

## *'Proxy War': a reconceptualisation*

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# **‘Proxy War’ - A Reconceptualization**

Vladimir Rauta<sup>a\*</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>School of Politics, Economics, and International Relations, University of Reading,  
Reading, United Kingdom*

\*[v.rauta@reading.ac.uk](mailto:v.rauta@reading.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This article presents a definitional structure for the notion of ‘proxy war’ organised around three components: (1) a *material-constitutive feature*, e.g. external support; (2) a *processual feature* explaining the modalities through which the material-constitutive component is provided; and (3) a *relational feature* underlying its specific type of strategic behaviour, e.g. strategic bargaining short of alliance building. In doing so, the article investigates the analytical utility of ‘proxy war’ as concept given the rapid expansion of the literature. First, the article evaluates the multiple usages of the term of ‘proxy war’ in light of its contested character. Second, it proposes a way of making sense of the literature’s conceptual turmoil by analysing the different attempts at defining the notion. To this end, it adds an important link to the methodology of concept analysis, namely the ‘semantic field’, which it re-introduces as a heuristic to identify ‘military intervention’ as a root concept for defining proxy wars. The article does so by identifying a type of semantic relationship between ‘proxy war’ and ‘military intervention’, namely *sub-type inclusion*.

**Keywords:** concept formation; proxy war; proxy warfare; concept analysis; semantic field; external support; delegation.

## Introduction

The study of proxy wars has made great advances over the last decade. This expansion of research provided insights into a serious international security problem (Rauta and Mumford, in Dover *et al.* 2017). Developed across multiple research clusters (Rauta 2020a), the debate has largely coalesced around two cores: international security and strategic studies (Hughes 2012; Innes 2012; Mumford 2013; Borghard 2014; Brown 2016; Marshall 2016; Moghadam and Wyss, 2020; Rauta 2016, 2018; Sozer 2016; Groh 2019); and the study of external support to factions in civil war as both ‘delegation’ and, more recently, ‘indirect governance’ (Salehyan 2010; Salehyan *et al.* 2011; Salehyan *et al.* 2014; Karlén 2017a, 2017b; Sawyer *et al.* 2017; Popovic 2018; Abbott *et al.* 2020; Anderson 2019; Petrova 2019; Roberts 2019)<sup>1</sup>. Karlén (2016) has provided an overview of the latter’s development, and a recent paper categorised the former’s growth into three generations: founders, framers, and reformers (Rauta 2020b). Notwithstanding its generational development, the debate has shared some of the problems of emerging research areas, including conceptual and definitional ‘battles’, theoretical disagreements, operationalisation differences, and methodological preferences (Kalyvas, in Chenoweth *et al.* 2019, pp. 11-12).

The aim of this article is to discuss only one such issue, conceptualisation, across one specific research cluster, namely proxy wars studies. A focus on how the debate has used/abused, deployed/employed, or adopted/rejected the concept of ‘proxy war’ serves as a useful point of departure for a broader evaluation of where the field is and where it is going. Starting with an evaluation of concepts matters because it is linked to our ability to compare research findings (Stanton in Chenoweth *et al.* 2019, p. 348), to construct

common and shared knowledge (Gerring 1999, p. 360; Sartori, in Collier and Gerring 2009a, p. 64), and to ensure the future progress of the debate.

First, as Tamm argued, there is a lack of conceptual work on proxy war (2014, p. 381; see Hughes 2012, p. 5), with the exception of an analysis of the theoretical implication of terminological choices regarding the parties involved in proxy wars (Rauta 2018), and Hauter's attempt at bridging the 'intervention'-'delegation' gap (2019). There have been calls to 'get real about what a proxy war is' (Beehner 2015), to move beyond the paralysis of the debate by providing richer and sharper definitions (Groh 2019; Sterman 2019), and an acknowledgement of the theoretical impediments brought by the lack of conceptual clarity (Moghadam and Wyss 2020, p. 124). Second, current conceptualisation has followed a curious trajectory. On the one hand, there has been a push towards rejecting the analytical utility of 'proxy wars' (San-Akca 2016), leading to the concept being perceived as 'a dirty word in foreign affairs' (Sozer 2016, p. 643). On the other hand, 'proxy war' has been replaced with an ever-expanding range of conceptual alternatives (Karlén 2017b, p. 16; Sozer 2016, p. 643), in the absence of rigorous conceptual analysis.

To address this problem, the article reconceptualises the notion of 'proxy war' in Giovanni Sartori's tradition of 'semantic' concept analysis (Goertz 2006, p. 3). First, the article provides an overview of the conceptual problems surrounding the usages of the term of 'proxy war'<sup>2</sup>. Second, it proposes a way of making sense of the proxy wars literature's conceptual turmoil by analysing the different attempts at conceptualising and defining its central subject. This matters because concepts and their definitions cannot be divorced from their semantic context, and any analysis of one concept, invariably, becomes 'part of an interpretation within that semantic web' (Guzzini 2013, p. 536). To this end, I add an important link to the methodology of concept analysis, namely the

‘semantic field’. Introduced by Sartori (in Collier and Gerring 2009a, p. 65), the notion of ‘semantic field’ has been defined as ‘a set of independent-interdependent terms, [...], which represent the conceptual structure, or the conceptual framework of a given field’ (in Collier and Gerring 2009b, p. 92).

Because concept analysis has not capitalised on ‘semantic field’ the same way it has done with notions such as ‘ladder of abstraction’ or the ‘extension-intension’ binary (Sartori 1970), I re-introduce it as a heuristic to identify a root concept for the notion of ‘proxy wars’. I do so by identifying a clear semantic relationship between ‘proxy war’ and ‘military intervention’, namely *sub-type inclusion*. This allows the analysis to determine clearer conceptual structures with identifiable properties for the notion of ‘proxy war’ as it occupies a place in each semantic field of intervention. I then group these key dimensions into a definitional structure of ‘proxy war’ organised around three components: (1) *a material-constitutive feature*, e.g. the provision of some form of support to a proxy by an external actor, a Beneficiary/Principal/Sponsor; (2) *a processual feature* explaining the modalities through which the material-constitutive component is provided; and (3) *a relational feature* underlying its specific type of strategic behaviour and its character, e.g. strategic bargaining short of alliance building.

In doing so, the aims of the paper are not to homogenise conceptual decision-making across research or to attempt to regulate the field’s ‘conceptual competition’ (Kalyvas in Boix and Stokes 2009, p. 416). The article is decidedly not about what conceptual category takes precedence, nor about the imposition of versions of conceptual best practices. Rather it offers *the* first analysis of the conceptual problems in proxy war studies, and puts forward a case for understanding proxy wars as specific forms of indirect interventionist interaction in the international system. Its significance is two-fold. First, conceptual problems usually hinder the development of research enterprises (Kalyvas in

Boix and Stokes 2009, p. 416). If we draw a parallel to the vast study of civil war that is still debating the intellectual traditions and transformations of its central concept (Armitage 2017), then an early conceptual discussion of ‘proxy war’ benefits the nascent sub-field of proxy war studies.

Second, ironing out conceptual problems in proxy wars research paves the way for the proxy war research cluster to inform different research strands dealing with the empirical problem of supporting rebels that have been reticent to consider its insights. To this end, it opens an avenue to address de Soysa’s observation that ‘the issue of proxy war has thus far been neglected in the theoretical and empirical models of civil wars’ (2017, p. 15). Specifically, it invites future research to expand the analysis for the concepts of ‘delegation’ and ‘indirect governance’ in a comparative manner to see similarities and differences between all conceptual alternatives<sup>3</sup>. By introducing the notion of ‘semantic field’ and by presenting a set of determinants for ‘proxy war’, this article provides a way of doing so, while emphasising the huge potential for cross-field communication.

### **Is ‘proxy war’ really that poor a concept?**

A quick survey of the conceptual problems in the debate is a useful starting point for a discussion about determining the key characteristics of proxy wars. Figure 1.1 provides this overview by determining two categories of problems distinguished on the basis of whether they concern *concept formation* or *concept employment*. In an effort to simplify the usual complicated character of conceptual debates, I distinguish two problems for each category drawing on commonly identified errors (Collier and Mahon 1993; Gerring 1999). In short, concept formation refers to issues with construction and categorisation of the notion of ‘proxy war’, whereas concept employment underlines its

rejection and replacement. Taken together, these problems amount pursuing careless card reshuffling (Sartori in Collier and Gerring 2009a, p. 68), with consequences for the present and future of the debate.

[INSERT FIGURE 1.1 HERE]

The debate's approach to construction and categorisation of 'proxy war' underlines problems with the framing, definition, and typology of 'proxy wars' – and these will be detailed below in the discussion on this article's proposed definitional structure. So far, however, no argument has questioned what 'proxy' qualifies as a determinant of 'war', in the same way we have now come to understand that qualifying a war as 'civil' acknowledges 'the familiarity of the enemies as members of the same community' (Armitage 2017, p. 12). Is 'proxy' a measure of distance, an indicator of a policy shorthand, or an identifier of some type of asymmetry? Is the war nominated as 'proxy' strategically hierarchical, or, in fact, heterarchical given the mutual constitutivity between Principal and Agent? Sterman (2019) acknowledges this difficulty inherent in the adjective, there have been attempts at distinguishing between 'proxy' and 'auxiliary' forces (Scheipers 2015; Rauta in Brown *et al.*, 2019), and Phillips and Valbjørn (2018) come closest by discussing the identities shaping choices of proxies in the context of Syrian civil war.

Yet, the overall framing of the debate has neither addressed the symbolic power of the adjective 'proxy', nor has it reconciled the intellectual assumptions 'proxy' attaches to 'war' when attempting to identify an empirical phenomenon. There are obvious limitations to the efforts of reaching clarity over naming, but establishing a baseline provides insight into the point from which a war's character might change. In fact, 'proxy'



has been thought more of as a trope with a three-fold functionality: (1) presenting low opportunity costs for conceptual innovation – e.g. ‘proxy alliances’ (Borghard 2014), ‘semi-proxy wars’ (Cragin 2015), or ‘third-party proxies’ (Rubright 2016); (2) inviting a range of over-stretched, imprecise, and catch-all definitions – e.g. Olsen’s discussion of the African Union and sub-regional organisations as American and European Union counter-terrorist proxies (2014), or Stambøl’s discussion of the European Union’s anti-drug cooperation mechanisms with regional partners as ‘proxies’ (2016); and (3) contributing to policy-appealing, but theoretically under-specified typologies – e.g. Fox’s modes of proxy warfare (2020)<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, the debate is yet to ‘soften or hide the coarseness of proxy warfare’ (Fox 2019, p. 1), and discussions of proxy wars are still partly ‘bogged down in conspiracy theories and scandals of one kind or another, a sorry state that has muddied already murky waters’ (Innes 2012, p. xiv).

Problems surrounding conceptual employment of ‘proxy wars’ include the rejection of the analytical utility of the notion of ‘proxy war’ (San-Akca 2016; 2017), and its replacement with either new alternatives such as ‘surrogate warfare’ (Krieg and Rickli 2018) and ‘vicarious war’ (Waldman 2018), or established concepts such as ‘sponsorship’, ‘delegation’, ‘substitution’, ‘empowerment’, ‘backing’, ‘external support’ (for a full range Karlén 2016, 2017a, 2017b)<sup>5</sup>. Rejecting and replacing ‘proxy war’ have been suggested without systematic justification and process (concept analysis), and in a normatively questionable way with clear pejorative undertones, again emphasising the need to discuss, firstly, what ‘proxy’ means.

One of the earliest comments on the notion of ‘proxy war’ presented it as part of a system of causes for why foreign states may support rebel groups in a civil war (Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz 2008, p. 484). This was followed by complaints about the use of ‘proxy warfare’ in a descriptive and a-theoretical manner (Salehyan 2010, p.

496), and its anchorage in the fabric of the Cold War (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010, p. 420; Anderson, 2019). San-Akca (2016) has provided a strong rebuttal to the use of ‘proxy war’ using as an argument the dominance of state-centrism over conflict research, arguing that ‘proxy war is a limited conceptualisation of these complex interactions [between state and non-state]’ (2017, p. 4), while linking this to the term’s bias ‘against nonstate actors, implying that they exist to the extent that states need them as proxies’ (2017, p. 4). To this specific point, Moghadam and Wyss (2020) add the most valuable discussion to date on armed non-state actors as wagers of proxy wars, not only addressing a serious gap in the debate but also invalidating such criticism.

Rejecting ‘proxy war’ has been automatic, unreflective, and value-laden. As Barkawi observed, the state centrism complaint has permitted ‘proxy war’ to be obscured by the image of major war and the horizontal world of sovereign states it presupposes (2016, p. 206). Disengagement with the concept in light of its Cold War links has produced a sceptical view of ‘proxy war’ as a mere ‘moniker’ of the Cold War superpower interventionism (Kalyvas, in Chenoweth *et al.* 2019, p. 16), in spite of recent research pushing for the widening of the historical background against which we research the problem (Rauta 2020b). This conceptual rejection does not identify a deficit with the notion itself, rather deeper epistemological and ontological processes of knowledge production. First, straitjacketing ‘proxy war’ to the Cold War replicates the long tradition of theorising international relations as constitutive of the practices of international politics (Smith in Booth and Smith, 1995). In doing so, it has falsely attached an image and expectation of symmetric retaliation that reflected the bipolar structure of the system (Beehner 2015), leading to false assumptions that for an event to be qualified as a ‘proxy war’, both sides should respond in kind. The American support of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan was a response to and responded by the Soviets with direct military

intervention, not with a proxy response. Second, it ignores the fact that the meaning of concepts is mediated by change: if we have acknowledged that the key characteristics of civil wars are variable rather than constant, and that civil wars underwent massive structural changes (Kalyvas, in Strachan and Scheipers 2013 p. 203), then why can we not apply these insights to the employment of ‘proxy wars’, instead of rejecting it?

More importantly, in objecting to the relevance of the term, ‘proxy war’ is not defined, but rejected on terminological grounds, under-evaluated failures, and contextual contingencies. This is a clear situation in which the *definiens*, the defining formulation, has been outranked by the *definiendum*, the term to be defined. To paraphrase Guzzini, we are not provided with an analytical assessment, but rather with a performative one that answers the question of ‘what does X concept do?’ as opposed to ‘what does X concept mean?’ (2005, p. 496). Against this background, I propose asking the questions that should have preceded the literature’s refutation of ‘proxy wars’. First, is there anything analytically specific about ‘proxy wars’? If this is not the case, then we could conclude that part of the debate was intuitively right and no longer insist on its employment. Second, if there is indeed something unique, we should find out what this is and ask what intellectual benefits this analytical specificity brings. I attempt an answer to these questions in the sections below and begin by briefly introducing the notion of ‘semantic field’ to the methodology of concept analysis.

### **Concept analysis and semantic fields**

Giovani Sartori defined the ‘semantic field’ as

‘a clustering of terms such that each of its component elements interacts with all the others, and, [...], is altered by any alteration of the others. In other words, a semantic field consists of a set of

associated, neighbouring terms that hang together under the following test: when one term is redefined, the other terms or some other terms also need to be redefined' (in Collier and Gerring 2009b, p. 124).

Sartori linked it to conceptualisation, operationalisation, and definition (in Collier and Gerring 2009a, p. 92). Without venturing into a complicated semantic discussion, it is worth point out that the notion's intellectual heritage goes back to the seminal work of Ferdinand de Saussure who argued that words are linked to other words in the same language like a cell in a network (Allan 2002, p. 258). In semantics, 'semantic field' has been defined as a domain of relevant words in specific areas (Goddard 1999, p. 43), and, in political science, as 'a group of terms and symbols that relate to each other in a particular way' (Berenskoetter 2016, p. 6).

For Sartori, however, the semantic field is important inasmuch as it becomes a benchmark for avoiding ambiguity, an endeavour which takes centre place in his research programme. I argue that the notion of 'semantic field' can be extended beyond its ability to weigh in this particular process, which in and of itself has been criticized for its excessive naturalism (Bevir and Kedar 2008, p. 509). When terms come with 'strings' in semantic fields it means their 'hanging out' is decidedly non-random and essentially interactive. As Allan put it 'concepts in a semantic field are related in various ways' (2001, p. 260), with synonymy and antonymy being examples of such relationships (Finch 2000, p. 180). We already see this in the proxy war debate: some scholars use concepts synonymously, while others attach different connotations (Karlén 2017b, p. 16). I propose harnessing this relationality for the process of identifying clearer concept structures, with easily determined core and marginal features/properties.

To this end, I define 'semantic field' as *an inter-relational semantic space populated with terms whose membership to the field is the result of the terms' ability to*

*acquire meaning by simultaneously crossing two boundaries of meaning: the boundary of contrast and that of conformity (where contrast separates terms through differentiation and conformity associates terms through similarity).* In other words, the semantic field is the space in which a concept's meaning is mutually constituted in definitions, through an active process of assembling *semantic crossovers* (shared features) and *semantic nuances* (properties setting terms apart). A quick review of the crossover-nuance balance across definitions of 'proxy war' reveals, first, that shared features concern the type of violent behaviour circumvented by terms (war, conflict, or intervention) as well as its character (low intensity, covert, great power, etc.). Second, differentiating properties add varying degrees of specificity concerning the actors involved, the strategic contexts, and the benefits or rationales of waging them. In the next section, I discuss the implications of the type of violent behaviour, by reconstructing the meaning of 'proxy war' as 'indirect intervention'. I argue that the 'proxy war'-'intervention' semantic relationship is *sub-type inclusion*, or a 'kind of' link (Finch 2000), given that definitions converge on this issue without explaining the links clearly. Also known as 'kind hierarchy', sub-type inclusion has been defined as 'a nested set of concepts in which the subordinate concepts or subtypes are a *kind of* in relation to the superordinate concepts' (Collier and Levitsky, in Collier and Gerring 2009, p. 270). This then becomes the background for drawing a set of conceptual properties for 'proxy war' acting a common denominator for a definitional structure, and not a fixed, confined definition, which I discuss in the final section of the article. In doing so, this addresses the criticism and revisions brought to Sartori's concept analysis methodology, whereby concepts are defined by the presence of a relative, not absolute, number of features (Collier and Mahon, 1993; Goertz 2006).

### **Sub-type inclusion: proxy wars as intervention**

As discussed above, members of a semantic field occupy their space by crossing two boundaries of meaning: the boundary of contrast which captures differences, and that of conformity which underlines similarities. *Sub-type inclusion* is one such pathway of boundary crossing. This relationship of inclusion between concepts operates a process of ordering of meaning. Simply put, sub-type inclusion is a classification in which the meaning of a core concepts narrows down into that of a subordinate concept: whilst it retains some general properties from its core (defined above as *semantic crossovers*), it acquires individual attributes (defined above as *the semantic nuances*) that qualify the specificity of the concept as a sub-type of the core. In this section, I reconstruct proxy wars as *intervention sub-types* because both literatures – military intervention and proxy war – rest on a conceptual foundation that sees proxy wars as a type of intervention, in spite of their limited communication. In order to delineate the conceptual core of the notion of ‘proxy war’ as an intervention sub-type, I trace the outline of this particular semantic field in Figure 1.2.

[INSERT FIGURE 1.2. HERE]

This shows the relationships between terms as a semantic tree in which the lower levels are included as logical ‘kind of’ subordinates, defined by increasing specificity. Because of this top-down logical progression of meaning acquisition, I start with ‘intervention’. This is usually conceptualised as a foreign policy tool (Palmer and Morgan 2006; Regan 2010), and as such it is subordinated semantically to ‘foreign policy’ which becomes its semantic pivot. Here, ‘intervention’ is defined at its broadest: ‘a means of

projecting power’ which ‘has a practical or functional policy utility in addressing a range of foreign policy problems’ (MacMillan 2019, p. 576), or as ‘convention-breaking military and/or economic activities in the internal affairs of a foreign country targeted at the authority structures of the government with the aim of affecting the balance of power between the government and opposition forces’ (Regan 1998, p. 756). The vast literature on intervention is itself undecided on what exactly falls under the rubric ‘intervention’ (Regan 2010), and because intervention comes in many forms (MacMillan 2019, p. 576), the debate identified, classified, and measured different types so as to avoid everything becoming intervention (Tillema and Van Wingen 1982, p. 223; Regan 2010).

Acknowledging Pearsons’ early observation that we need to distinguish between military and non-military forms of intervention (1974, p. 259), what concerns us here is ‘military intervention’, defined in the literature as the movement of regular troops or forces of one country inside another, in the context of some political issue or dispute (Pickering and Kisangani 2009). At its simplest, intervention stands for large-scale military operations intended to influence strategic outcomes and it involves the following: (1) *an intervener*; (2) *a target state*; (3) *a mode of intervention*. As Tillema put it in a definition still relevant today, intervention refers to the ‘direct combatant or combat-preparatory military operations conducted upon foreign territory by units of a state’s regular military forces’ (1989, p. 187). These definitions cast ‘military intervention’ narrowly emphasising its ‘direct’ character as the key semantic nuance.

To this conceptualisation, the semantic field subordinates the notion of ‘third-party intervention’ in an effort to build further specificity and to differentiate between other forms of intervention aimed at ending the conflict such as mediation or arbitration (Regan 2000; 2002; Gleditsch and Beardsley 2004; Reagan and Aydin 2005; Blach-Lindsay et al 2008). This is then broken down into ‘direct’ (Regan 1998, p. 756) and

‘indirect’ intervention (Regan 1996; 2010; Yoon 1997; Gleditsch 2007; Jones 2017), in recognition of the fact that external states do not just intervene directly with military personnel, but also indirectly through the provision of a range of support (military and non-military). The literature captures this as ‘hostile-supportive’ or ‘government-biased’/‘rebel-biased’ interventions (Balch-Lindsay et al 2008; Peksen and Lounsbery 2012; Sullivan and Karreth 2015), an important distinction which clarifies not just theoretical expectations, but ‘better mirrors how interventions take place in reality’ (Findley and Teo 2006, p. 892). Such empirical differences can be observed in the context of the ongoing Syrian civil war: on the one hand, Turkey’s harbouring of the Free Syrian Army rebels has taken the form of indirect intervention aimed at both regional rivals, Iran and Syria, and the local Kurdish groups; on the other, the direct Russian intervention in support of the Assad regime is a classic type of direct military intervention.

Yoon defines ‘indirect intervention’ as ‘one or a combination of such activities as initiation or increase of arms supply or deployment of military advisers without participation in actual fighting’ (1997, p. 585). In doing so, Yoon echoes Dunér’s identification of the provision of support as the key marker of indirect intervention which he labelled precisely as ‘proxy wars’ (1981, p. 356). In terms of the shifts of meaning vis-à-vis proxy wars within this semantic field, two steps are relevant. The literature on military intervention, first, classes ‘indirect intervention’ as complimentary to the direct mode of intervention: the semantic crossovers emphasise the interventionist core of this international behaviour, while the semantic nuances add conceptual specificity by highlighting ‘indirectness’ as the absence of actual fighting and its substitution with the provision of support.

Figure 1.2 captures the imperfect and often theoretical ‘direct’-‘indirect’ dichotomy by showing how the two *complement* and *substitute* each other as tools of



statecraft (Gleditsch 2007; Gleditsch *et al.* 2008; Salehyan 2010). To understand the latter, we look at the Iranian involvement in the Yemeni civil war which marks a clear substitution of direct violence with the Houthi rebels fighting not just *in situ*, but also attacking Saudi oil tankers in the Bab al-Mandab Strait (Rouhi 2018, p. 36). The complementarity of direct and indirect intervention can be noted with multiple actors' involvement in the Syrian civil war: on the one hand, Turkey intervened directly and assumed control of the Syrian city of Afrin in 2018, and on the other hand, it has provided support to Salafi-jihadist groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham (Jones 2018, p. 190).

Second, military intervention literature treats 'indirect intervention' and 'proxy wars' synonymously, tying, therefore, the conceptual origins of 'proxy wars' to the semantic field of military intervention as a clear sub-type of intervention. Despite not producing a coherent research enterprise around proxy intervention, military intervention literature provides the conceptual premises for the nascent literature on proxy wars: Andrew Mumford makes a strong case against misrepresenting proxy wars as direct intervention (2013, pp. 22-23; Gleditsch 2007, p. 296), while Cragin argues that the term 'proxy war' refers specifically to an indirectly fought conflict (2015, p. 312). As such, we see how 'proxy war' crossed borders of meaning within the military intervention literature acquiring the semantic properties of a form of indirect intervention, which the next section unpacks by proposing a more rigorous process of defining.

### **Towards a more robust definitional structure of the notion of 'proxy war'**

The previous section located proxy wars in the semantic field of intervention. This brought together at the conceptual level two literatures that have been speaking about the

same problem in a similar fashion, yet at the same time past each other. Specifically, it provided a tentative corrective to arguments that questioned the utility of the notion of ‘proxy war’ by clarifying that many interventions ‘make use of proxy relationship[s] to achieve relevant military and political objectives’ (Pfaff 2017, p. 317). Tracing the interventionist genealogy of ‘proxy war’ resolves only half of the impasse. As discussed in this section, working towards developing a more robust definition is the second step forward. However, instead of attempting to provide *a* definition as *the* definition, this section outlines a definitional structure whose determinants combine to form a minimal, necessary and sufficient set of attributes required to identify an empirical referent under the label ‘proxy war’. Taken together, the determinants of the structure I present below form a descriptive partnership which reinforce proxy wars as an indirect intervention whilst providing a useful generative benchmark for future definitions.

Notwithstanding the acknowledged difficulties of defining its referent (Loveman 2002, p. 30; Hughes 2012, p. 15; Sterman 2019), the debate has provided a range of definitions, whose principle dimensions are presented in Table 1.1 below, along the lines of assumptions, conditions, and characteristics. Next to these definition, Loveman identified six common features: (1) the presence of a relationship; (2) the potential for this to be over/covert; (3) provision of material aid; (4) conditionality of provision of material aid to cooperation (5) grass-roots conflict buy-in; and (6) capacity for escalation (2002, pp. 32-33). Similarly, Hughes presented three criteria: (1) provision of direct assistance; (2) existence of a common target; and (3) sustained Beneficiary-Proxy relation, not mere short-term cooperation (2012). Finally, Pfaff penned an elaborate set of norms guiding the proxy relationship drawing on just war theory (2017), and Fox spoke of a wider proxy war environment bound by a range of tenets codifying the relationship (2019, p. 5).

[INSERT TABLE 1.1 HERE]

The literature's definitional effort allows a series of observations. First, whilst 'it is not always clear what characterizes a proxy' (Dunér, 1981: 353), and identifying indirect intervention is challenging, defining proxy wars is a first-tier consideration in the debate. Working towards refining this process, therefore, matters and locating the notion in the semantic field of military intervention provides a useful background. Second, the definitions sit on a maximalist-minimalist spectrum, capturing enormous variation of detail: *who fights, for whom* and *at whose request, against whom, why, how, where, and for how long*. This heterogeneity speaks to much more than just the individuality of research programmes. Rather, it underlines the complexity of the proxy war phenomenon which we should take seriously and in the same way we have come to understand the complexity of civil wars.

This carries two implications on how we define: (1) an acknowledgement that what a concept 'is' does not have a single answer (Berenskoetter 2016), and (2) the best way forward is to embed the phenomenon's multidimensionality and multilevel nature in a definitional structure, and not an overarching definition imposed from one corner of the debate. To this end, I present the following definitional structure for 'proxy wars': (1) *a material-constitutive feature*, e.g. the provision of some form of support to a proxy by an external actor, a Beneficiary or Principal; (2) *a processual feature* explaining the modalities through which the material-constitutive component is provided; and (3) *a relational feature* underlying its specific type of strategic behaviour and its character, e.g. strategic bargaining short of alliance building

The *material-constitutive feature* identifies an intrinsically necessary attribute of proxy wars: their constitution through the provision of specific forms of external support. ‘External support’ references a material-constitutive feature because the proxy relationship is usually undertaken through the provision, covert or overt, of some form of support to the party acting as ‘proxy’. Hezbollah, for example, was created with outside support by Iran and Syria during the Lebanese civil war as a forward defence to Israel and the United States, only after their previous proxies, chiefly of which Amal, failed to deliver the desired strategic outcomes and direct military intervention would have been too costly (Byman 2008). Speaking about a war theatre in which Hezbollah has been engaged as a proxy, United States President-elect, Joe Biden, argued that US efforts to counter ISIS in Syria were undermined by influx of external support to rebels from the country’s very allies in the region, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, and their resulting proxy wars:

‘What were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad, and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tonnes of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad’ (in Plett Usher 2014).

‘External support’ features as a non-negotiable determinant of what we end up labelling a ‘proxy war’. At its broadest, ‘external support’ is assistance (Roberts 2019) and ranges from provision of finance, training, to help with intelligence, safe havens, and permission for transit (Byman *et al.* 2001). Having previously integrated proxy wars into the semantic field of military intervention as indirect in character, the constitutive function of external support permits drawing an artificial, yet much needed, line between how we understand the direct/indirect binary. On the one hand, we have direct/indirect as categories for *the provision* of support. The provision of support can be done the state

itself, as emphasised by several of the definitions in Table 1.1, or by intermediaries, an overlooked issue in the literature to which I return when discussing the processual feature.

On the other hand, the *support itself* can be direct/indirect, where ‘direct’ refers to the country’s own troops and indirect speaks of the above-mentioned categories: supplies of weapons, financial assistance, or sanctioned use of a neighbouring state’s territory. This is an issue whose conceptualisation has undermined communication between proxy war literature and conflict research. The latter sees external support as unilateral, direct or indirect intervention by a third-party in an internal armed conflict in favour of either the government or the opposition movement (Karlén 2016, p. 117; Grauer and Tierney 2018). In doing so, it blurs the lines between direct and indirect intervention. As such, by including the indirect form of external support in a definitional structure, we are better able to locate the types of backing through which proxy wars are constituted and to isolate these distinct from their direct counter-parts.

Next to the *material constitutive* identifier, I include *a processual feature* explaining the modalities through which the material-constitutive component is provided. This was anticipated by discussing the implications of the direct/indirect dichotomy. There are two potential pathways: first, one in which various institutions of government form complex chains of responsibility over the intervention and allow its aims to be met through a third party (Borghard 2014; Groh 2019, p. 29). Second, provision of support can be achieved through an entirely external intermediary, which is how the USA channelled support to the Mujahedeen through Pakistan, or how its support to UNITA was delivered through Zaire. Distinguishing between the two is crucial because it informs us about the structures of violence: first, the transformation of the fighting dyad into a triad through the proxy’s involvement (San-Akca 2016); and, second, the transformation of the triad into an even more complex fighting dynamic through intermediaries. For

example, in Latin America, the United States' support of the Contras was enabled by training camps in neighbouring Honduras and Costa Rica, and, more recently, Qatar's support to the Dawn faction in the Libyan civil war involved coordinating with Turkey and using Sudan as an intermediary (Wehrey 2014).

As such, the processual part of the definitional structure adds specificity by integrating the material constitutive aspect into a series of interactions between parties. Process features very scantily in the existing definitions, appears mostly as 'delegation', 'sponsorship', or 'empowerment', and is a usual indicator of one's theoretical underpinning – for example, 'delegation' is now associated with Principal Agent theory (Popovic 2018). More importantly, as Tamm remarked, the absence of a focus on process is one of the shortcomings of the literature on external support for rebel groups which has so far provided 'relatively long lists of state motives', referred 'to an abstract policy dispute', and modelled 'the interstate bargaining implications of pro-rebel support' in light of group characteristics (2016, p. 149).

Linking external support to an essentially interactive process of provision/acceptance helps meet a high analytical bar: 'the test for defining a war by proxy is not where the war is fought, and not only by whom, but if we can prove that one actor has been asked by another to fight for him' (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984: 265). Process is an integral definitional benchmark because the mere presence of external support does not reveal much about party dynamics, only about conflict processes such as duration or termination. While we know that external support transforms civil war violence into robust insurgencies (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010) or that financial support is a more fungible form of support (Sawyer *et al.* 2017), identifying the processual feature helps provide partial answers to the twin questions of 'who fights whom and how?', while inviting a revision of the assumptions governing proxy dynamics: e.g. proxy agency and

its role in the initiation/management/control/termination of process of providing support. Contrary to popular belief, proxies request specific form of support, enter proxy-to-proxy relationship themselves, and return the support favour to their Principals, as was the case with the Yemeni Houthis raising nearly \$300.000 for their sponsor, Hezbollah, in the last months of 2019 (Porter 2019).

Such observations should then inform the need for specification of a process of provision of support and to understand it as an iterative set of decisions, and not a onetime discrete grant of war responsibility. In support of this, to the material constitutive and processual feature, I add a *relational* one. The need for this has only recently been acknowledged. Specifically, Sterman argued that we should embrace ‘a definition of proxy warfare that focuses on the constitutional status of the agents and actors involved in a conflict’ (2019). A focus on relationship serves multiple aims. First, it provides a tool to clarify issues such as who can be a proxy and who can delegate to a proxy. Normally, proxy relationships ‘are commonly seen as arrangements in which states sponsors work through non-state proxies, typically rebel or insurgent groups’ (Moghadam and Wyss 2018). Yet, proxy dynamics involve a range of actor types with non-state actors delegating war themselves. While the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo backed militias fighting against the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) in the east of the country, the FDLR itself also cultivated proxies (Arieff 2018). Embedding a relational component in definitional structures ensures the development of actor-centric definitions which permits integrating proxy behaviour by non-state actors whether militias or rebels.

Second, a focus on relations permits specifying what proxy wars are not. Moghadam and Wyss argue that the malleability of the label allows for almost everything to become a proxy. To this end, incorporation relation type helps distinguish proxies from

auxiliaries as well as alliances. Auxiliaries has been defined as military forces supporting militarily the regular armed forces of a state in contrast to proxies (Rauta, in Brown *et al.* 2019). Examples would be: tribal chiefs working with the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) against Rhodesia/Zimbabwe; the Mau Mau Kikuyu auxiliaries helping the British Army during the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya; the Tropas Nomadas assisting the Spanish in Western Sahara; the tirailleur regiments, the moghnaznis, or the harkis fighting alongside the French in Algeria. Similarly, alliances are defined as 'written agreements, signed by official representatives of at least two independent states, that include promise to aid a partner in the event of military conflict, to remain neutral in the event of conflict, to refrain from military conflict with one another, or to consult/cooperate in the event of international crises that create a potential for military conflict' (Leeds *et al.*, 2002: 238). Because proxy dynamics are essentially indirect, it is important to keep distinct cases in which alliances are built, and in which we are talking about relational processes short of alliances that are similar in strategic character but different in logic and aim.

The latter is the relational process accounting for the indirect delegation of violence from one party onto another through a third party, amounting to a proxy war. It presents a specific type of relationship: rather than pulling resources together in a committal and formalised arrangement as in an alliance, the warfighting is entrusted to a party fighting one's target based on an expectation of provision of either *ex ante* support or *ex post* rewards. As Pfaff put it 'it is the indirect nature of the benefactor's involvement that distinguished a proxy relationship from other supportive relationships, such as, for example, an alliance' (2017, p. 2). Therefore, proxy dynamics should not be confused with alliance dynamics in which rebels are known to engage. There are many such examples: the 1980 agreement between Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) resulting in Oromo fighters being admitted to EPLF's



training centre at its base area in the Eritrean Sahel region; the 1995 agreement between the leaders of the National Council for the Defence of Democracy–Forces for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD) and ex-FAR in Burundi calling for common military and diplomatic strategies, joint mobilisation initiatives, logistical, financial and intelligence cooperation; or joint operations between Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Afar Liberation Front (ALF) against the Ethiopian government.

As a configuration of *material-constitutive*, *processual*, and *relational features*, the definitional structure presented here contributes to understanding ‘proxy war’ as a complex semantic entity which incorporates process and actor-specific mechanisms and which occupies a distinctive place in the semantic field of military intervention. Moreover, having also located proxy wars as an indirect interventive behaviour within the semantic field of military intervention, we can employ the concept more robustly with a series analytical advantages which are summarised in the concluding observations.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This article presented the first comprehensive effort at examining the conceptual micro-foundations of the study of proxy wars. At the centre of this endeavour was conceptualisation. This matters for scholarly debate and for policy making as well, because concepts permeate public and popular discourse (Berenskoetter 2016). The Syrian, Libyan, and Yemeni conflicts have become contemporary archetypes of proxy wars adding to a long list of internationalised civil wars, but also to the general confusion over what ‘proxy wars’ mean, how they are waged, and with what consequences.

As the article argued, the heterogeneity of meanings attached to ‘proxy war’ was itself not a problem, rather the rejection of the term without proper conceptual analysis

and without consideration of how its conceptualisation and definition relates and upsets the semantic field through the addition of new terms. To address this, the article, first, located proxy wars in the semantic field of military intervention and then presented a definitional structure combining properties necessary to identify empirical problems as proxy wars. The analytical advantages of employing this structure are two-fold. First, it is a first step away from idiosyncrasy. Instead of contingent definitions, a minimal definitional structure allows the debate to think more productively about the phenomenon in a trans-historical and cross-contextual way (Rauta 2020b). This allows the development of a *longue durée* perspective in the study of proxy wars as continuum: from the Roman's support of the Mamertines against Carthage (Pfaff 2017, p. 305), to Queen Elizabeth I using 'covert means' to influence the Dutch Protestant revolt against Spain (Cormac 2018, p. 2), to Richelieu's waging of war 'via a constellation of proxies' (Rehman 2019), and to T. E. Lawrence's transformation of the Arab Revolt during World War I into a proxy war (Oxnevad 2020). Locating proxy wars on a history that not merely succeeds the Cold War, but actually precedes the bipolar confrontation can be attempted first through a clearer conceptual understanding of the phenomenon.

Second, by identifying the minimally required features of a proxy war, research can blend findings at *macro*-, *meso*-, and *micro*-levels analysis. Proxy wars have featured as non-state conflicts with rebel groups more likely to function as proxies for other states in order to increase their capabilities through military support (Pettersson, Hogbladh, and Oberg 2019). Next to this, proxy wars are both alternatives and parallels to inter-state war, with Sudan and South Sudan, or Ethiopia and Eritrea frequently extending their confrontations through proxy wars. Finally, they have been linked to great power competition as a potentially subversive form of such interaction and as a 'normal feature of great power war' (Fazal and Poast 2019). Perhaps the clearest examples of this, were

the USA-Iran interactions over the last year. At the start of May 2019, former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, released a statement announcing the deployment of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force to the U.S. Central Command region signalling US determination to counter potential Iranian attacks ‘whether by proxy, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or regular Iranian forces’ (White House 2019). The events took an escalatory tone when Iran downed a US drone, and a direct US-Iran confrontation was narrowly averted with President Trump’s decision to abort retaliatory strikes and pursue a covert cyber response. The assassination of Qassem Suleimani in January 2020 brought the Middle East even closer to a USA-Iran direct military exchange, raising key questions over how Iran might use the proxy armies Suleimani had invested in for decades. As such, a robust concept has the potential to drive forward a cumulative research agenda that integrates diverse methodologies, plural theories, and embraces interdisciplinarity. More importantly, it allows the debate to take on pending problems not just as questions, but also through puzzlement. As we move forward, welcoming rich thinking about proxy wars is key especially as we are witnessing the emergence of an enduring research programme whose findings will shape strategic and policy thinking in trying to tackle a serious and pressing policy problem.

## Notes

1. In fact, the study of sponsorship of armed non-state actors has an even longer history across numerous sub-fields. One can identify at least three other research clusters: (1) state sponsorship of terrorism (Byman 2020); (2) covert action and secrecy (Cormac 2018); and (3) the study of proxies within area studies, from Africa (Tamm, 2019) to the Middle East (Hinnebusch and Saouli, 2020; Phillips and Valbjørn, 2018). Given this ‘balkanization’ of research, a discussion about

the concept itself is a useful starting point for cross-field communication.

2. Notwithstanding the differences between ‘war’ and ‘warfare’ – the latter being understood as referencing technologies of fighting (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010), this article treats ‘proxy war’ and ‘proxy warfare’ interchangeably, leaving further conceptual refinement on this issue for future research.
3. Conflict delegation is defined here as a strategy in which a government commits material resources or military expertise to a non-state armed group abroad to target a perceived adversary. Importantly, delegation requires some degree of control over agents – that is – state sponsors are likely to influence the aims, strategies, and tactics of rebel groups (Salehyan 2010, 501). Hauter (2019) presented an attempt at bringing the intervention-delegation gap, and much more work is needed on the issue.
4. Some explanations for these problems follow logically from the fact that research programs (belonging to research sub-fields) ask specific questions and design custom-made concepts serving the requirements of different units and levels of analysis. Moreover, there are the usual culprits: theoretical and methodological preferences. This goes back to the qualitative-quantitative divide extending into conceptual problems (Goertz 2006, p. 2), cutting through the co-constitutivity of theory and concept, and ending in lack of inter-field communication (Guzzini 2013, p. 535).
5. Some of these new concepts can indeed provide an insight into the limitations of existing conceptual language. Moreover, as mentioned above, they are tied to different research aims while also underlining the competitiveness of the intellectual marketplace, fashionably driven by catchy terminology. ‘Surrogate’, ‘vicarious’, and ‘remote’ warfare are the latest iterations in the attempts to grasp

the complexity of contemporary political violence. They are what Heuser called ‘bureaucratically convenient catch-all term’ (2014, p. 741), and not concerned with the discrete problem of waging indirect, war by proxy. ‘Sponsorship’ and ‘delegation’ underline the interest in understating wider processes affecting the incumbent notion of ‘civil war’ and the forms of violence it presupposes.

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*Dr Vladimir Rauta* is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading. He researches proxy wars and has published articles in *International Relations*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *RUSI Journal*, and *Contemporary Security Policy*. He is currently working on a book project analysing the contemporary dynamics of proxy wars with a focus on the Middle East, out in 2022 with *I. B. Tauris*. Together with Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, he is the co-editor of the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*.

## ORCID

Vladimir Rauta: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3870-8680>

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Figure 1.1. Concept Problems

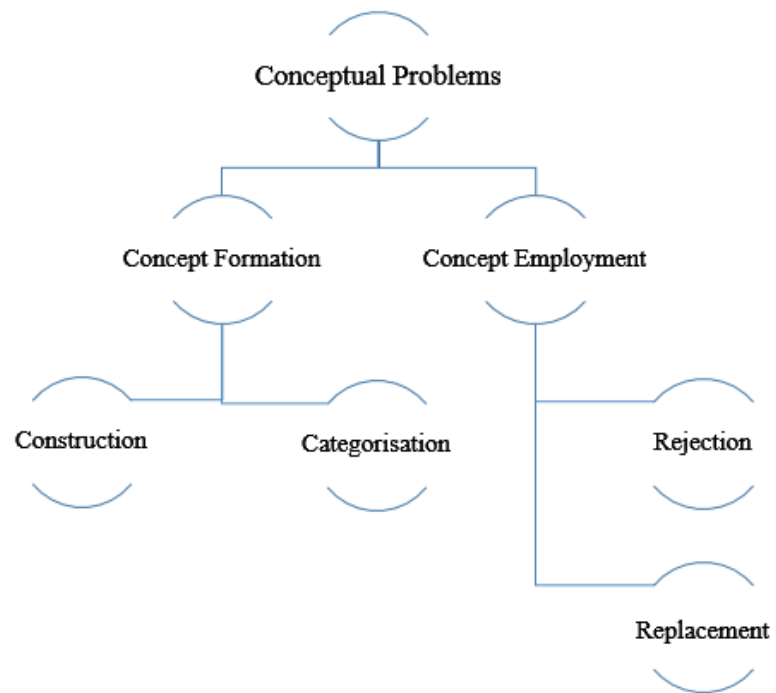




Table 1.1 Definitions

Features	Definitional Dimensions		
	Assumptions	Conditions	Characteristics
Direct-Indirect Substitutability <sup>1</sup>	X		
Inter-State/Intra-State Replacement <sup>2</sup>		X	
Cost Effectiveness <sup>3</sup>			X
Risk Aversion <sup>4</sup>			X
Triadic Relations (Sponsor/Proxy/Target) <sup>5</sup>		X	
Relational Asymmetry <sup>6</sup>	X		
Provision of Support/Assistance <sup>7</sup>		X	
External Provision of Direct Support/Assistance <sup>8</sup>			X
Outcome Influencing <sup>9</sup>	X		
Proxy Availability <sup>10</sup>		X	
Proxy Typology (state v non-state) <sup>11</sup>			X

<sup>1</sup> (Brewer 2011, p. 138; Mumford 2013, p. 11; Cragin 2015, p. 312; Pfaff 2017, p. 312; Rauta 2018, p. 457)

<sup>2</sup> (Brewer 2011, p. 138)

<sup>3</sup> (Brewer 2011, p. 138; Mumford 2013, p. 11)

<sup>4</sup> (Brewer 2011, p. 138)

<sup>5</sup> (Mumford 2013, p. 11; Rauta 2018, p. 457; Moghadam and Wyss 2020, pp. 124-125)

<sup>6</sup> (Moghadam and Wyss 2020, pp. 124-125)

<sup>7</sup> (Hughes 2012, p. 11; Moghadam and Wyss 2020, pp. 124-125)

<sup>8</sup> (Hughes 2012, p. 11; Mumford 2013, p. 11; Borghard 2014; Sozer 2016, p. 643; de Soysa 2017, pp. 12-13)

<sup>9</sup> (Mumford 2013, p. 11; Sozer 2016, p. 64; Groh 2019, p. 29; Moghadam and Wyss 2020, pp. 124-125)

<sup>10</sup> (Hughes 2012, p. 11; Cragin 2015, p. 312; Borghard 2014; Sozer 2016, p. 643; Rauta 2018, p. 457; Groh, 2019, p. 29)

<sup>11</sup> (Hughes 2012, p. 11; Innes 2012, p xv; Mumford 2013, pp 45; Moghadam and Wyss 2020)

**Figure 1.1. The Concept of Proxy War and the Semantic Field of Military Intervention**

