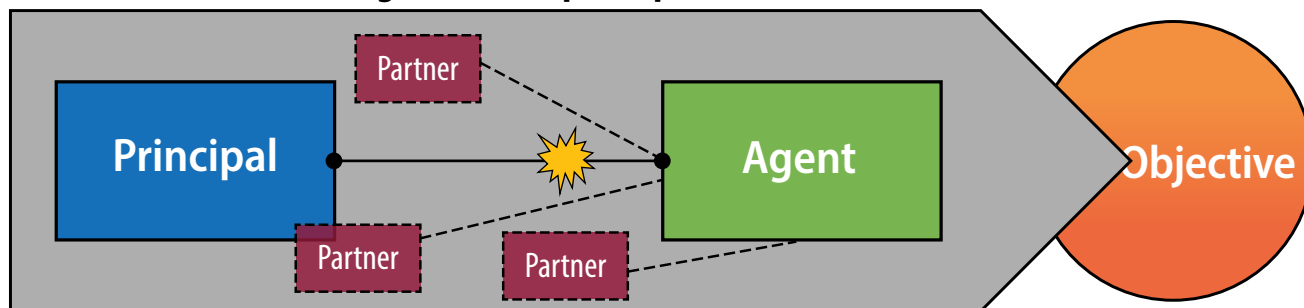
## The Transactional Model: Agent Leads, Principal Follows

The Transactional Model is proxy warfare's second model (see figure 7, page 39). This model is a paradox because the proxy is actually the power broker in the relationship. In many cases, the proxy government is independent but needs help defeating a foe; it is not interested in political or military subjugation by its principal. Moreover, the proxy possesses the power in the relationship, because its association with the principal is purely transaction—each participant is interested in what they can attain from the other while in pursuit of their common interest. Given the transactional character of the relationship, the clock starts ticking on the duration of the bond as soon as the first combined shot is fired. As a result, the agent's interest in the principal recedes at a comparable rate as the common goal is gradually achieved. The Iraqi government's request for U.S. and coalition assistance to defeat IS in their country is an example of this dynamic.

A mental picture that supports this model is to view the proxy as the lead and the partner as a supporter or follower. Unlike the latter model, in the Transactional Model, the proxy force's government requests support from another nation to defeat a given threat. In doing so, the proxy force's government places parameters on the partner such as force caps or a clearly defined mission, end state, and time lines. The proxy provides these constraints to align the principal with its own political and military objectives and to limit the principal's ability to influence the proxy beyond the narrowly defined parameters of the association. Also, it is important to highlight that the proxy has fixed political and social interests in the principal; it is likely that the proxy will look to end its dependency on the principal once its goals are attained.

At the same time, the Transactional Model is vulnerable to external influence due to the proxy's lack of investment in the partner, unlike the Exploitative Model. This provides leverage for adroit actors to drive a wedge into a principal-agent relationship. Russian and Chinese activity in Iraq provides an instructive example of this

## Transactional model: agent leads, principal follows



(Figure by author)

**Figure 7. Transactional Model**

dynamic. Seeking to weaken the U.S.-Iraq bond, both have managed to wedge themselves into the foreign military sales and foreign military finance realms, which were the bulwark of U.S. political and military strategy in Iraq.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, both Russia and China have managed to influence and gain access to tactical inroads across the country. Similarly, clever external actors will undercut the principal by providing support with fewer caveats to the agent in order to exploit gaps in the principal's policy and relationship strategy.

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 to determine where it sits with the agent. The exit plan is 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.

### Recommendations for Addressing Proxy Hot Spots

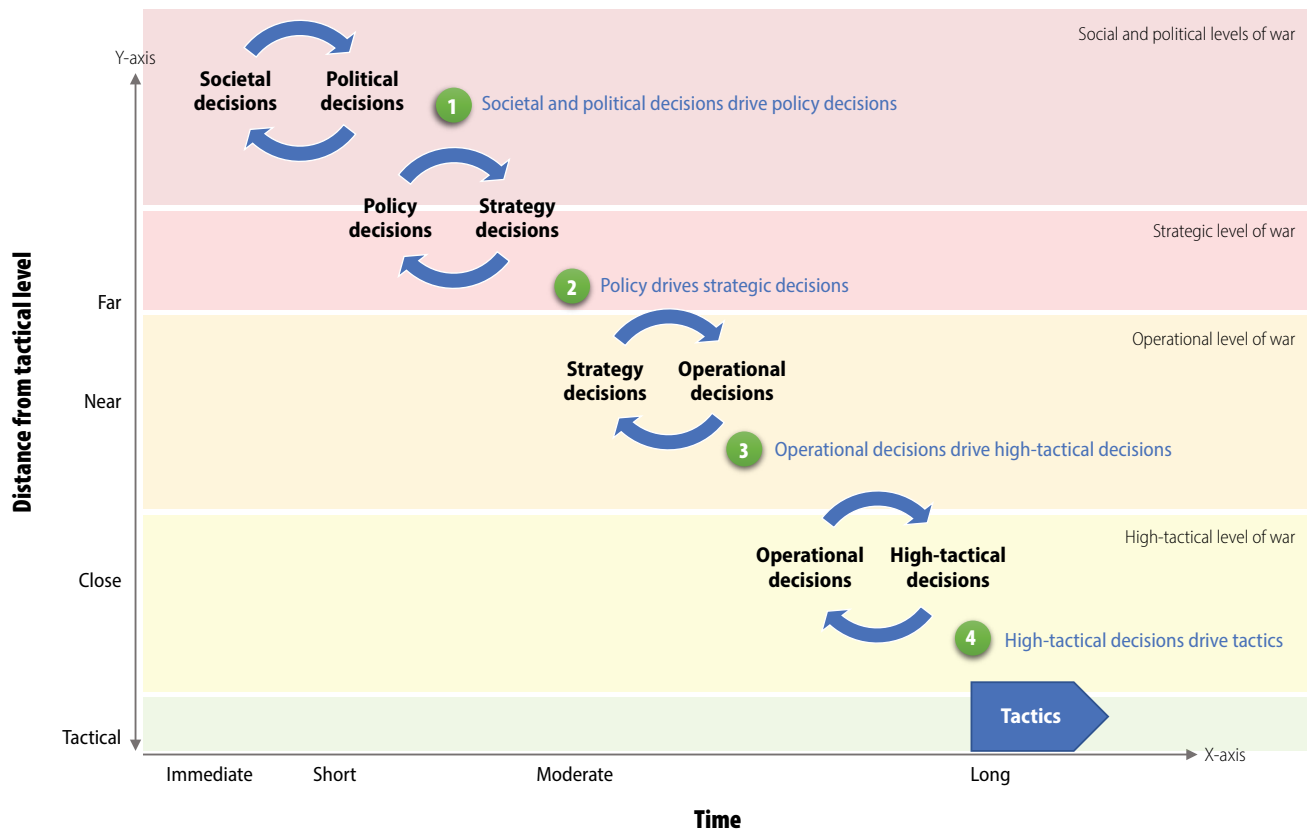
Everett Dolman, a contemporary military theorist, contends that if one communicates only in the

language of the system, then they are inextricably bound by that system's rules.<sup>37</sup> As established, the U.S. Army lacks a theory of proxy warfare, resulting in the absence of a proxy doctrine. Consequently, the U.S. Army instead relays its language of the system in an attempt to navigate ubiquitous proxy hot spots. This has likely hindered the U.S. Army's ability to achieve positive results at the high-tactical, operation, and strategic levels in proxy hot spots, resulting in indecisive, open-ended campaigns.

Given the aforementioned discussion of axioms and concepts, a number of principles for proxy warfare can be deduced. These principles, while not all-inclusive, should serve as the starting point for articulating a proxy warfare doctrine for the U.S. Army. The proposed principles of proxy warfare follow:

- Principals, agents, and actors 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 (see figure 8, page 40).
- 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.





(Figure by author)

**Figure 8. Graphical Representative of “Lag”**

- Savvy opponents will seek to fracture the principal-agent alliance by attacking the relationships, bonding with the agent, or 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; red teams and assessment teams should tell the commander what they *need* to hear, not what they want to hear.<sup>38</sup>

These principles, plus the Exploitative and Transactional models of proxy warfare, provide a starting point for the U.S. Army to begin crafting a comprehensive proxy warfare doctrine.

## Conclusion

The prevailing mentality and literature on proxy warfare, which is insufficiently expressed in doctrine, presents the practitioner of war with insufficient theories, models, and lexicon to understand and communicate the nuance associated with proxy hot

spots. This work has sought to remedy that deficiency by introducing a general theory of proxy warfare. The theory—focused at the high-tactical, operational, and strategic levels—is dominated by three concepts: (1) time, (2) the principal-agent problem, and (3) power relationships. Power is the ability of one actor to make another actor do something they would not otherwise do. Power cannot occur without an existing relationship between participants. However, relationships can change over time as new parties are introduced or existing ones lose interest in the extant power dynamics and depart.

Principal-agent problems loom large in proxy environments. One never values the reason for fighting as much as the other. Once the objective has been accomplished, each partner pursues its own interests. The introduction of external actors or meddling adversaries, seeking to gain their influence or fracture the principal-agent partnership, often accelerates the divergence of interests. Thus, time dominates proxy hot spots.

Principals and agents have finite time to accomplish their goals; therefore, it is prudent for the U.S. Army to develop termination criteria and time horizons driven by an empowered red team and assessments crew to enable realistic environmental understanding.

Continuing along the same path—continually engaging in proxy wars without a theoretical and doctrinal foundation for proxy warfare while obfuscating

the realities of proxy hot spots through mismanagement of the environment—the U.S. Army will continue to find itself unable to successfully conclude its proxy wars on favorable conditions. While not a comprehensive theory, this article sought to provide a framework on the argumentation of modern proxy hot spots and why the U.S. Army should invigorate the discussion on proxy warfare. ■

## Notes

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38. It must be noted that 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.