



**Tyrone L. Groh.** *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 255 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-0818-4.

**Reviewed by** Alexandra Chinchilla (University of Chicago)

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**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Proxy war is often misunderstood as Cold War competition between superpowers avoiding escalation by intervening on opposite sides of civil wars. However, proxy war transcends superpower competition and is a common form of contemporary conflict. After 9/11, while facing little opposition from other great powers, the United States engaged in proxy wars in Afghanistan against the Taliban, Libya against Muammar Gaddafi, and Syria against ISIS. These contemporary interventions demonstrate the need for a post-Cold War understanding of proxy war. Yet comparatively little academic work has systematically explained why interveners choose this form of intervention in conflict and when it is likely to succeed.[1] Tyrone L. Groh's *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option* is an important addition to academic work on the topic of proxy war and a guide to policymakers as they consider intervention options.

Groh conceives of proxy war as an intervention in an ongoing civil war by a state that provides aid, arms, military advisors, or air power to initiate a principal-agent relationship with a proxy who provides the ground forces to fight. Interveners tend to be highly capable states with "significant regional or global interests" (p. 4). The intervener as principal must intend to control the proxy, distinguishing proxy war from "donated assistance" when an intervener makes no such at-

tempt (p. 28). Groh confines his analysis to non-state proxies, arguing that it is difficult to prove a principal-agent relationship between two states. Although the majority of the book is theory building, Groh codes thirty-three cases of state support for non-state proxies and tests his theory with three under-studied case studies of proxy war: US support for the Hmong in Laos (1960), South African support for the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in Angola (1975), and Indian support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (1983). His case studies rely largely on secondary sources but also make use of archival evidence and elite interviews.

The concept of control is at the heart of Groh's definition of proxy war, so, unsurprisingly, he argues that interveners must be able to control proxy behavior to succeed at proxy war. He outlines three proxy-level characteristics that make control more likely: compatible objectives between intervener and proxy, high proxy ability to fight autonomously, and high proxy dependence on the intervener's support. Compatibility of objectives is the clearest and most developed of the three proxy characteristics. Groh shows that disagreement between proxies and interveners in ambition, in respect for human rights, and in military or political solutions to the conflict is common and often costly for the intervener. Neverthe-

less Groh could have done more to theorize the objectives of the proxy and afford it more agency. The book at times reads as if the intervener can easily control the proxy if it can identify the source of their incompatibility. The proxy's own political objectives, the degree to which it seeks cooperation with the intervener, and even its military capability may be structural factors not amenable to intervener control. It would be useful to know when control is possible—or even desirable—and when it is unachievable.

While Groh provides a significant conceptual contribution to the literature by outlining which proxy-level characteristics matter most for controlling the proxy, he is less effective in describing how interveners attempt to control the proxy. Two main levers to induce better behavior from the proxy emerge from the case studies: using military advisors on the ground to direct the proxy and providing just enough support to keep the proxy dependent on the intervener. Groh also suggests that interveners may replace the proxy when necessary to get a more compliant proxy. However, Groh does not develop these levers conceptually or evaluate when they can be used. Replacing the proxy, for example, may not be possible in many cases. He also does not consider other possible levers, such as conditioning aid on proxy behavior or threatening to withdraw or escalate involvement. In addition, the distinction between when the intervener attempts to control the proxy or merely donates assistance is unclear. The case study of US intervention in Laos illustrates these points. Groh argues that the US initially adopted a policy of donated assistance in Laos by giving economic aid. Yet he shows that the US was attempting to influence internal Laotian politics in order to keep the Pathet Lao out of power, which seems quite similar to control. Groh notes that the US began exerting control when it sent military advisors in 1959 to train Laotian units. The Laotian case raises questions of how the type of support provided to a proxy is related to attempts to control it, why military advisors are different from other

forms of support and when they are used, and whether donated assistance and proxy war are actually distinct.

If proxies can be difficult to control, then why do interveners choose proxy war? Groh argues that prospective interveners choose proxy war when “‘doing nothing’ is too weak and committing the state’s own forces is too risky” (p. 8). High risk of escalation, lack of domestic support, lack of international support, and lack of capacity can all make direct intervention too risky. While capable states prefer direct intervention to the “inefficiency” of using a proxy, the risks of direct intervention often leave would-be interveners with proxy war as the least bad option (hence the title of the book) (p. 65).

Groh provides another important conceptual contribution to the literature by offering a typology of proxy wars and the goals of interveners. First, an intervener could be “in it to win it,” seeking military victory for the proxy when it has a strong stake in the outcome of a conflict. Second, a “holding action” proxy war is when the intervener desires maintaining the status quo but hopes to get a better outcome from the conflict by supporting the proxy. Third, when “meddling,” the intervener would like to alter the status quo but the conflict is not important enough to justify putting substantial resources into the proxy war. Finally, in “feeding the chaos,” the intervener would like to alter the status quo but views gains as unlikely, so it aims merely to prolong the violence (pp. 8-9). Groh stops short, however, of examining when proxy war could be an attractive option in its own right depending on the intervener’s goals. For example, if a state is “in it to win it,” proxy war could be the only way to cultivate a proxy’s independence and its legitimacy. Direct intervention could make it harder for the proxy to win and then effectively govern after winning.[2] Sometimes proxy war may be the best option instead of a last resort.

Groh also does not fully address the information environment in which states make interven-

tion decisions. He explains using agency theory that an intervener can encounter problems controlling the proxy as the result of hidden information about the proxy's goals and behavior before and during an intervention. Most of the case studies presented in Groh's book, however, suggest interveners are often fully aware from the beginning of potential conflicts of interest. If interveners know the proxy will be difficult to control when they first enter a conflict, it is worth examining why interveners choose proxy war even when they anticipate significant control issues. For example, in the case of Indian support of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, India knew it wanted a one-state solution while its proxy wanted independence from Sri Lanka. India accepted this divergence initially but escalated involvement once the Tamil Tigers refused to accept a peace deal. Future work should address when interveners are willing to accept limited control over the proxy and when they abandon the proxy or escalate their involvement.

*Proxy War* provides important conceptual innovations in the study of proxy war and finds its motivation and urgency in serving as a guide for policy. If the past decade is any indication, proxy war will only increase as the world becomes more multipolar, as Groh points out. Understanding proxy war is therefore critical for the United States when considering its own intervention policy and responding to proxy wars by such states as Russia and Iran. Groh provides a much-needed caution that "the usefulness of proxy war has unfortunately been overblown" (p. 2). While it might be tempting to focus on proxy war as a means to avoid the costs of direct intervention, proxy war can itself be very costly if it escalates or if the proxy is difficult to control. Groh's main goals are to help us "understand the phenomenon better in its application" as well as "provid[e] a useful way to think about a policy of proxy war" (p. 6). In these two goals, Groh succeeds, presenting a useful way to think about proxy war for academics and policy-

makers alike while sparking debate about questions still unaddressed.

#### Notes

[1]. Tyrone L. Groh's book is part of a wave of recent work on proxy war to remedy this gap in the literature. See Walter Carl Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counter Insurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Eli Berman and David A. Lake, eds., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); and Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

[2]. David A. Lake makes a similar point in *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016). For an excellent roundtable on the book, see Francis J. Gavin, David Chandler, Bridget L. Coggins, Stephen D. Krasner, and David A. Lake, "Roundtable 9-15 on *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention*," H-Diplo ISSF, May 15, 2017, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/9-15-dilemma>.

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