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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. A proxy is a surrogate or substitute for something else, and a *proxy war* is 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 use in both ancient and medieval times, the actual *study* of proxy wars is relatively modern and largely a product of the Cold War.

During the Cold War, proxy warfare was understood as a *two-sided* indirect contestation by rival powers in a third state, such as the US-Chinese proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s and the US-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 likewise 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 belief that direct involvement between nuclear-armed powers entails unacceptably high costs and 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 competing for geopolitical dominance (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984).

With the end of superpower rivalry, 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 group (NSAG). Naomi Joy Weinberger (1986), Michael T. Klare (1989), and Andrew Mumford (2013), for example, 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). 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. Ariel Ahram (2011) describes *proxy warriors* as armed groups co-opted by their government to serve as paramilitary forces within the country indirectly or "by proxy." While acknowledging the usefulness of this minimal definition, 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, while distinguishing it from the broader set of external intervention in civil wars.

Our analysis of great power interventions in regime conflicts, drawing on our unpublished book manuscript *Clients, Rivals and Rogues: Why Great Powers Intervene in Revolutionary Civil Wars*, co-authored with Milos Popovic, suggests that *two-sided* (symmetrical) proxy wars are rare. For the past 40 years, rival powers have mostly exercised restraint in their interventions (see also Carson, 2018; O'Rourke, 2018). One 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 US intervention on the side of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention on behalf of anti-Qaddafi forces in Libya – are also rare. Much more common are one-sided *defensive* interventions by great powers on behalf of "client" states. After defense interventions, the most common response is non–intervention.

Over the past decade, symmetrical proxy warfare has become more common and thus merits more systematic attention. In symmetrical proxy wars reminiscent of the Cold War 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 conclude 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; Moghadam and Wyss, 2020). This scholarship overwhelmingly relies on the minimal definition of proxy warfare – foreign governments providing indirect military support to NSAGs challenging their governments. Prominent cases include the US arming and training of the mujahideen 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 77% of active rebel organizations received external support, "making it a new form of international politics."

Principal–agent analysis is the main heuristic in this research program. In it 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 war aims. 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 proxy for the principal in the war theater (see Figure 34.2, Cell C for a visual representation of this relationship and others discussed later). 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" (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 withdraw more easily as the situation evolves.

The US delegation of war to the Contra rebels to overthrow the Nicaraguan regime in the 1980s, the US 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 these aims. In addition to delegating the tasks of direct intervention to a proxy, 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 sanction bad agents is circumscribed. For this reason, "agency slack" is at the heart of the principal–agent "problem" (Hughes, 2012; Groh, 2019).

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 analyze in our study. Our analysis shows that great powers overwhelmingly intervened defensively on behalf of their clients – defined here as states that obtained at least 10% of their arms imports from that power five years before the start of the conflict – and only very rarely engaged in asymmetric offensive interventions. A 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 security hierarchy.

In symmetrical proxy wars, a rival power challenges a status quo power by using a NSAG to overthrow the status quo power's client government. This has elsewhere been called "foreign-imposed regime change" (Downes, 2021; Downes and Monten, 2013). The status quo power counters by giving indirect support to its client government in order to push out the rival power. This two-against-two configuration can sometimes escalate into *direct* interventions by one or both external powers. For example, Western support for anti-Assad NSAGs 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 separatist NSAGs in Donbas to prevent Ukraine from becoming a Western client and NATO ally. The Western powers then escalated the violence in Ukraine by extending and enhancing indirect support to the Ukrainian government, culminating in Russia's direct invasion to overthrow the government in Kyiv in February 2022. Most of the time, however, symmetrical proxy conflicts remain indirect contests between rival great powers that fall short of direct intervention.

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. This has been true from the Peloponnesian wars between Sparta and Athens to the Thirty Years' War to the 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 mujahideen in Afghanistan to counter the Soviet defensive intervention on behalf of the communist government. 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 US-backed South African Defense Force (SADF).
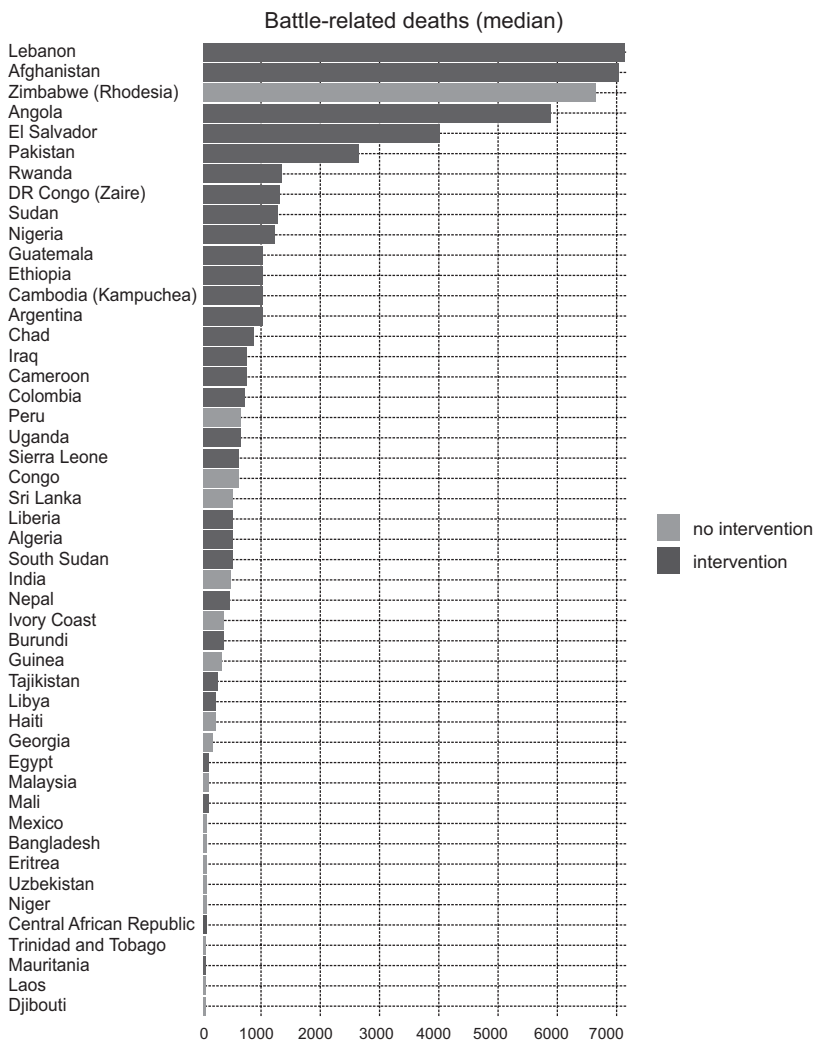

Figure 34.1 Median Duration and Intensity of Regime Conflicts (With and Without P5 Intervention).
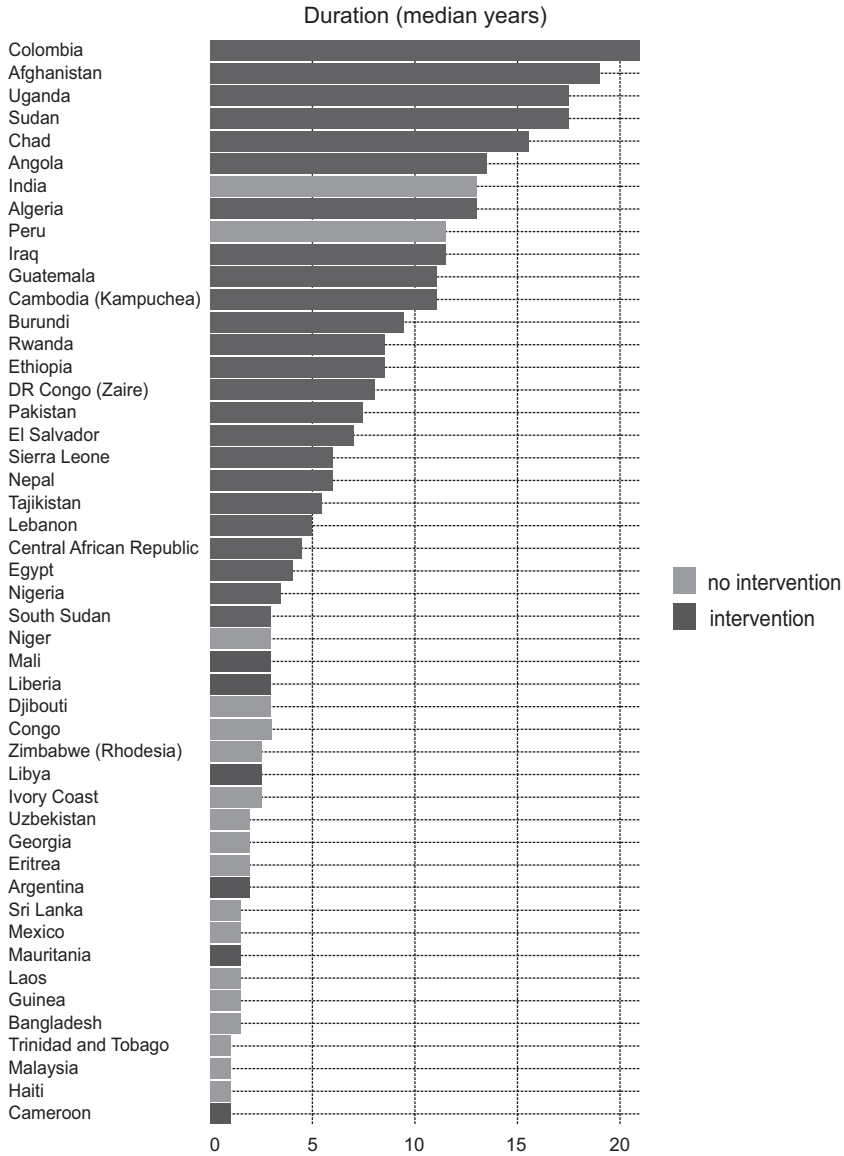
Duration (median years)

Figure 34.1 (Continued)

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 34.1 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 potential of the US/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 escalating the violence considerably. For all these reasons, there is a clear need to re-examine great power interventions in regime conflicts holistically.

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*
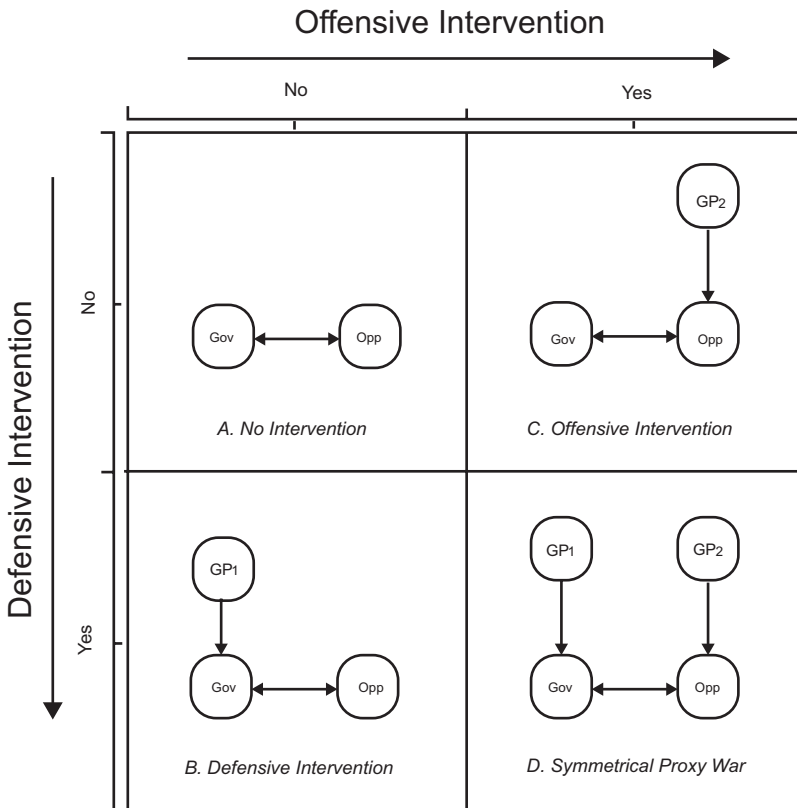

Figure 34.2 Typology of Hierarchical Interventions.

conflicts. To ensure a degree of uniformity in the decision settings, we do not mix territorial and regime conflicts, which in most cases entail distinct intervention logics – the first primarily territorial revisionism and the second regime. We conceptualize great power participation in these conflicts as *hierarchical interventions*, defined as "any military engagement by a state with significantly greater military resources than that of the conflict country." The more powerful intervener sets the terms and calls the shots of intervention and may even provide the justification for the war.

Figure 34.3 presents our typology of great power interventions 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
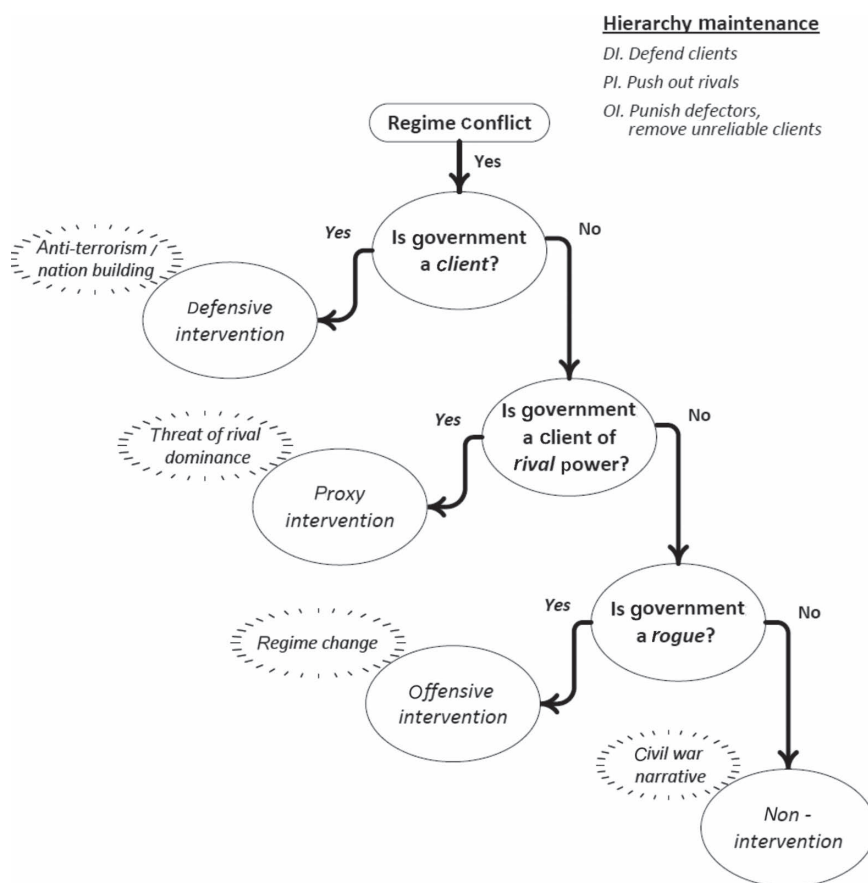

Figure 34.3 The Logics of Hierarchical Interventionism.

non-state armed group (NSAG). The escalatory potential of symmetrical proxy wars lies in the secondary conflict between the great power rivals.

- *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 US-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 more common than others. In our analysis, *defensive interventions* on behalf of the government (cell B) made up 62% 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% of all conflict-years. This was followed by *symmetrical proxy war* (cell A), which made up only 11% of conflict-years, and finally *offensive (asymmetric) interventions* against the government (cell C), which represented only 8% of conflict-years. Overall, the majority of great power interventions over the past 40-odd years has actually been defensive rather than offensive. Patron-client ties account for the lion's share of these interventions, whereas offensive (regime change) interventions make up a relatively small share.

Security Hierarchies at War

We argue that *security hierarchies* shape the intervention choices of great powers. Security hierarchies are defensive networks that connect great powers with their allies and clients. Our model unpacks three logics of hierarchical interventionism. When a regime conflict breaks out in a third country, each great power utilizes its prior security ties with that country to make sense of the conflict and thus the type of intervention (if any) that it should undertake.

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. 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 is likely to be 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. 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. Using dictionary scaling with a dynamic model, we analyzed the statements of P5 representatives in the UNSC in debates over the Syrian war, showing that the P3 consistently used the 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 the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), at which point there was convergence in the use of human rights violations rhetoric across the P5 (Medzihorsky *et al.*, 2017). Finally, if the embattled regime is altercast as none of these, then the conflict country is likely to be of marginal interest, resulting in non-intervention (see Figure 34.4).

Our data show that great powers have been overwhelmingly defensive in their approach to intrastate wars – both over the government and over territory. With the important notable
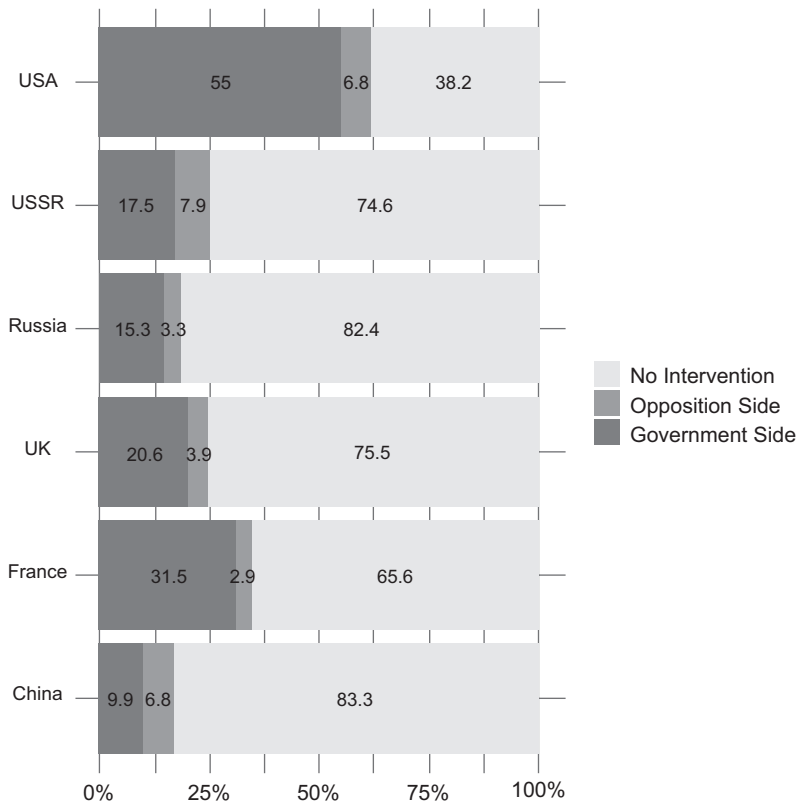

Figure 34.4 Great Power Side-Taking in Regime Conflicts, 1975–2015.

exceptions of US interventions at the end of the Cold War in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya, most recent interventions by the P5 have been aimed at defending allies and clients. The P5 have confined their participation in such conflicts to providing client governments with capacity-building assistance in counterterrorism.

Figure 34.4 breaks down these interventions by great power. It is obvious that the United States has been the predominant intervener – taking sides in roughly 60% of the regime conflict-years from 1975 to 2015, with most interventions being defensive (89%). The USSR, the United Kingdom, and France intervened much less often than 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.

Great Power Proxy Warfare in Syria and Ukraine

How does this model help us understand great power interventions in Syria and Ukraine? First, we know that defensive interventions are common. This means that embattled governments can expect some form of external assistance from their great power patron. Since Syria has long been a client of Russia, Moscow 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 US 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, which are designed to avoid miscalculation or escalation over military incidents, were used to prevent conflict escalation. Likewise, when the Russian government began hybrid 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 switched to direct intervention using its own troops.

The Russian-US proxy war in Syria offers an inverse example of the US–Russian proxy war in Ukraine. In Syria, the Western powers altercast Assad as a rogue for using chemical weapons on Syrian civilians – similar to the justifications underlying Western 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 a 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 to Syria in order to protect his client government, and later airstrikes, 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. Both conflicts featured indirect intervention by great powers, later escalating to direct intervention by Russia. 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, but it was neither a US ally nor even an important arms

client until recently, receiving no shipment of Western arms until the beginning of the 2014 war, with major shipments of lethal aid from Western countries beginning only in 2018. This means that Ukraine most likely appeared "undefended" to the Russian leadership at the start of the war.

Hierarchical interventions in Ukraine finds no recent parallels in the past 40 years. Although Ukraine is not a NATO member, 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 the nuclear weapons of the former Soviet Union on its territory and join the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Sarotte, 2021; Budjeryn, 2015). We argue that this made Ukraine a para–ally of the West, committing it to defensive intervention. For its part, 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 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. Although Moscow also engaged in an offensive war against the Georgian government in 2008, that campaign was limited to brief offensive interventions in *territorial* conflicts in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian regions. To justify them, Moscow made use not only of the "rogue logic" and associated narrative of regime change, but also the "rival logic" and the narrative of imperial threat. In addition, irredentism to protect ethnic kin also featured in Putin's war narratives (Siroky and Hale, 2017; Hale and Siroky, 2022). Moscow's simultaneous activation of multiple war narratives may indicate desperation, but it also suggests expansionist war aims that could extend to other countries with significant Russian minorities (namely, the Baltic countries and Central Asia), following the irredentist imperative of align 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 with, or reattach the state to, the security hierarchy.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Great power proxy warfare deserves the renewed scholarly attention and analysis that it 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 twenty-first century, as the aspiring powers of Russia and China

continue to challenge the liberal powers for global military primacy, the rivals are increasingly likely to face off in third countries. The coming decades will test the stability of the US security hierarchy – and the US commitment to defending its allies and clients – like never before. It is therefore crucial for scholars and policymakers to devote more resources to bridging the theoretical, empirical, and practical study of great power proxy warfare.

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