

Force are literally *not mentioned* in a book about a coming world war. Worse, in a book that features politicians and military officers from China, Russia, India, and Iran, the key villain is not just an American, but a former West Point football player. Apparently, the shutout in last year's Army-Navy game left more of a mark than I had realized.

*2034* is a good companion read to *Unrestricted Warfare*, written by People's Liberation Army colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui in 1999. This book argues that the United States remains vulnerable to an indirect approach, including cyber and network attacks. MIT's M. Taylor Fravel, whose recent book *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton University Press, 2019) would add additional depth to the discussion of the *2034* scenario.

Scenarios for war and operational art in an era of globalization are exactly the subjects that should be discussed in the Pentagon and in our institutions of professional military education. The beauty of *2034* is that it raises issues of such importance in a compulsively readable way that it makes a terrific book for an Officer Professional Development session. But bring your own maps. JFQ

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### Proxy War: The Least Bad Option

By Tyrone L. Groh  
Stanford University Press, 2019  
264 pp. \$65.00  
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Reviewed by Tobias B. Switzer

If proxy wars will haunt the future, as Tyrone Groh suggests, then *Proxy War* will prove to be not only useful but also essential. Writing to policymakers and strategists, Groh offers many valuable considerations for clear and sober thinking about the employment of a proxy and, conversely, how to overcome a proxy threat.

There are innumerable options available between direct military intervention and doing nothing, including proxy war, for a country with national security concerns abroad. As Groh defines it, *proxy war* is the act of “directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state.” A proxy war is a discrete policy choice within a more extensive set of indirect approaches. However tempting it may be to outsource violence to achieve the desired outcome in another state,

proxy war policy is complicated and fraught with peril.

Groh warns that proxy wars are neither cheap nor riskless, but when employed under narrow conditions, a proxy war policy can help states secure their interests. In situations where outcomes short of a total military defeat of the target state are acceptable, a proxy can be effective. Groh makes an insightful contribution to proxy war policy by classifying these different objectives and their accompanying risks into four categories: “in it to win it,” “holding action,” “meddling,” and “feeding the chaos.”

Another strength of *Proxy War* is Groh's convincing argument, threaded throughout, that “the complexity of proxy war, like any social interaction, quickly overwhelms the human brain.” In unpacking the different aspects of an intervening state's relationship with its proxy, Groh stresses that employing a proxy is not as simple as hiring a teenager to mow one's lawn. Policymakers and strategists must consider the dynamics within the target country, the intervening country, and across the international community, as well as the capability and goals of the proxy. These factors and the ability to surveil and direct the proxy's actions contribute to the likelihood of success or failure.

The most important contribution of *Proxy War*, however, is that while most of these factors are environmental and out of the control of the policymaker, Groh identifies two key variables an intervening state can alter to help ensure a more successful outcome: policy coherence and proxy control. In no uncertain terms, Groh asserts that “an intervening state intending to engage in a proxy war must assess its ability to control its proxy and limit its objectives commensurate with that ability.”

Left unmonitored, a proxy will likely use intervening state resources toward different objectives. The intervening state must exploit the proxy's “constant fear of being abandoned,” as Groh describes, to keep the proxy working toward the desired outcome. With too many resources, a proxy may deviate from the

intervening state's direction; with too few resources, the proxy will be unable to do its job. This delicate tension often requires an intervening state to commit its resources, such as advisors, airpower, and intelligence support—the shadow costs of a proxy war policy—to observe, control, and enable the proxy.

Policy coherence is the other lever the intervening state controls, and its importance is easy to overlook. Contravening policy goals at different levels of governance will undermine the proxy war policies. One of *Proxy War's* most insightful points is how policy drift—known to military strategists as mission creep—can set in and undermine the effort. Keeping a leader's expectations in check is half the battle for strategists and policymakers. Many states began a proxy war with modest goals in mind, but its leaders shifted to a more ambitious vision on seeing initial success and ended up empty-handed.

To cut through the complexity and ensure the greatest leverage for a policy, *Proxy War* offers three heuristics: “know your enemy, but know your proxy even better,” “let the proxy lead, but only so far,” and “cultivate proxy dependence.” Before a state hands over guns and money, it should have a deep understanding of its proxy's objectives, Groh argues. Aligned goals imply fewer requirements to supervise the proxy. However, when goals diverge, then the price is higher oversight costs.

Letting the proxy get too far in front of the intervening state can result in total loss of control, potentially genocide and other atrocities, Groh warns. Worse still, an unleashed proxy can potentially turn on its client. Finally, a lonely proxy is a good proxy. A proxy's incentives to comply with any single state's directives diminish when multiple states offer assistance. Isolating the proxy from other sources of support and supplying the minimal resources needed to accomplish the intervening state's objective are crucial for coercing the proxy, Groh asserts.

*Proxy War* suffers from one early distraction in the form of a 40-page chapter that advertises itself as a

description of how proxy wars evolved since the end of World War II. While Groh serves up many interesting examples of proxy war, he also includes a complicated academic model, leaving solid ground for the ethereal. Departing from the book's intended purpose, it drifts into a confusing international relations theory that attempts to link world order and a state's vital and desirable interests to explain its proxy war decisions. This section may fall flat for generalist readers, but press on or skip ahead.

One of *Proxy War's* many treasures is its three detailed case studies: the United States in Laos, South Africa in Angola, and India in Sri Lanka. By giving each lesser known example an entire chapter, Groh provides rich texture and variation to the book and illuminates his concepts more thoroughly. For readers seeking more information, Groh offers over 25 pages of notes and a table summary of 33 separate proxy wars that occurred between 1945 and 2001. In all, *Proxy War* is a praiseworthy book that I urge national security policymakers and irregular warfare practitioners to read. JFQ

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Strategic Forum 307

*Baltics Left of Bang: Comprehensive Defense in the Baltic States*

By Dalia Bankauskaite, Janis Berzins, Tony Lawrence, Deividas Šlekys, Brett Swaney, and T.X. Hammes



Since regaining independence in 1991, the Baltic states' (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) foreign and

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