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The Return of Great Power Proxy Wars?

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The Return of Great Power Proxy Wars?

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The study of proxy warfare has in recent years received new scholarly attention. Just as a *proxy* denotes a surrogate or substitute for something else, so *proxy war* designates an armed conflict undertaken by the surrogate of an actor. Typically, that actor is physically distanced from the war, thereby insulating it from paying at least some of the costs of waging war, particularly the human costs but also the reputational costs of waging unpopular military campaigns. Despite its documented deployment in both ancient and medieval times, the actual *study* of proxy wars is relatively modern and is largely a product of the Cold War period.

During the Cold War, proxy warfare was customarily understood as a *two-sided* indirect contestation by rival powers in a third state, such as the U.S.-Chinese proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s or the U.S.-Soviet proxy wars in Afghanistan, Angola, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s. Karl Deutsch defined proxy war as "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies" (Deutsch 1964, 102). Linda B. Miller also characterized proxy wars as "conflicts between foreign states fought on the soil of a third country using that country's resources and territory to achieve goals of external powers… [They] are one form of violence in which conflicting American, Soviet, and Chinese interests may be expressed" (Miller 2015, 17). Proxy warfare is premised on the notion that a direct conflict between nuclear-armed powers would entail unacceptably high risks. Symmetrical proxy wars, thus, not only serve as a foreign policy tool to minimize costs, human and reputational, but also as a strategy to displace potentially escalatory conflict onto a third country while still competing for dominance (Bar-Siman-Tov 1984).

With the end of superpower rivalry immediately after the Cold War, scholars began to re-cast proxy warfare as a *one-sided* intervention by one state in another state through a local proxy— usually a non-state armed actor (NSAG).[1] Naomi Joy Weinberger (1986), Michael T. Klare (1989) and Andrew Mumford (2013), for example, have made the case for redefining proxy war as a strategy of indirect warfare whereby a foreign state uses a local armed actor ("proxy") to carry out its war aims in a foreign country (Mumford 2013).[2] Examples of these dyadic relationships include Pakistan's long-running ISI military aid to its proxies in Jammu and Kashmir and Iranian support for Hezbollah proxies in Lebanon and Syria. While acknowledging the usefulness of this minimal definition for conceptualizing conflict delegation, we believe there are strong reasons for remaining with – or reviving - the classical Cold War-era definition of proxy wars as *two-sided* confrontations between rival powers and their allies in a third country. This formulation has the benefit of allowing researchers to focus squarely on the intervention choices of *rival* great powers,

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[1] In a similarly dyadic conceptualization, Ariel Ahram (2011) describes *proxy warriors* as armed groups coopted by their government serve as paramilitary forces within the country indirectly or "by proxy."
[2] See also Weinberger (1986) and Klare (1989).

while distinguishing it from the more general study of external intervention and support in civil wars.

Our analysis of great power interventions in regime conflicts from 1975 to 2015 suggests that *two-sided* (symmetrical) proxy war have been rare.[3] For the past forty years, great powers have mostly exercised restraint in this situation (see also Carson 2018; O'Rourke 2018). A key reason is nuclear deterrence - states are generally deterred from intervening in their rivals' client states, especially when their rivals possess nuclear weapons. Great powers, in particular, have a record of respecting one another's security hierarchies. Offensive (one-sided) interventions—such as the U.S. intervention on the side of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the NATO intervention on behalf of anti-Qaddafi forces in Benghazi in Libya— are also rare. Much more common than either symmetrical and asymmetrical proxy wars are one-sided *defensive* interventions by great powers on behalf of 'client' states. After defense interventions, the most common form of intervention is actually non-intervention, where the great powers do not intervene militarily at all in the conflict.

Over the past decade, symmetrical proxy warfare has become more common on the international stage and thus merits much more systematic attention. In symmetrical proxy wars reminiscent of the Cold War period, an increasingly revanchist Russia has faced off against Western powers in post-Maidan Ukraine and in post-Arab Spring Syria, leading some to herald the opening of a *new* Cold War (Karaganov 2018; Legvold 2014; Zhao 2019). When and where should we expect to see great power proxy war in the world today? We suggest that symmetrical proxy wars - 'proxy wars' for short – are more likely to occur: (1) during periods of heightened great power rivalry, and (2) in states that straddle rival security hierarchies. In the penultimate section, we speculate about the likelihood of further escalation of war between Russia and NATO powers. We present these conjectures and attendant analysis in the next four sections, concluding with a discussion of the implications of our findings for great power proxy warfare.

The Proxy War Research Program

The study of proxy warfare has developed into a robust research program (for overviews, see Rauta 2020; 2021; Mumford 2013). This scholarship overwhelmingly relies on the more minimalist definition of proxy warfare—which we call one-sided offensive interventions—focusing on why, when, and how foreign governments provide indirect military support to non-state armed groups (NSAGs) challenging their governments. Prominent case studies include the US arming and training of the mujahadeen in Afghanistan and the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, Arab state military aid to armed Palestinian groups that target Israeli civilians (San-Akca 2016), and Russian military aid to Ukrainian separatists in Donbas (Kuzio 2015). Given the abundance of such cases, Salehyan (2010) has argued that scholars have massively underestimated the incidence of conflict around the world because they have focused solely on *direct* military engagements. San-Akca (Karlén et al. 2021, 2056) estimated that a enormous 77 percent of active rebel organizations received external support since World War II, "making it a new form of international politics."

Principal-agent analysis has been the main heuristic for understanding asymmetric proxy wars. In short, one of the armed combatants—usually an NSAG—is 'the agent' who receives support from an external state or actor—'the principal'—in return for carrying out the principal's

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[3] This chapter draws on our unpublished book manuscript, *Clients, Rivals and Rogues: Great Power Interventions in Revolutionary Civil Wars*, co-authored with David S. Siroky and Milos Popovic.

war aims in a foreign country. The principal and agent are thus connected in a dyadic, hierarchical, and unidirectional relationship: the principal *delegates* war-making to the agent, who in turn serves as a surrogate or proxy for the principal in the war theater.[4] In practical terms, this means that the principal, typically a foreign government, "commits material resources or military expertise to a non-state armed group to target a perceived adversary" (Rauta, in Karlén et al. 2021, 2051). In this way, the principal creates distance between itself and the proxy that carries out its aims—often alongside its own agenda—insulating the principal from much of the human and reputational costs of the war, and allowing it to more easily withdraw as the situation evolves.

The U.S. delegation of war to the Contra rebels to overthrow the Nicaraguan regime during the Cold War, the U.S. support for Cambodian rebels to overthrown Pol Pot in the 1970s, and the Soviet delegation of war to the Marxist revolutionaries in El Salvador are all examples of asymmetrical proxy warfare. In each case, the principal had war aims in a local conflict and trained local agents to carry out its goals. In addition to delegating some of the costs of direct intervention, the principal-agent analogy also implies that the principal exercises a degree of control over the agent—not just in the arms it uses, but also in the goals it pursues. However, in the process of delegating these tasks to the agent, the principal unavoidably cedes a certain amount of control to the agent because its ability to monitor the agent's performance is imperfect and its capacity to monitor and sanction bad agents is circumscribed. For this reason, "agency slack" is at the heart of the principal-agent "problem."[5]

The principal-agent heuristic is incredibly useful for making sense of *offensive* interventions in which an outside actor uses a NSAG to put pressure on (or depose) a government that it dislikes or to achieve a discrete war aim inside the borders of another state. However, we suggest that it is less helpful in shedding light on the dynamics of *defensive* interventions and *symmetrical proxy wars*—the two other forms of hierarchical interventions that we identify and analyze in our study of external involvement in regime conflicts waged from 1975 to 2015. Our analysis shows that great powers overwhelmingly intervened defensively on behalf of their clients, and only very rarely engaged in asymmetric offensive interventions.[6] One key reason, we argue, is that these defensive relationships are far more enduring and politically meaningful than the one-off transactional relationships that characterize most offensive interventions. Defensive interventions aim to "prop up" client governments, assist them with counterterrorism and preserve the integrity of the great power patron's security hierarchy.

In symmetrical proxy conflicts, a rival power challenges a status quo power by using a NSAG to overthrow the status quo power's client government in what has elsewhere been called "foreign-imposed regime change" (Downes 2010; Downes and Monten 2013). The status quo

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[4] See Figure 2, Cell C for a visual representation of this relationship and others discussed later.

[5] The principal-agent model dominates the proxy war literature, offering insights into how sponsor states deal with "agency slack" (Hughes 2012; Groh 2019), how states select proxies (San-Akca 2016), how international rivalries influence a state's choice to delegate war to a proxy (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011), when proxies defect from the sponsor's war agenda (Popovic 2017), the long-term consequences of sponsor support on the NSAG's choice to engage in conflict (Karlén 2017), how war delegation influences inter-rebel alliances (Popovic 2015), how sponsor states can act as veto players that spoil peace settlements (Cunningham 2011), the effects of transnational alliances on the likelihood of rebel group splintering (Tamm 2016), the impact of state sponsorship on the likelihood that NSAGs will target civilians as part of their war strategy (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014), and how NSAGs can themselves act as sponsors in war delegation in what Rauta and Karlén call patterns of "complex war delegation" (Karlén et al. 2021; Moghadam and Wyss 2020).

[6] Clients are defined in our analysis as states that obtained at least 10 percent of their arms imports from that power five years before the start of the conflict.

power counters by giving indirect support to its client government in order to push out the rival power. These two-by-two interactions can sometimes escalate into *direct* interventions by one or both external powers. For example, Western support for anti-Assad NAGs to achieve regime change in Syria led Moscow to intervene *directly* on Assad's behalf in 2015 to save his regime. At the same time, Moscow used Russian separatist NSAGs to prevent Ukraine from becoming a Western client and NATO ally. The Western powers then escalated the violence in Ukraine by extending and enhancing their indirect support to the Ukrainian government, culminating in Russia's direct invasion to overthrow the government in Kyiv in February 2022.[7] Most of the time, however, symmetrical proxy conflicts remain indirect contests between rival great powers that fall short of escalating to entail the direct intervention from one or both of the great powers.

Why We Focus on Great Powers

Even before the dawn of the nuclear age, direct conflict between the world's great powers—usually a status quo power and its challengers—has led to mass casualties in nearly every systemic war. This has been true from the Peloponnesian wars between Sparta and Athens to the Thirty Years' War Napoleonic Wars to the Sino-Japanese Wars to the First and Second World Wars. Indirect conflict between great powers has been less bloody but much more commonplace. During the Cold War, for example, the United States and USSR engaged in proxy warfare in distant countries across the globe. Notable examples include Washington's provision of weapons and training to the mujahadeen in Afghanistan to counter the Soviet defensive intervention on behalf of the communist government in Kabul. Conversely, the Soviets provided weapons, training and Cuban soldiers to the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO), which fought the Apartheid state of South Africa that was, in turn, defended by the U.S.-backed South African Defense Force (SADF).

Although symmetrical proxy warfare can occur among any rival powers, we focus on the Permanent Five members (P5) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for four main reasons. First, their outsized military capabilities and status as leading arms exporters mean that they can and do serve as "kingmakers" in many contests over control of the state government. Their global perspective also gives them greater credibility to intervene. Second, given their permanent membership status in the UNSC as well as their veto powers over UNSC resolutions, the P5 and their allies have an institutionalized role in global security and have used this authority to undertake costly interventions around the world. Third, since the P5 powers intervene in regime conflicts not only through the delegation of war, but also through direct interventions—sometimes in hybrid form, which typically precede and even catalyze more consequential direct interventions, it makes sense to examine symmetrical proxy conflicts closely over time and across space. Fourth, the destructive potential of their interventions is of an order of magnitude greater than that of the primary combatants. Wars with great power involvement are on average not only bloodier, but also significantly longer, than wars without great power involvement.

Figure 2 ranks regime conflicts from 1975 to 2015, showing that the longest and most intense conflicts feature P5 involvement on one or both sides. We have seen the destructive

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[7] While our focus is on great power rivalry, regional powers also utilize proxy war. For example, Saudi Arabia and Iran, two regional powers in the Middle East, have engaged in a series of proxy wars in third countries, notably in Syria and Yemen. Similarly, India and Pakistan have been alleged to use proxy war throughout their contentious coexistence.

potential of the U.S./NATO wars in Iraq (2003-2011), Afghanistan (2001-2021), Libya (2011), and the symmetrical Russian-Western proxy wars in Syria post-2011, and Ukraine (post-2014). They show that indirect proxy wars can evolve into direct interventions (with Russia intervening directly in Syria in 2015 and Ukraine in 2022)—thereby considerably escalating the violence. For all these reasons, there is a clear need to re-examine great power interventions in regime violence.

Figure 2. Median Duration and Intensity of Regime Conflicts (with and without P5 intervention)
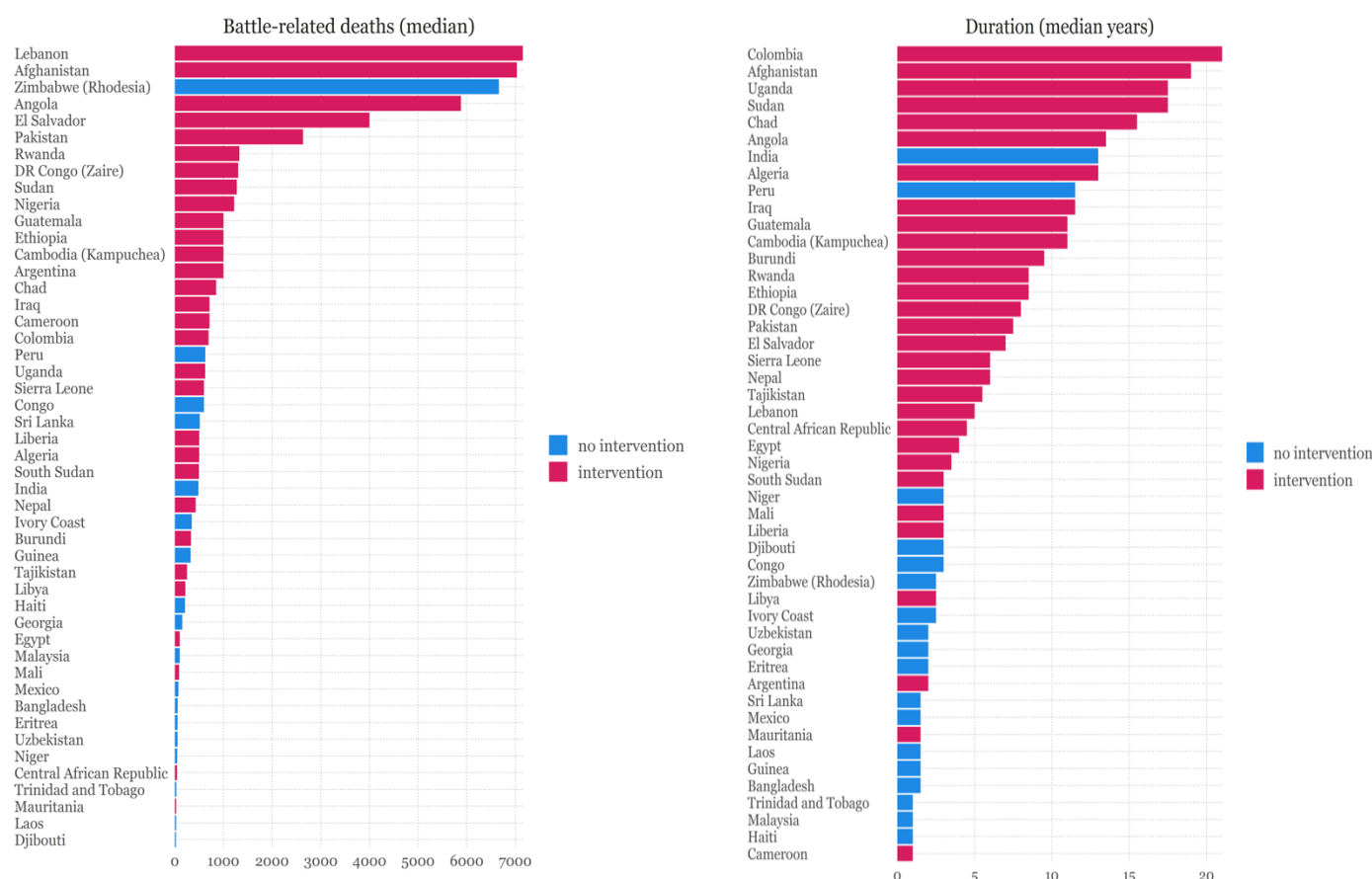
## The Logics of Hierarchical Intervention

Since the Second World War, violent conflict has overwhelmingly taken place *within* states rather than between them (Pettersson and Eck 2018). Our analysis focuses on why great powers intervene in armed conflicts over control of the state government—which we call *regime* conflicts.[8] We conceptualize great power participation in these conflicts as *hierarchical interventions,* defined as

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[8] To ensure a degree of uniformity in the decision settings, we focus specifically on great power side-taking in civil conflicts over control of the state government (what we call regime conflicts) and therefore do not mix territorial and regime conflicts, which in most cases entail distinct intervention logics—the first primarily territorial revisionism and the second regime revisionism. We further exclude one-off directed interventions for territory and coups.

'any military engagement by a state with significantly greater military resources than that of the conflict country.' This definition derives from the Cold War understanding of proxy warfare as a displacement of conflict between superpowers, which are generally deterred from confronting their rivals directly. The more powerful intervener sets the terms and calls the shots of intervention, and may even provide the justification for the war.

Figure 3 presents our typology of great power intervention in regime conflicts. In *asymmetrical* proxy wars, the great power supports the opposition indirectly in its fight against the central government (Cell C), or it supports the government in its fight against the opposition (Cell B). Asymmetrical proxy wars imply at least *two relationships* among conflict actors: (1) a conflict between the government and opposition in the conflict country, and (2) a cooperative relationship between one power and one side of the conflict—either the opposition or the government. *Symmetrical* proxy wars, by contrast, entail at least *four* relationships: (1) a primary conflict between the government and the opposition in the conflict country, (2) a secondary conflict between two rival powers or blocs, (3) a cooperative relationship between the first power and the government, and (4), a cooperative relationship between the rival power and the opposition or non-state armed group (NSAG). The escalatory potential of symmetrical proxy wars lies in the secondary conflict between the great power rivals.

Figure 3. Typology of Hierarchical Interventions
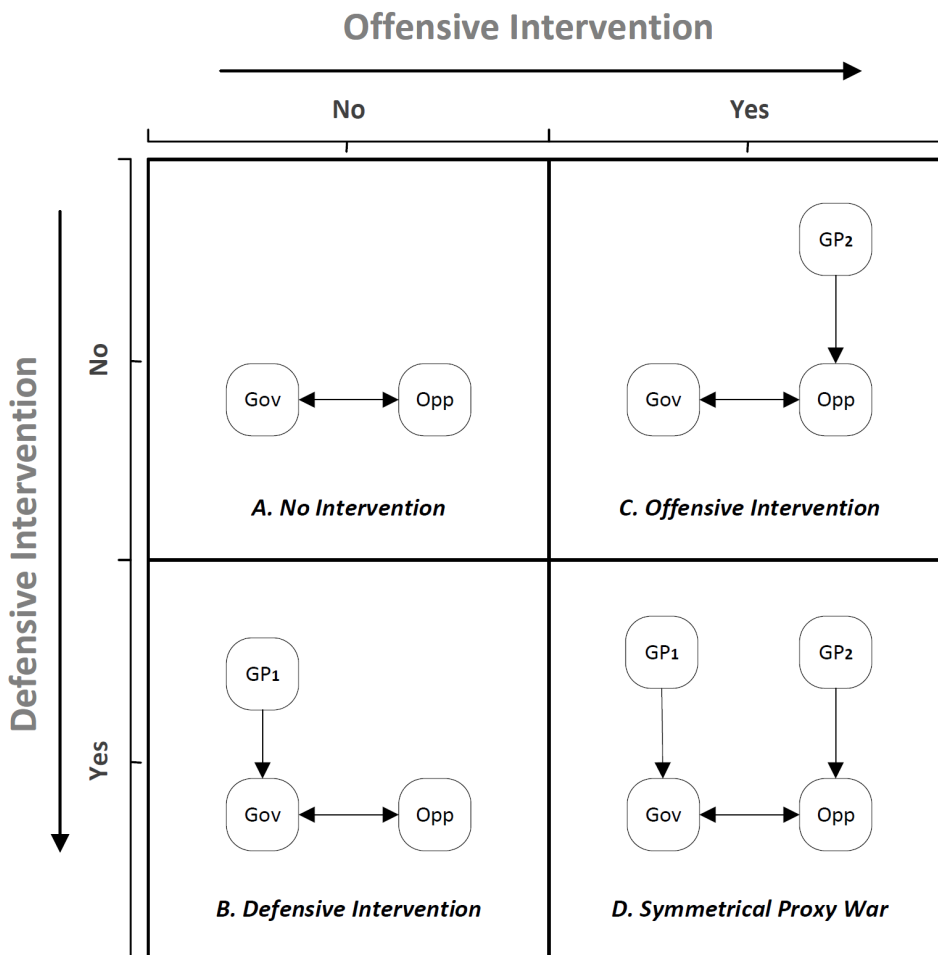
- **Cell A** represents a local ("civil") conflict with *no great power intervention*. The majority of these occur in peripheral, less developed countries without significant land-based resources such as Guinea, Haiti, Bangladesh, and Trinidad and Tobogo.
- **Cell B** depicts an internationalized civil war featuring an *asymmetrical defensive intervention*. Examples include Western interventions in Iraq (2003-2011), and Afghanistan (2001-2021), as well as Soviet interventions to aid communist governments in Afghanistan (1979-1989), Angola (1975-1990), and Nicaragua (1983-1990). If the target government is weak, these interventions are among the costliest and longest for the intervener, who must engage in state-building and sometimes nation-building to create a self-sufficient state with a loyal national citizenry.
- **Cell C** depicts an internationalized civil war with an *asymmetrical offensive intervention* by one or more great powers. Examples include US/NATO interventions in Kosovo, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In this configuration, one or more powers intervene to support the opposition against the government—because the offensive intervener had no major rivals during that period or the government had no patron defender, the embattled government is essentially undefended. These include offensive Western or NATO-led interventions during the period of US unipolarity in the 1990s and 2000s. Because they violate the norm of territorial integrity, these interventions must be carefully justified. They also tend to attract considerable international scrutiny, journalistic focus, and scholarly work.
- **Cell D** depicts symmetrical proxy wars in which two rival great powers (or blocs) intervene on opposite sides of an internationalized civil war. Examples include the conflicts between the United States and USSR in Afghanistan (1979-1989), Angola (1975-1990), Nicaragua and El Salvador (1983-1990); as well as rival U.S.-China interventions in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Korea. In the post-Cold War period, examples include the symmetrical interventions between the United States and Russia in Syria (2012-present) and Ukraine (2014-present).

Certain conflict configurations are much more common than others. In our analysis, *defensive interventions* on behalf of the government (Cell B) made up 62 percent of all regime conflict-years between 1975 and 2015. The next most common configuration was *non-intervention* by any great power (Cell D), which made up 18 percent of all conflict-years. This was followed by *symmetrical proxy war* (Cell A), which made up only 11 percent of conflict-years, and finally *offensive (asymmetric) interventions* against the government (Cell C), which represented only 8 percent of conflict-years. Overall, our analysis suggests that the majority of great power interventions over the past forty-odd years has actually been defensive rather than offensive. Patron-client ties account for the lion's share of these defensive (nation-building/counterterrorist) interventions, whereas offensive (regime change) interventions make up a relatively small share of side taking in such civil wars.

Security Hierarchies at War

We argue that the *structure of security hierarchies* shapes the intervention choices of great powers. Security hierarchies are the defensive networks that connect great powers with their allies and clients, producing different incentives for intervention.[9] Our model implies three logics of hierarchical interventionism. When a regime conflict breaks out in a third country, each great power utilizes its prior security ties with the conflict country to make sense of the conflict and therefore the type of intervention (if any) that should be undertaken.

Patron-client ties between the great power and conflict country lead the great power to "altercast" the embattled government as a *client* (if it has transferred weapons to the government prior to the conflict), resulting in a *defensive* intervention to prop up the government in the name of counterterrorism or nation-building. Second, if the conflict country is not a client, then the GP asks whether the government is the *client of a rival* or part of the rival's security hierarchy. If the answer is yes, then it will be most likely deterred from intervention. However, deterrence is not perfect. When it fails, then the GP intervenes to counter the rival in a *symmetrical proxy war* configuration. Third, if the embattled government is neither a client nor a rival's client, then the question arises whether the government is a *rogue*, meaning that it engages in systematic territorial or system revisionism. All else equal, great powers are less likely to intervene in such conflicts. However, when they do intervene, they do so *offensively* in the name of regime change.[10] Finally, if the embattled regime is altercasted as none of these, then the conflict country is likely of marginal interest, resulting in non-intervention, and drawing on a narrative of entrenched civil war with neither good nor bad guys (see Figure 4).

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[9] Salehyan argues that the state sponsor-NSAG relationships are hierarchical in a way that the relationship between allies are not, because "rebels are dependent upon foreign resources and are asked to do its patron's bidding" (Karlén et al. 2021, 2053). We concur but argue that client states *also* exist in a hierarchical relationship vis-à-vis their patron great powers because they depend on their patrons to provide for their basic survival.

[10] Using dictionary scaling with a dynamic model, we analyzed the statements of P5 representatives to the UNSC in debates over the Syrian war, showing that the P3 consistently used language of human rights violations and intervention throughout the war. This contrasts with Russian and Chinese statements, which focused on sovereignty and non-intervention until the rise of ISIS, at which point there was convergence in the use of human rights violations rhetoric across the P5 (Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne 2017).

Figure 4. The Logics of Hierarchical Interventionism
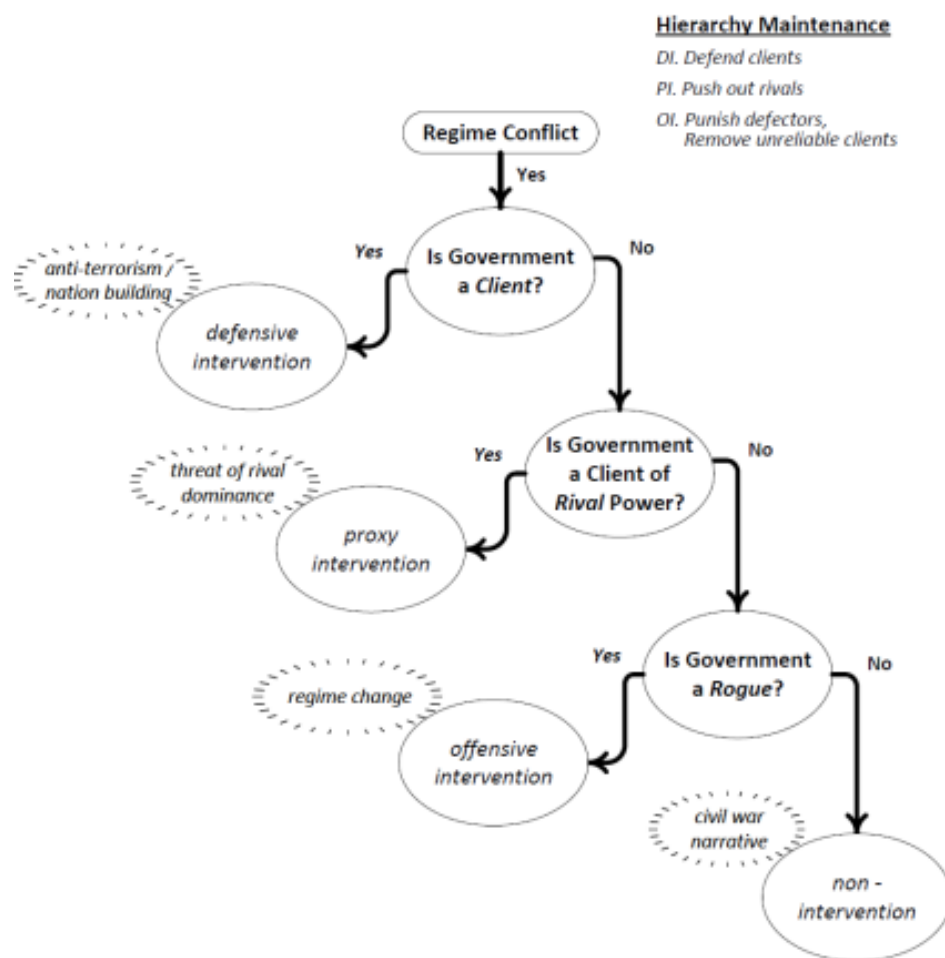
Our data show that great powers have been overwhelmingly defensive in their approach to all intra-state wars—both over the government and over territory. With the important notable exceptions of U.S. interventions at the end of the Cold War in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya, most of the interventions undertaken by the P5 have been aimed at defending allies and clients. The P5 have confined their participation in such conflicts to the task of propping up client states, providing client governments with assistance in counterterrorism, and helping their clients defend against external threats

Figure 5 breaks down these interventions for each great power. It is obvious that the United States has been the predominant intervener – taking sides in roughly 60 percent of the regime conflict-years from 1975-2015, with most interventions being defensive (89 percent). The USSR, the United Kingdom, and France intervened much less often than did the United States, but more frequently than China. Overall, P5 interventions have been mostly defensive—to protect their clients when they were challenged by armed opposition at home. This paints a *defensive* realist picture of the conditions under which great powers take sides in regime conflicts, with the P5 disproportionately intervening on behalf of their clients to defend the status quo.

Figure 5. Great Power Side-Taking in Regime Conflicts, 1975-2015
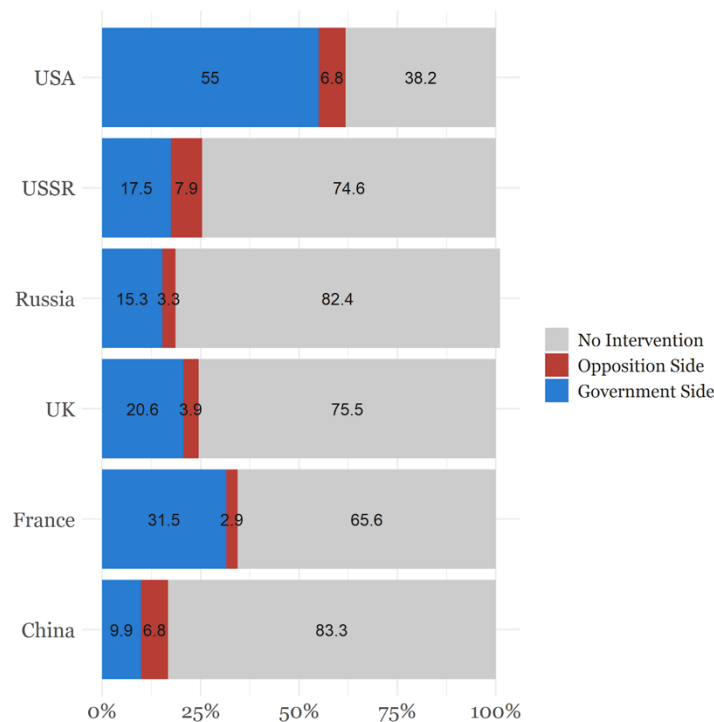
Great Power Proxy Warfare in Syria and Ukraine

How does this model help us understand contemporary proxy interventions such as those in Syria and Ukraine? First, we know that defensive interventions in such conflicts are common. This means that governments challenged by armed groups can often expect some form of external assistance from their great power patron. Since Syria has long been a security client of Russia, Moscow predictably began to funnel steady support to President Bashar al-Assad's forces to counter the armed resistance. We also know from our analysis that intervention by a great power bloc on one side of a regime conflict tends to *deter* rival powers from intervening on the opposite side. Consistent with this, although U.S. President Barack Obama declared that Assad must step down after its bloody crackdown of the protesters, Washington only provided halting aid to the anti-Assad resistance, focusing its efforts on combating Islamic State (IS) forces in the east. Deconfliction channels[11] were used to prevent direct Western engagement with Russian forces in the war to head off conflict escalation. Likewise, when the Russian government began hybrid

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[11] "Deconfliction" talks between Russia and the U.S. began in Syria in 2015; the two countries also set up a "hotline" in Ukraine known as a "deconfliction line" to avoid miscalculation or escalation over military incidents. In brief, deconfliction consists of coordinating flights and maneuvers between actors engaged in overlapping operations in a theatre of war to reduce the risk of accidents that could escalate conflict between the nuclear powers.

warfare on behalf of anti-regime forces in Ukraine in 2014, the United States and NATO allies slowly began to step up their support of the pro-Western Ukraine. In Ukraine today, Russia is no longer fighting through local proxies, as the United States continues to do, but has escalated its intervention to a direct invasion using its own troops.

The Russian-U.S. proxy war in Syria offers an inverse example of the U.S.-Russian proxy war in Ukraine. In Syria, the Western powers altercasted Assad as a rogue for having used chemical weapons on Syrian civilians—similar to the justifications underlying Western offensive interventions in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo—and began to arm the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and other anti-Assad NSAGs. In response, Russia escalated its defense of the Syrian regime to direct intervention in 2015. Just as Western governments argued that Assad was a rogue, so too has Russia said—with no comparable justification—that the Kiev government is a "Nazi" state engaged in war crimes against ethnic Russians, even likening Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Hitler.

Just as Putin committed indirect military aid, and later airstrikes, to Syria to protect his client government, so too have the US and its NATO allies committed indirect military aid to Ukraine as a means of pushing out a rival power from its perceived security hierarchy. Consistent with the strategy of proxy warfare, both conflicts featured indirect intervention by great powers, later escalating to direct intervention by Russia. Further in line with the model's expectations, Russia targeted a state that was not well-integrated into the Western security hierarchy. Ukraine is a member of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), but it was neither a U.S. ally nor even an important client until recently, receiving no shipment of Western arms until the beginning of the 2014 war.[12] This means that Ukraine most likely appeared "undefended" to the Russian leadership at the start of the war.

In many ways, great power side taking in Ukraine finds no recent parallels in the past forty years. Although Ukraine is not a NATO member country, nor even a Western arms client, it has been in the NATO Partnership for Peace since 1994. Under the 1994 Budapest Agreement, Western powers assured—but did not guarantee—Ukrainian sovereignty in return for its promise to give up its nuclear weapons and join the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).[13] We argue that this made Ukraine a para-ally of the West, leading to defensive intervention. Second, Moscow has only undertaken offensive military interventions in *two* regime conflicts since the 1970s: first, when it supported the communist SWAPO rebels in Southern Africa in the fight against Apartheid South Africa for the independence of Namibia; and second, when it provided support to the various Marxist armed formations organized under the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in the U.S. client state of El Salvador.

Furthermore, Putin's war in Ukraine is the first case of *offensive* intervention in a regime conflict since the 1980s, and it is the *only one* (or first one) undertaken by the Russian Federation.[14] Finally, Moscow made use not only of the 'rogue logic' and associated narrative of regime change, but also the 'rival logic' and the narrative of U.S./NATO threat. In addition, irredentism to protect ethnic kin also featured in Putin's war narratives.[15] Moscow's simultaneous activation of multiple

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[12] Major shipments of lethal aid from Western countries did not begin until 2018.

[13] Sarotte 2021; Budjeryn 2015.

[14] Although Moscow also engaged in an offensive war against the Georgian government in 2008, these were limited to brief offensive interventions in *territorial* conflicts in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian regions.

[15] David S. Siroky and Christopher W. Hale, 'Inside Irredentism: A Global Analysis', American Journal of Political Science, 61(1), 117-128; Hale, Christopher W., & Siroky, David. (2022). Irredentism and Institutions. *British Journal of Political Science,* 1-18.

war narratives may indicate desperation, but it also suggests expansionist war aims by a revanchist power that could extend to other countries with significant Russian minorities (namely, the Baltic countries and Central Asia), following the irredentist prescription of aligning state borders with ethnonational boundaries. The simultaneous invocation of the rival power narrative suggests the dual aim of pushing NATO out of East Central Europe, while the regime change narrative suggests that Moscow is seeking to overthrow Ukraine's "rogue" government to realign, or if needed reattach, this state to the Russian security hierarchy.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Great power proxy warfare deserves the renewed scholarly attention and analysis that is has received in recent years. Unlike *asymmetrical* proxy warfare, *symmetrical* proxy wars have the potential for significantly higher destruction on the ground—they are both longer and bloodier on average and pose considerable risk of conflict escalation between rival nuclear powers. To investigate this subtype of proxy warfare, our chapter sets out a typology of great power interventions, which allows us to track the relative frequency of each conflict configuration and map the outcomes onto a decision-theoretic model of great power intervention. Finally, we applied the model to study great power side-taking in the current conflict in Ukraine.

The pattern of symmetrical proxy warfare in Ukraine points to the failure of Western military deterrence against Russia and casts doubt on its capacity to defend Taiwan against China. It is also a potential harbinger of a newly expansionary Russia responding to an emerging period of global multipolarity. In the 21st century, as the aspiring powers of Russia and China continue to challenge the liberal powers in the West for global military primacy, rival powers are increasingly likely to face off in third countries. The coming years and decades will test the stability of the U.S. security hierarchy—and the U.S. commitment to defend its allies and clients—like never before. It is therefore crucial for scholars and policymakers to devote more systematic attention and resources to bridging the theoretical, empirical, and practical study of great power proxy warfare.

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