Last Resort: When Foreign Sponsors Escalate from Indirect to Direct Support in Civil War

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Abstract

In more than 75% of civil wars since 1946, warring parties receive external support from foreign states. Foreign sponsors can provide support in the form of weapons, finances or training (which this dissertation calls "indirect support"), or by to dispatching their own military forces to engage in combat ("direct support"). In many conflicts, sponsors expand their involvement from indirect to direct support as the conflict progresses. When do sponsors "escalate" from indirect to direct support? This dissertation argues that direct support is costlier than indirect support for the sponsor and carries higher risks. However, in situations in which indirect support may take too long to have the desired effect on the battlefield, and in which the recipient of support is unable to use it effectively, the sponsor could opt for direct support instead. When deciding escalation, the sponsor state takes two variables into account: the *costs of delaying battlefield action*, and the degree of *proxy effectiveness*. The first variable measures whether the sponsor perceives a closing window, i.e. a limited timeframe to affect battlefield dynamics before the costs of achieving the sponsor's objectives become insurmontable. The second variable measures the extent to which, according to the sponsor, the recipient is able and willing to use the sponsor's resources to obtain meaningful battlefield success. When the costs of delaying battlefield action are high and the recipient displays low proxy effectiveness, the sponsor will be incentivized to intervene directly, as a measure of last resort. If no closing window is perceived, or if the recipient appears effective as a proxy, the sponsor does not escalate to direct support. The dissertation finds evidence in support of Support Escalation Theory through process tracing in two in-depth cases: Fascist Italy's intervention in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and Russia's intervention in the Donbas War in 2014. The thesis further probes the theory's generalizability in four additional short cases.

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To conclude, let me say a few words about the two main cases included in this dissertation.

My interest in the topic of civil war and foreign intervention originated during high school. I studied at the Liceo Classico Giovanni Meli in Palermo, Italy, and in addition to the regular curriculum—including Latin, Ancient Greek, History, Philosophy, and Art History—I took classes in Spanish history and literature with mother-tongue teachers. My Spanish history teacher, Professor José María de Juana González, instilled in me a great passion for the Spanish Civil War. My end-of-school project was precisely on the theme of civil wars, comparing the Spanish case with the "bella plus quam civilia" that plagued ancient Rome. That conflict fascinated me: while it was a genuinely Spanish conflict (displaying the uniqueness of that country and of its history), it also reflected the main cleavages of European and global politics. And indeed, people from all over Europe took part in it. Some of the key features of WWII

emerged in Spain: the Fascist powers cemented their alliance—the Axis—in Spain. Democratic countries failed to form an equally strong bond, both between them and with the Soviet Union. This weakened deterrence, and paved the way for appeasement—and eventually for the bloodiest war the world has ever seen. The civil war was a tragedy for all Spaniards, but the rest of the world did not see—or could not stop—the seeds of an even bigger evil.

The other conflict I explore in detail, the war in the Donbas, is at the root of the current war Russia is waging against Ukraine (although the latter is not just an extension of the former). I unfortunately see many parallels between the Spanish Civil War and this case, and my experience at NATO has only reinforced this feeling. In 2014, the world was unable to see the threat that still hung over Ukraine, even after the Minsk Accords. Today, Russia is seeking to destroy and subjugate Ukraine. If it succeeds, the entire European security order will be unravelled. I'm not sure that this dissertation provides the answer to stop this from happening—its primary purpose is not prescriptive—but it may help understand how the current situation came about. In keeping with historical comparisons, if we want to prevent another tragedy like the one that followed the Spanish Civil War, we must not commit the same mistakes: we must not give in to appeasement, we must face the reality and act accordingly.

I dedicate this dissertation to the brave Ukrainians, the front-line defenders of our freedom and security.

Technical note

The footnotes in this dissertation follow the citation style of the journal *International Organization*. The Bibliography list at the end of the dissertation contains the complete facts of publication and availability for each source cited. Only those sources directly cited in the text are included.

The main text is double-spaced, with quotations (when they are in a separate paragraph) and footnotes in single spacing.

This dissertation has received Research Ethics Approval from the DPIR Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) on 4 April 2023 (Ref No.: SSH_DPIR_C1A_23_020). All interviews were carried out after the approval was granted. All interviewees signed an informed consent form prior to being interviewed. Copies of all interview materials are stored safely on Giuseppe Spatafora's official Oxford University online storage (Nexus 365 Drive for Business) which is password protected with multi-Factor authentication, and on his personal password-protected, encrypted laptop.

Introduction

"Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero."

["Seize the day, trusting the future as little as possible."]

Horace, Odes I, 11

"There are two ways to help Franco: either we just send materials and relatively few men... or we opt for a more direct intervention… a more burdensome solution economically, more demanding morally, but certainly more quickly decisive."

General Pariani, Italian Army Chief of Staff, to Count Ciano, Italy's Foreign Minister, 28 November 1936

From backers to belligerents: a recurring phenomenon

At the end of September 2015, Russia launched a military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. The Kremlin's intervention supported the government of Bashar al-Assad against Syrian opposition factions and the Islamic State, or Daesh.[1] Despite supporting Assad from the onset of the rebellion in 2011, Russian President Vladimir Putin had for many years steered clear of sending its own military forces to fight directly in Syria. What is more, at the time of the Russian intervention, the Assad government only controlled about a quarter of Syria's territory and had suffered a significant defeat in the Northwestern Syria offensive earlier in the year.[2] Faced with this surprising change in strategy, many experts asked at the time: "Why would

[1] While Russian officials claimed that the strikes were solely directed against Daesh bases, the location of the Russian Air Force bombings was in Homs and Hama provinces, which were controlled by opposition militias. See Borshchevskaya 2022; Charap, Treyger, and Geist 2019; Grant and Kaussler 2020.

[2] Borshchevskaya 2022, 69.

Putin do this?"[3] But the timing of this change is also puzzling: why would Putin do this *at that time, and not earlier or later in the conflict*? Why did he continue to support Assad for years, but refrain from becoming directly involved in the civil war? And why did he eventually opt for a costly intervention that risked provoking international condemnation and, to many, resembled the failed Soviet adventure in Afghanistan?

Intervention by foreign sponsors in civil war is not a rare phenomenon. About one every three intrastate conflicts fought between 1946 and 2020 experienced at least one intervention by foreign states in support of either the government party or a rebel (or non-state) party.[4] In many conflicts, foreign actors initially provided non-combat assistance, such as weapons transfers or training missions, and later expanded their involvement to dispatching military forces. In 1965, the United States "Americanized" the Vietnam War, moving from advising the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) to assuming a direct combat role in counterinsurgency against the Viet Cong. In 1975, Cuba and South Africa supported rival factions in the Angolan Civil War, first with advisory missions, and then by sending expeditionary forces to the frontline. In 2014, Saudi Arabia expanded its support to Yemen's ousted government, leading an air campaign against the Houthi rebels. At the same time, intervention is much less common than other forms of external support: while foreign states provide assistance to combatants in 72% of intrastate conflict fought between 1975 and 2017, direct intervention is observed in only 33% of civil wars in the same period.[5]

According to the existing literature on external intervention, foreign support and proxy warfare, foreign states can support warring parties in a civil war essentially in two ways. On the one

[3] Ibid., 2.
[4] Calculations on data from the UCDP Armed Conflict Database. See Pettersson et al. 2021.
[5] Meier et al. 2022, 548.

hand, they can carry out a military intervention in support of one of the conflict parties, thereby engaging directly in combat.[6] On the other hand, they can provide material assistance to the preferred party, such as weapons, training, finances, or intelligence.[7] The latter form is often referred to as proxy war or conflict delegation, since the foreign state delegates fighting to a local party, the proxy, limiting its own participation to material assistance.[8] These two forms of assistance are often seen—at least implicitly—as alternatives from which foreign states must choose at the beginning of the conflict.

However, as the case of Syria shows, states can move from support to warring parties short of combat forces to intervention over the course of the same conflict. This is surprising since, for the external party, direct intervention is costlier and riskier than non-combat support. When the state sponsor provides assistance to a warring party, the costs it bears will be limited to the value of the resources transferred. The costs of fighting—in terms of loss of lives, destruction of assets, the costs of occupation and holding of territory, international repercussions, and escalation from the opponent side—will be taken up entirely by the conflict actor. In addition to outsourcing the costs of fighting, the foreign sponsor can exploit local actors' expertise and legitimacy, while often preserving a clout of plausible deniability.[9] On the other hand, intervention carries additional costs. Sending one's own forces to fight a foreign civil war could drag the foreign state into an endless quagmire, reduce the strength of the intervener's army and its combat power, cause a decline of domestic support for the sponsor's leadership, like

[6] Findley and Teo 2006; Fordham 2008; Lemke and Regan 2004; Daxecker 2011; Tikuisis, Carment, and Samy 2013; Mullenbach and Matthews 2008; Pearson 1974; Saideman 2012; Fox, James, and Li 2009.
[7] Byman 2013; Deutsch 1964; Grauer and Tierney 2018; Karlén et al. 2021b; Meier et al. 2022; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011.
[8] Bar-Siman-Tov 1984; Borghard 2014; Karlén et al. 2021a; Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023; Mumford 2013b; Rauta 2021b; Rauta 2021a.
[9] Salehyan 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Abbott et al. 2020a; Karlén et al. 2021a; Byman 2013.

the United States during Vietnam, or even precipitate the collapse of the state, as the Soviet Union experienced after a ten-year intervention in Afghanistan.[10] Why, then, would a state increase its level of involvement from non-combat support to direct intervention, when the latter entails higher costs?

This transition of foreign sponsors from "backers" to" belligerents" is even more surprising when this happens when things are not going well for the recipient of support. As mentioned above, Russia intervened after Assad suffered several major defeats at the hands of the Syrian rebels. The interventions in Angola, Vietnam and Yemen also took place after the recipient of support had suffered major setbacks in combat. In the case of Vietnam, the Saigon government appeared not only weak, but also unwilling to carry out the reforms that the United States requested, which were meant to make the ARVN more efficient in fighting the Viet Cong.[11] Why would a foreign sponsor expand the commitment to the warring party, taking up higher costs, precisely when the latter is doing poorly and appears unable to change the situation? Why wouldn't a rational sponsor stop providing assistance to a manifestedly weak or incompetent actor, and seek a ceasefire or a diplomatic solution to the conflict instead?

Shifts in the form of external support during war remain significantly underexplored in existing scholarship. The literatures on proxy war and intervention have mostly developed in parallel, treating the two phenomena as separate. According to the mainstream explanation for external support, derived from the Principal-Agent model, foreign states sponsor warring parties when they want to influence the conflict without paying the costs of war directly.[12] However, this does not explain why the form of support would change. Corbetta (2015) argues that "social

[10] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020; Herring 1979; Kalinovsky 2009.
[11] Kaiser 2000, 131; Logevall 2010; Elias 2020; Ladwig 2017.
[12] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 709; Karlén et al. 2021a, 2049.

proximity" between sponsor and recipient of support—essentially, socio-political, ideological, and ethnic links—leads to costlier interventions. Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl (2022) show that the sponsor's leverage over the conflict actor determines the latter's autonomy, which in turn affects the type of support, and the number of strings attached to it. Karlén (2022) argues that "negative feedback" from the conflict pushes foreign sponsors to alter their level of support. However, none of these studies explicitly discuss the transition from non-combat assistance to direct intervention. The existing body of knowledge has not sufficiently highlighted the interlinkages between these two policy options, and how an external party could substitute between the two within the same conflict.

This dissertation seeks to fill this gap in the literature. It explains why and when foreign sponsors expand their level of involvement in support of a civil war party from the provision of material assistance short of combat forces to the direct participation in fighting in the civil war. It focuses specifically on the surprising scenario where the recipient of support appears weak, in the wake of a defeat, or unwilling to do the sponsor's bidding, since it would be natural to expect that actor's backers to withdraw their support in that case—and yet, as the empirical record shows, in some cases the sponsor increases its commitment. The dissertation provides a theoretical model and tests it on a wide range of case studies.

The conceptualization and argument in brief: a theory of escalation from indirect to direct support in civil war

This dissertation engages with the existing literature on foreign intervention, external support and proxy wars. The main object of analysis is the concept of *foreign* or *external support*, which is a relationship between a warring party and a foreign state, whereby the latter provides

material assistance to support the former's war effort. The foreign state is called *sponsor*, while the warring party receiving assistance is called *recipient*. Both the government of the country at war and rebel groups fighting the civil war are included in the category of recipients, while the sponsor category excludes non-state providers of assistance. Chapter 2 provides more details in justification of these scope conditions.

This dissertation divides foreign support into two categories. One is *indirect support*, which consists in the provision of resources to the recipient, who then uses them in combat. Indirect support follows a logic of conflict delegation (or proxy warfare), since the sponsor does not directly engage in combat. The second category is *direct support*, whereby the sponsor sends its own combat forces for the purpose of engaging in combat, either alongside the recipient's forces or in their stead. Direct support responds to a logic of intervention. Through this conceptualization, which is novel to the literature, the two phenomena described in parallel literatures—intervention and proxy war—are incorporated within the category of external support.

Direct support and indirect support differ for the sponsor both in terms of the costs involved and the benefits the sponsor can attain. When the sponsor provides indirect support, the costs it bears will be limited to the value of the resources transferred, which can be referred to as financial or monetary costs. Direct support, instead, involves *both* monetary and fighting costs, since the sponsor accepts not only the costs of transferring resources but also the costs of engaging in battle and losing lives, as well as the risks entailed in potential escalation by other states and the expansion of a civil conflict into an interstate war. On the other hand, direct support provides two benefits: it allows the sponsor to have an *immediate* and *unmediated* impact on the battlefield—immediate, because the participation of the sponsor's own combat

forces in battle will quickly affect the military evolution of the conflict in as short a time lag as possible; unmediated, because the sponsor does not need to rely on the recipient as intermediary between its own forces and the battlefield.

Indirect support cannot provide both benefits. First, the impact of any form of indirect support provided by the sponsor is always mediated by the recipient, since the latter uses the resources in combat. Second, while some forms of indirect support, such as new weapons, can have immediate impact on the battlefield, other forms such as training tend to take a while, since the recipient needs time to acquire new skills, diffuse them across its forces, and test them before engaging in combat. Therefore, in situations in which indirect support may take too long to have the desired effect on the battlefield, and in which the recipient is unable to use indirect support effectively, the sponsor could opt for direct support instead.

After outlining the distinction between direct and indirect support and discussing the advantages and disadvantages for the sponsor, the dissertation develops a theory to explain why sponsors transition from indirect to direct support. This transition is conceptualized as an *escalation* of support because, just like escalation in the nuclear literature, it entails the crossing of what is considered by the actors involved as a significant threshold—the sponsor's direct participation in combat.[13] In this way, this dissertation introduces the concept of escalation to the external support literature. While more than one form of support could cross significant thresholds for the actors involved, the transition to direct support is the most likely to be regarded as escalatory.

[13] Morgan et al. 2008, ix; Talmadge 2019, 867; Zartman and Faure 2005.

Chapter 3 provides an explanatory framework for the transition from indirect to direct support: Support Escalation Theory. The theory only applies to situations in which a sponsor is already providing indirect support to a recipient engaged in a civil war. Without this initial condition, escalation to direct support over the course of the conflict could not be observed. The theory posits that, over the course of the civil war, the sponsor may come to question the type of support that it is providing to the recipient. This could be due to several factors, such as domestic developments within the sponsor state (for instance, a domestic electoral contest), or the influence of the sponsor's international allies and patrons. However, the particular focus of the dissertation is on military developments, and in particular, a *negative conflict evolution*.[14] Such negative evolution could be the results of defeats suffered by the recipient, splinters within the recipient's factions, or events leading to the strengthening of the recipient's opponent (such as the discovery of new resources, or even additional support from the opponent's own sponsors).

A negative conflict evolution will affect the sponsor's understanding of the balance of power within the conflict, and consequently the expected likelihood of achieving the sponsor's goals through indirect support to the recipient. If the situation is not positive, the sponsor will be incentivized to re-evaluate its support, and potentially alter it. However, this change could be an increase or decrease in support. Since there is a low barrier to entry into external support, an actor does not need to have high interests to start sponsoring a conflict party,[15] and sponsors that have started providing assistance but have limited interests may drop out of escalation in the wake of a negative conflict evolution, either reducing or withdrawing entirely their assistance. A sponsor may also change strategy and engage instead in mediation, conflict

[14] This concept is similar to that of "negative conflict feedback" introduced by Karlén (2022).
[15] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.

resolution, or peace enforcement. Consequently, in the wake of a negative conflict event, a selection occurs: only those actors with high interests in affecting the civil war and no acceptable alternatives—or perceived as such—will escalate support. Chapter 3 provides details on the type of sponsors that select into escalation.

Even if a sponsor decides to escalate its involvement, direct support is not the automatic outcome of escalation. The way in which a sponsor could increase support still presents significant variation. A negative conflict evolution could just translate into additional indirect support for the recipient: sponsors may increase the quantity of weapons and funding they provide; they could send more technologically advanced weapons and share more intelligence; or they may send instructors and advisors to train the recipient and address its deficiencies. Often a combination of training and additional subsidies is provided. In neither case is the direct engagement by the sponsor in fighting necessary. Hence, there is a need for an additional step to explain the type of escalation.

When deciding the form of escalation, the sponsor state takes two variables into account: the *costs of delaying immediate battlefield action*, and the degree of *proxy effectiveness*. The first variable measures whether the sponsor perceives the presence of a closing window, i.e. a limited timeframe to affect battlefield dynamics before the costs of supporting the recipient to victory (or to the achievement of the sponsor's objectives) become insurmontable.[16] To affect the negative conflict evolution before the window closes, the sponsor requires a form of assistance that has an immediate battlefield impact. The second variable (proxy effectiveness) measures the extent to which the recipient can and/or wants to use the sponsor's resources to obtain meaningful battlefield success. Adapted from the military effectiveness literature, this

[16] See Levy 1987; Sudduth 2017; Talmadge 2015; Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda 2020; Pischedda 2020.

variable measures the recipient's willigness and/or ability to "be a good proxy" for the sponsor, i.e. an actor to which the sponsor can delegate fighting.[17] Faced with an ineffective proxy, the sponsor must provide support that can either improve the recipient's effectiveness (such as training and advising) or bypass it altogether, swithching to a form of assistance that is unmediated by the recipient. Note that these two variables measures the sponsor's *perceptions* of closing windows and proxy effectiveness, rather than necessarily reflecting the objective balance of power and the recipient's intentions.

The theory's central prediction, based on the combination of these two variables, is that the sponsor will escalate to direct support only when two conditions are realized simultaneously: (1) the costs of delaying battlefield action are high and (2) the recipient is an ineffective proxy. Under these conditions, indirect support is insufficient to solve the sponsor's conundrum: the recipient's ineffectiveness as a proxy reduces the usefulness of subsidies such as weapons because the recipient would not be able to apply them to quickly change fortunes on the battlefield, and the closing window does not allow the sponsor sufficient time to improve the recipient's necessary skills via time-consuming training and advising. Faced with the prospects of a collapse of the recipient, and with no time to transfer skills via training and advising, the sponsor will be incentivized to intervene directly, since only direct support can have an immediate and unmediated impact on the battlefield.

Escalation to direct support will not take place if either of the two variables takes a different value. If the recipient is an ineffective proxy but no closing window is perceived, the sponsor will be able to provide indirect support which can address the effectiveness deficit but has a delayed impact on the battlefield, such as training. If there is a limited time window, but the

[17] Abbott et al. 2020a, 5; Ashour 2021; Biddle 2004; Millett and Murray 2010; Talmadge 2015.

recipient appears effective, the sponsor can provide the recipient with support that has an immediate but mediated impact, such as new or more sophisticated weapons. Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of these outcomes, of the recipient's role in escalation, and on the relationship between support escalation and conflict escalation.

Support Escalation Theory, in a nutshell, argues that sponsors escalate from indirect to direct support as a measure of last resort. Other things equal, the sponsor prefers indirect support due to the lighter burden of costs that is placed on the sponsor itself—limited only the financial costs, while the recipient will carry the full extent of the fighting costs. However, when the recipient's prospects are dire and there is need for immediate action, the sponsor will resort to the only type of assistance that can have both immediate and unmediated battlefield impact. Horace's *Carpe Diem* quote—at the beginning of this chapter—highlights the sense of urgency that pushes sponsors to become direct belligerents.

Research method and empirical chapters

Support Escalation Theory explores a complex, multi-stage decision-making process that leads the sponsor state to change the form of assistance. Since the sponsor's leadership is ultimately the actor that decides which kind of assistance to provide, the theory and the empirical analysis focus on the incentives, inputs, and perceptions of this actor. The role of other relevant actors, such as the sponsor's military advisors, the recipient, and other sponsors and competitors, are also taken into account, but the focus remains on the decision of the sponsor's leadership.

Within-case analysis and process-tracing appear to be the most appropriate methodology for testing the theory. Key components of process tracing include the development of empirical

implications, both for Support Escalation Theory and for alternative explanations. The dissertation compares escalation theory against five alternative explanations for why a state sponsor would transition from indirect to direct support in a civil war: domestic political developments and electoral concerns within the sponsor state;[18] the independent role of the sponsor's bureaucracies, such as the military or the intelligence services, in escalation;[19] the sponsor's retention and provision of support as a mechanism to reward and punish the recipient;[20] outbidding between different sponsors, who use external support to gain influence over the recipient;[21] and complex delegation dynamics, whereby sponsors act on behalf of third parties.[22] Support Escalation Theory is evaluated against these alternatives using primary sources, such as archival material and interviews, and secondary literature, such as journalistic account or respectable historical works.

The internal validity of Support Escalation Theory is tested in two in-depth case studies from different historical and geopolitical contexts: Fascist Italy's move from indirect to direct support for Franco in the Spanish Civil War between July and December of 1936, and Russia's involvement in the Donbas War, supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine between the Spring and the Summer of 2014. In both cases, foreign sponsors began supporting conflict parties indirectly, only to increase their involvement later. Within each case, two escalation episodes are expolored, either leading to direct support (positive cases) or remaining within the boundaries of indirect support (negative cases). Hence, this dissertation carries out four process-tracing exercises.

[18] Duursma and Tamm 2021; Gent 2009; Tamm 2016b; Polo and Wucherpfennig 2022; Tamm 2016a.
[19] Nielson and Tierney 2003; Bennedsen and Schultz 2011; Laffont and Martimort 1998.
[20] Abbott et al. 2020a; Ladwig 2017; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Popovic 2017; San-Akca 2016; Thaler 2021.
[21] Abbott et al. 2020a; Christensen 2011.
[22] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019; Karlén and Rauta 2023.

The case of Fascist Italy's intervention in the Spanish Civil War breaks with the Cold War and post-Cold War bias present in the civil war literature, showing that the theory and concepts are just as valid for conflicts prior to 1945 as for contemporary wars. The civil war broke out after a failed coup d'état in July 1936 gave way to fighting between the legitimate Republican government and a rebel faction called the Nationalists. The Nationalists, led by General Francisco Franco, received a significant stream of assistance from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, whereas the Republican government relied almost entirely on the Soviet Union. Italian support to Franco escalated dramatically in the first six months of the war. It began with a supply of twelve planes sent by Mussolini in July 1936 to help Franco's army cross the Gibraltar Strait. Around one month later, as the Nationalists faced stronger resistance than expected from the Republicans, Italy escalated assistance by setting up a training and advise mission, thereby escalating within the boundaries of indirect support. This is well explained by the theoretical framework: the Nationalists needed to re-organize themselves to fight the Republican resistance (low proxy effectiveness), but time was not seen as a significant constraint (low costs of delaying battlefield action).

In December, however, Italy moved to direct support, deploying a ground troop contingent called the Corpo Truppe Volontarie (CTV) to Spain. The core reason behind Mussolini's decision to escalate reflects the theorized mechanism. Troop intervention aimed to maintain Franco's offensive momentum and win the war before the Republican government culmed the capability gap (high costs of delaying battlefield action), at a time in which the Nationalist army appeared unable—and unwilling—to carry out a decisive push (low proxy effectiveness). Hence, Support Escalation Theory is an excellent predictor of the transition to direct support in this case study.

The second in-depth case is the Russian intervention in the Donbas War in the summer of 2014. The conflict in the Donbas is at the root of the largest interstate conflict in Europe since the Second World War, the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022-ongoing).[23] But 2022 was not the first time that Russia sent troops to Ukraine: in 2014, the Kremlin escalated its support for the insurgency in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces of eastern Ukraine, moving from providing weapons, advisers and commanders in the spring to sending thousands of soldiers to prevent the rebels from being overrun. This could be regarded as a least likely case to observe escalation, since Russian forces were already in Ukraine after the illegal annexation of Crimea. However, the chapter makes the case for the distinction between the almost instantaneous and quasi-bloodless annexation of Crimea—whose death toll did not even reach the traditional threshold for identifying an armed conflict—and the long, kinetic war in Donbas, where violent fighting and changes in external support were present and measurable.

In April 2014, the Ukrainian government's strong response to the rebellion in Donbas, in the form of the Anti-Terrorist Organization (ATO), created a significant challenge for the self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, who needed quick support to resist. However, the rebels appeared to be well-organized, supported by the local population, and led by Russian citizens, which ensured loyalty to the Kremlin's goals. Hence, the costs of delaying battlefield action were high, but proxy effectiveness was also high. Putin could therefore limit himself to providing weapons to the rebels to repel the ATO and avoid direct intervention.

By July of the same year, however, the ATO received a new push, and all indicators of proxy effectiveness were reversed: the separatist commanders appeared disloyal and disunited, local

[23] Spatafora and Rauta 2022.

support to the separatists proved weaker than expected, and the rebels were unable to stop the Ukrainian army. The latter appeared on the verge of closing the border, severing ties between separatist-held territories and Russia, and threatening the very survival of the separatist project. It was under those circumstances, with high costs of delaying battlefield action and poor proxy effectiveness, that Russia escalated to direct intervention in August 2014. Once again, the theory's predictions show a strong fit with the empirical outcome.

The dissertation also presents four short cases for the purpose of probing the theory's generalizability and testing robustness against alternative explanations. Since Fascist Italy was not the only supporter of Franco, the case of Nazi Germany's role in 1936 is also discussed: the short case study highlights how the two interventions, while parallel, were the results of decisions that were taken independently from each other. To gauge the strength of the theory during the Cold War, two cases are explored: Cuba's intervention in Angola in 1975, and the Americanization of the Vietnam War in 1965. The former case shows how a small Soviet ally was able to carry out an independent intervention 5,000 miles away from home—against Moscow's wishes—whereas the latter probes the extent to which Support Escalation Theory stands against the well-accepted explanation that President Johnson delayed the intervention in Vietnam for domestic reasons. Finally, the last short case—Turkey's intervention in Libya in 2019—tests whether escalation theory applies to forms of intervention that do not include ground troops, since Turkey sent to Tripoli only officers and Syrian mercenaries.

Plan of the dissertation

The rest of the dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on intervention, proxy wars and external support, highlighting their differences and overlaps. To

incorporate the logics of intervention and conflict delegation within the framework of external support, the chapter introduces the concepts of indirect and direct support. It also provides additional details on the role of sponsors and recipients in this dissertation.

Chapter 3 builds on the distinction between indirect and direct support to develop Support Escalation Theory. First, it discusses the concept of escalation in the context of external support. Second, it presents the various steps of the theory: the initial condition of indirect support, a negative conflict evolution as an incentive to re-evaluate support, selection into escalation, the two key variables (proxy effectiveness and costs of delaying battlefield impact) and their interaction, which determines the forms of escalation. Third, the chapter discusses the role of the recipient actor in escalation and the relationship between support escalation and conflict escalation in the traditional sense of the term.

Chapter 4 presents the research design that is used to evaluate the theory. It develops empirical implications of Support Escalation Theory, and presents the alternative explanations. Then, it makes the case for process tracing as the appropriate methodology, and provides a justification for case selection. The chapter concludes with a quantitative section: while arguing that the existing datasets on external support are not appropriate to evaluate the theory, it provides a descriptive overview of global patterns of intervention in civil war.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are dedicated to theory testing, going over the cases of Fascist Italy in Spain, Russia in the Donbas, and the four additional short cases. Each chapter tests the strength of Support Escalation Theory against alternative explanations. Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation by summarizing the theory's record against the empirical evidence, highlighting the theory's contribution to the literature on international relations and conflict studies,

suggesting avenues for expanding the theoretical argument and the empirical analysis, and discussing the policy implications of the dissertation.

Conceptualization: The existing literature on military intervention, proxy warfare and external support, and the difference between direct and indirect support

Introduction

This chapter has three goals. The first is to provide conceptual clarity about some of the key terms that are used in the dissertation. Concepts such as external support, direct intervention, and proxy wars are diffused in policy discussions, but they are often used interchangeably, or misused. Therefore, it is important to clarify what these terms refer to, and how they are connected to each other. The second goal is to organize the existing academic literature and to highlight any gaps or misunderstandings between different strands of scholarship. By focusing on the transition from a form of indirect involvement into a civil conflict to one of direct participation in fighting, this dissertation is at the intersection of two literatures: the one on military intervention and that on proxy warfare. Scholars of these two phenomena often talk past each other, as if they were two different phenomena (which they are) and that one could not emerge from the other (which they could).

The third goal of the chapter is to define two fundamental types of external support. The empirical category of "external support" subsumes the two phenomena—intervention and proxy war—under one term. In doing so, however, it loses the theoretical distinction between the two different logics underpinning them. The chapter, instead, proposes a theoretical distinction between indirect support—which follows a logic of conflict delegation—and direct support—which instead ascribes to a logic of direct intervention. After describing the two main

categories of actors in an external support relationship, sponsors and recipients, the chapter theorizes the advantages and disadvantages of direct support, and why foreign sponsors would choose to provide it when cheaper indirect support is available. This distinction will set the stage for the ensuing chapter, which theorizes the transition from indirect to direct support.

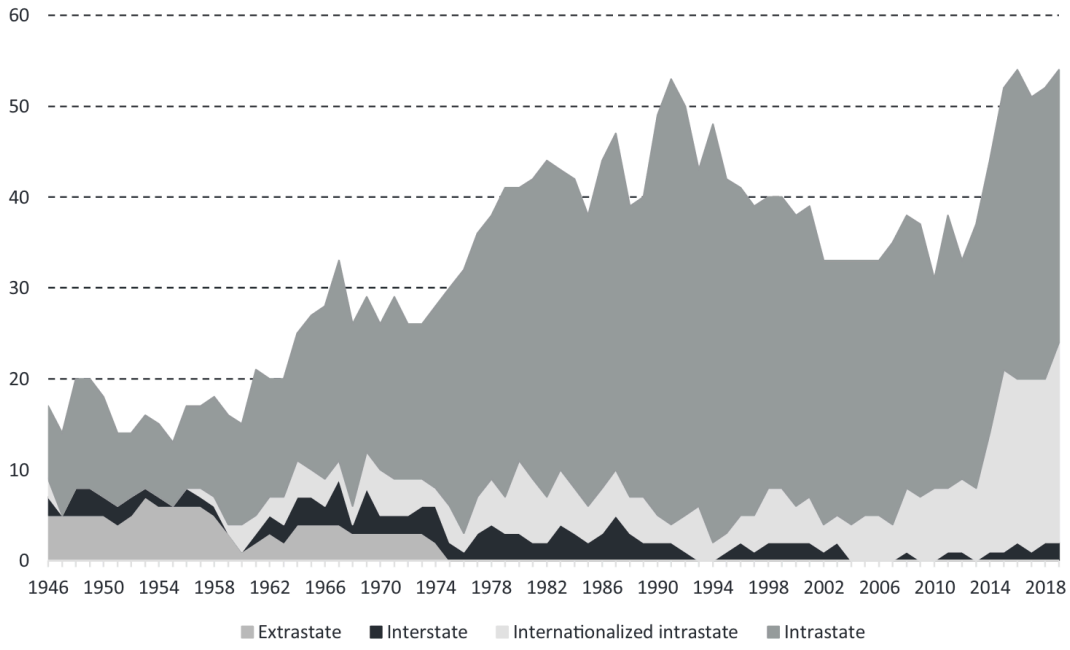
Three concepts, three literatures: intervention, proxy war, and external support

The literature on foreign military intervention

External military intervention in conflict is a recurring trait of the 20th century. Even as the incidence of interstate war fell after 1945, great powers continued intervening militarily in foreign countries. Internationalized intrastate wars, which are defined as civil wars where one or both sides in the conflict receive troop support from an external state,[24] are well present during and after the Cold War, as shown in Figure 2.1 from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). More recently, the number of internationalized conflicts has "skyrocketed… from nine in 2012 to 25 in 2020."[25] Meanwhile, the number of interstate wars has remained low, but not disappeared, and has also seen a slight increase in the last decade. In 2020, the UCDP recorded three interstate wars: while this is only 5% of the total number of active conflicts, the world as not seen as many active interstate conflicts since 1988.

[24] Rasler 1983; Pettersson et al. 2021.
[25] Pettersson et al. 2021, 811.

Figure 2.1. *State-based armed conflicts by type, 1946-2020.*[26]



Because of the endurance of foreign military intervention as a practice, a wave of scholarship has developed to analyze this phenomenon, especially in the context of intrastate war. Gleditsch, Salehyan and Schultz (2008) provides what is arguably the most significant study of the relationship between civil and international conflicts. They argue that "intervention" by external powers is one of the forms in which interstate wars become "internationalized" (the others being "opportunism", "externalization", and "spillover effects"): as states may have different preferences over the outcome of the civil war, they are incentivized to use military force to affect such outcomes.[27] The evidence collected by many studies to date shows that neighboring states, allies, rivals, former colonial powers, trade partners, and states are more prone to intervene in foreign wars: such structural factors increase the foreign country's

[26] Pettersson and Öberg 2020, 600.
[27] Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz 2008, 7–8; Pettersson et al. 2021; Gleditsch 2007; Checkel 2013.

interests in the outcome of the military contest, and therefore the probability that their own forces will be used to affect such outcomes.[28]

Two main theoretical models have been used to explain how these structural factors affect the propensity to intervene. On the one hand, the interstate rivalry framework argues that a subset of states accounts for the bulk of forceful interactions in the interstate system.[29] On the other, the bargaining model of war claims that force may be used to communicate information about capabilities and resolve, but if this type of costly action and other interactions fail to "facilitate the convergence of expectations," the probability that the dispute will escalate to war increases.[30]

In addition to systemic variables, the extant literature points at conflict-specific characteristics that may also increase foreign states' incentives to intervene. While it seems logical that third parties would be less likely to intervene in intense conflicts with high casualty rates, empirical evidence to date suggests that the opposite may be the case.[31] The probability of military intervention declines, however, if other third parties have intervened recently and failed to achieve their objectives.[32] Transnational ethnic affinities increase the likelihood of external intervention because of higher incentives.[33] Religious ties also seem to be important predictors of external military intervention into ongoing civil conflicts.[34]

[28] Findley and Teo 2006; Fordham 2008; Lemke and Regan 2004; Daxecker 2011; Tikuisis, Carment, and Samy 2013; Mullenbach and Matthews 2008; Pearson 1974; Saideman 2012; Fox, James, and Li 2009.
[29] Acuto 2010; Bak, Chávez, and Rider 2020; Diehl and Goertz 2001; Diehl, Owsiak, and Goertz 2021; Thompson 2018.
[30] Fearon 1995; Levy 1981; Schelling 1980; Thompson 2018.
[31] Aydin 2010; Regan 2002.
[32] Aydin 2012.
[33] Tikuisis, Carment, and Samy 2013; Mullenbach and Matthews 2008; Pearson 1974; Saideman 2012.
[34] Fox, James, and Li 2009.

Political characteristics of the intervening state may also make a difference, although the extent to which they matter is disputed.[35] One of the most robust empirical findings in political science emerges from the democratic peace theory: democracies do not use force to solve disputes against one other. However, the democratic peace theory does not tend to apply to external intervention in ongoing civil conflicts, as the country at war is not usually democratic. The literature provides mixed findings about the relationship between democracies and foreign intervention. Some studies suggest that democratic states are more likely to deploy soldiers to defend co-ethnics within civil wars than autocracies, while autocratic states seem prone to support rebels when such non-state actors control lootable resources.[36] Grauer and Tierney (2022), on the other hand, find evidence for a phenomenon akin to democratic peace theory, which the authors call the "democratic embargo": democracies routinely intervene to support rebels fighting non-democracies, but they are less likely to provide such support to rebels battling elected governments.[37]

The literature on proxy warfare: how to interfere without using your own forces

States do not always need to intervene with their military forces to influence an intrastate war. In fact, more often states delegate warfighting to local actors, without taking up fighting themselves, thereby engaging in a "proxy war." Definitions of proxy war vary from study to study, and the *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* (2023) steers away from providing an encompassing definition.[38] For the purpose of clarifying the terminology used in this chapter, however, the following definition comes in handy:

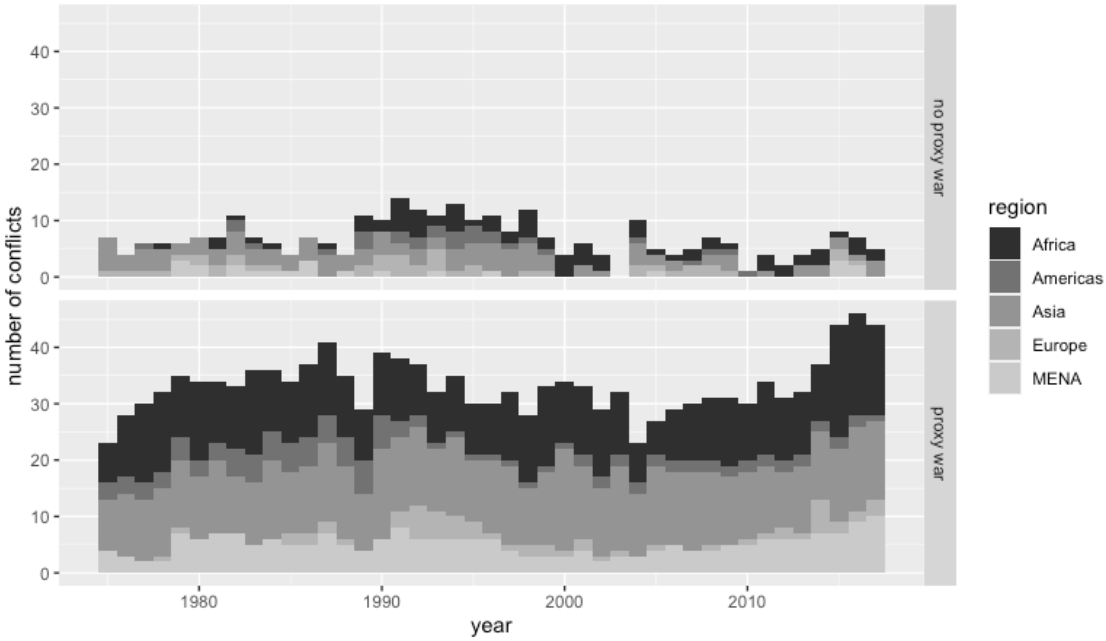
[35] Mullenbach and Matthews 2008.
[36] Koga 2011; Wolak 2014; Findley and Marineau 2015; Ross 2004.
[37] Goldman 2016; Grauer and Tierney 2022.
[38] Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023.

> "Proxy wars are conflicts between two (or more) actors in which at least one of them entrusts another party to fight on their behalf. The external party (usually referred to as the sponsor or principal) delegates combat action to an agent (known as the proxy) and provides some form of military, economic, or diplomatic assistance to help the latter fight. As such, proxy warfare can be thought of as an indirect military strategy that substitutes direct military confrontation with the opponent."[39]

Most conflicts experience some form of foreign interference in the form of proxy war. As Figure 2.2 shows, foreign states have provided assistance to warring parties short of direct intervention in 78% of civil wars fought Between 1975 and 2017. The graph allows to study when and where proxy wars tend to take place. Proxy wars seem to decline after the end of the Cold War, only to surge again over the past decade. This suggests a correlation between periods of heightened strategic competition and the use of proxy strategies.[40] During the Cold War, the majority of these conflicts took place in Asia and Africa, where Soviet-American competition unfolded and intersected with the process of decolonization and state building.[41] While a sizeable proportion of these proxy wars continues to takes place in Asia throughout the period following the Cold War (partly as a function of Afghanistan remaining a theatre for indirect intervention), a surge in proxy conflicts elsewhere is driving the recent global growth of conflicts. The increased yearly count is driven mostly by an increase in proxy wars in the Middle East and North Africa (such as in Yemen, Syria, and Libya) and very recently, in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Somalia).

[39] Rauta and Spatafora 2024, 179.
[40] Rauta and Spatafora 2024.
[41] Ayoob 1991.

Figure 2.2. *Proxy war trends by region, 1975-2017.*[42]



Proxy war phenomena are often analyzed through the lenses of the Principal-Agent (PA) model: states opt for external sponsorship to outsource the costs of fighting, exploit local actors' expertise, and legitimize their actions.[43] While delegation reduces the costs of war for the sponsor, it also generates well-known problems such as adverse selection (the sponsor selecting a bad proxy due to lack of information), shirking (the proxy being unwilling to follow the sponsor's requests), and misaligned intentions.[44] Some scholars have criticized the PA model for being over-focused on sponsors and not paying sufficient attention to recipient actors' own, independent incentives to enter a proxy war relationship.[45] Nevertheless, the PA model remains the prevalent theoretical framework to analyze this type of conflicts. The PA literature is also

[42] Rauta and Spatafora 2024, 180.
[43] Salehyan 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Abbott et al. 2020a; Karlén et al. 2021a; Byman 2013.
[44] Abbott et al. 2020a; Ladwig 2017; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Popovic 2017; San-Akca 2016; Thaler 2021.
[45] See Abbott et al. 2021; Karlén et al. 2021a; San-Akca 2016.

accused of state-centrism: in the traditional view of proxy wars, the sponsor is regarded as a state while the proxy is often a non-state actor. However, non-state actors can be sponsors, and states can be proxies too.

The incentives behind proxy warfare and direct intervention are comparable: foreign actors with significant interests in affecting the conflict's evolution and outcome have more of an incentive to support a warring party.[46] Empirically, studies have shown that states are more likely to become sponsors of rebellion if a rival is involved in the conflict, if they share ideological and ethnic affinity with the would-be proxy, or for domestic reasons.[47] If the interests are similar, however, what makes proxy wars so much more common than direct military action? The advantage of proxy warfare as opposed to direct intervention lies in the lower cost for the external party. The consequences of intervention may entail open war with the invaded country, long and costly occupation, international condemnation, sanctions, collective military retaliation, and domestic opposition.[48] Proxy wars are often described as escalation management devices for sponsors.[49] By supporting one of the competing factions via a proxy strategy, states can avoid the costs and risks of direct combat, and only accept the costs of subsidizing or training one side. Proxy war is, therefore, "the least bad option" for an

[46] A typical assumption is that the sponsor wants the victory of the supported side and the defeat of the target actor. However, not all states enter support relationships to win a war. Groh (2019) identifies three additional strategies foreign states may want to pursue in proxy war: a 'holding action' approach when the state perceives the actual outcome as less important or the desired outcome is unachievable; 'meddling' when the sponsor has little commitment to the outcome and the stakes in the target state are low; and a 'feeding the chaos' strategy when it perceives that an intrastate conflict poses little threat to its vital interests but offers the potential of denying another state the ability to attain its desirable interests. See Groh 2019, 104. The pattern of proxy wars in Africa, for example, suggests that many states foment rebellion in foreign countries to maintain weak governments in their neighborhood, thereby preventing the emergence of threatening states. See Duursma and Tamm 2021; Tamm 2016a.

[47] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Hughes 2014; Westad 2005; Innes 2012; Aydin 2012; Castellano 2015.

[48] San-Akca 2016; Lake 2016; Elias 2020.

[49] Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023, 4–5.

actor that wants to influence a conflict without paying high costs and run significant risks.[50] The lower costs also reduce the barrier to entry, as foreign sponsors do not necessarily have to have extremely high interests: as Schulhofer-Wohl (2020) argues, a sponsor can remain involved in the conflict as long as its interests are above a minimum threshold that offsets the costs of providing assistance.[51] This is another reason for the proliferation of proxy wars.

The literature on external support: empirically extensive, insufficiently theorized?

As the paragraphs above show, states can influence a war by either intervening directly with their combat forces, or by delegating fighting and engaging in proxy warfare. However, existing studies have not sufficiently highlighted the interlinkages between these two policy options, and how an external party could substitute between the two within the same conflict. First, oftentimes intervention in a civil war is carried out in support of a warring party rather than independently. In 1965, the United States sent a large troop contingent to sustain South Vietnam's counterinsurgency campaign against the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). In 1975, South African forces entered Angola to help UNITA repel the MPLA's advance. In 2015, Russian forces intervened in Syria to assist President Bashar al-Assad. That same year, Saudi Arabia led a coalition of states in carrying out an air campaign against the Houthi in Yemen, supporting the former government of President Hadi. In each of these cases, the deployment of combat forces is carried out as a form of external support for one of the warring parties.

[50] Groh 2019.
[51] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020, 37.

Second, states can move from support to warring parties to intervention within the same conflict. In the examples mentioned above, the sponsor initially provided material support and military expertise and refrained from direct military intervention, only to deploy combat forces later in the conflict. In the Angolan Civil War, UNITA rebels initially received weapons and training from South Africa, and its opponent, the MPLA government, also benefitted from Cuba's Military Advisory Mission to Angola, which initially played a non-combat role.[52] The Johnson administration's 1965 decision to start sending 500,000 troops to Vietnam with a combat function came after more than a decade in which Washington supported Saigon with weapons, advisors, and a training mission.[53] The Russian direct intervention in Syria only took place in 2015, while Moscow had been involved in providing support short of military intervention to al-Assad for years since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011-12.[54] And Saudi Arabia's air campaign in Yemen also took place after a period of military assistance to the Hadi government.[55]

Hence, while military intervention and support to proxies are often pitted as two alternative forms that states can use to influence foreign conflicts, there are significant overlaps and connections between the two. An additional concept within the existing literature partly overlaps with and encompasses the previous two, that of *external support*.[56] This is defined as "the provision of militarily relevant assistance by an outside party to a warring party with the intent to assist that party in an ongoing armed conflict."[57] External support is neither new nor rare.[58] Almost two-thirds of all rebel groups active since World War II have received material

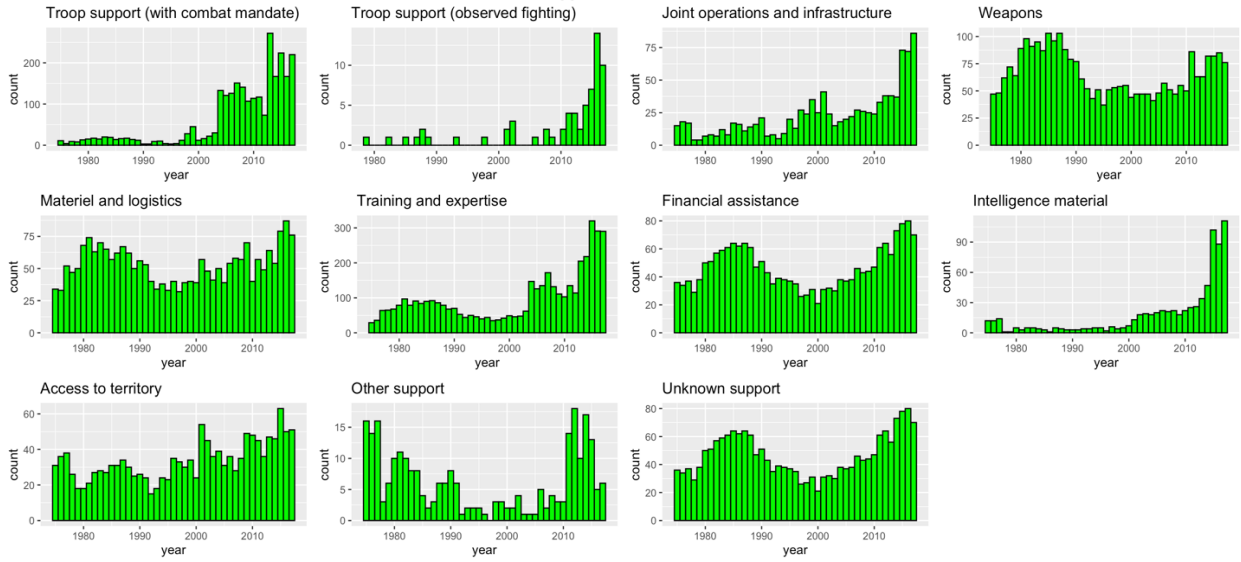
[52] George 2005; Spies 1989.
[53] Herring 1979; Ladwig 2017; Kahin 1986; Kaiser 2000; Payne 2021.
[54] Charap, Treyger, and Geist 2019; Grant and Kaussler 2020.
[55] Hill 2017; Stark 2019.
[56] Karlén et al. 2021a, 2051; Salehyan 2010.
[57] Meier et al. 2022, 546.
[58] Mumford 2013a, 1; Rauta 2020; Deutsch 1964; Dunér 1981; Bar-Siman-Tov 1984; Towle 1981.

resources or military expertise from outside states (as shown in Figure 2.2).[59] Between 1975 and 2017, external support in armed conflicts is the rule rather than the exception: 80% of all intrastate conflicts and 72% of all interstate conflicts saw at least one instance of external support.[60] The key distinction between external support and proxy war is that the former encompasses both the provision of troops by external parties as "secondary warring parties" (a form of external direct military intervention)[61] and external assistance short of fighting such as financial support, arms transfers, intelligence sharing, logistics, and training.

Figure 2.3 provides an example of the variation in forms of external support over time, as recorded by the UCDP External Supporter Dataset (ESD). The most common forms of external assistance between 1975 and 2017 are supplies of weapons and materiel as well as financial support, as they score consistently high yearly counts. Access to territory is also a frequent type of assistance. Forms of support that entail the use of the foreign sponsor's troops are rare during the Cold War but are increasingly common since 2000. The same can be seen for intelligence and training. This upwards trend might reflect the post-9/11 tendency to engage in counter-insurgency operations abroad, especially by Western states.[62] In addition to changing across civil wars, foreign support may also vary over the course of the same civil war. In 127 out of 168 intrastate conflicts (75.6%) showing evidence of foreign support listed in the ESD, at least one sponsor changed the combination of support types it provides to a single conflict actor at least once from one year to the next.

[59] San-Akca 2016, 1; Grauer and Tierney 2018.
[60] Meier et al. 2022; Moghadam and Wyss 2020; Petrova 2019; Percy 2013.
[61] The definition of "secondary warring parties" is taken from UCDP's Armed Conflict Database (ACD). See Pettersson et al. 2021.
[62] Grauer and Tierney 2018; Jones 2017; Karlén et al. 2021a; Malet 2015.

Figure 2.3. *Year-on-year variation in foreign support, by type.*[63]



While the concept of external support encompasses both direct intervention and proxy war, this has mostly been used as an empirical category and deployed mostly in quantitative studies, with little theoretical conceptualization—in contrast to "proxy war" which has often been used in qualitative studies and for conceptual purposes.[64] In fact, both scholars of external support and of proxy war rely on the PA model as the main theoretical framework: states opt for external sponsorship to outsource the costs of fighting, exploit local actors' expertise, and legitimize their actions.[65] Hence, although external support is empirically distinct from—and encompasses—proxy warfare, the former is not sufficiently distinguishable from the latter from a theoretical standpoint.

This lack of theoretical development and over-emphasis on empirics is perhaps most obvious when we look at the different types of external support, such as those listed in Figure 2.3. The

[63] Own graph on data by Meier 2021.
[64] Rauta 2021b.
[65] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019; Byman 2013; Salehyan 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011.

existing literature has leveraged this wealth of empirical variation to study the effect of different forms of support on conflict duration, competition and cooperation between supported sides, level of violence and civilian victimization, and conflict outcomes.[66] While placing such emphasis has helped us understand the consequences of different types of external support, their causes are underexplored. Very few if any studies consider *why* one type of support is provided as opposed to another.[67] This is especially problematic if we consider that external support encompasses more than one logic: one of direct intervention, and one of conflict delegation or proxy war. Without an understanding of why foreign actors provide one different type of support as opposed to another, we are likely to overlook significant biases. This is the purpose of the conceptualization section that will follow. First, however, we need to spend more time to discuss who sponsors and recipients are.

The protagonists of external support: sponsors and recipients

Defining external support

For the purpose of this dissertation, and in line with existing literature, external support is defined as *a relationship between a warring party and a foreign state, whereby the latter provides militarily relevant assistance to assist the former's war effort*. This definition excludes any support type which is not aimed at supporting one side's war effort, including peacetime assistance, most OECD-listed foreign aid, and inter-state arms transfers as part of

[66] Anderson 2019; Aydin and Regan 2012; Cohen and Nordås 2015; Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2022; Huang and Sullivan 2021; Ives 2019; Karlén 2020; Manekin and Wood 2020; Petrova 2019; Popovic 2018; Roberts 2019; Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017; Schulhofer-Wohl 2020; Stein and Cantin 2021; Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012.
[67] Exceptions include Corbetta 2015; Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2022; Karlén 2022.

the regular workings of the globalized economic and political order.[68] Financial motives, for example, drive large parts of the sales of military equipment worldwide and sellers often show little interest in how their equipment is used–but this would not constitute external support in civil war. It also excludes instances of "de facto support", i.e., situations in which fighting groups use the territory or the resources of a state without the latter's awareness or consent.[69] Non-state actors and militias fighting in a civil war might find safe haven in other states, exploiting either porous borders or the civil liberties that are granted in foreign territory.[70] For example, a Kurdish terrorist group may have operative cells in Germany which it uses to plan attacks in Turkey: in this case the German government should not be counted as a sponsor.[71]

In the traditional view of proxy wars, the sponsor is regarded as a state while the proxy is often a non-state actor. However, as non-state actors can also be sponsors, and states can be recipients the external party could be a state or a non-state actor.[72] This dissertation includes both state and non-state actors as possible recipients of support, or recipients, whereas non-state sponsors are excluded. The following sections dig further into the nature of sponsors and recipients, and provide justifications for the exclusion of non-state sponsors and the inclusion of both state and non-state recipients.

Sponsors

The *sponsor*, also known in the literature as patron, backer, or principal, is as an external state who provides military support to one of the parties fighting the civil war. Using Kalyvas

[68] Apodaca 2017; Findley 2018.
[69] San-Akca 2016.
[70] Byman and Kreps 2010.
[71] Byman 2005, 7.
[72] Moghadam and Wyss 2020; Rauta and Spatafora 2024.

(2019)'s definition of civil war as a conflict "primarily fought between domestic factions within a state, sometimes in the name of political and social change and sometimes to promote a secessionist agenda and the creation of a new state,"[73] only those parties who are not subjects of the country at war's incumbent government at the start of the civil conflict can become foreign sponsors. In the context of interstate wars, this definition is not as straightforward because a distinction between those who are under the same sovereign at the beginning of hostilities cannot be drawn. Consequently, external actors who may become sponsors could be defined as those who are not directly involved at the onset of hostilities between two (or more) states, and who then decide to support one of the parties at war rather than intervene independently. However, this definition may run the risk of confounding sponsors with allies.[74] Hence, although the theory developed in this dissertation could in principle be extended to interstate wars (as the concluding chapter will discuss), it be limited to civil war contexts.

A defining characteristic of sponsors is that they do not intervene in a "neutral" fashion, but in support of one or more warring factions, pooling their resources to the support of local partners' war effort. Sponsors may provide such support individually or as a group. The Afghanistan War of 2001 is a case of foreign support provided collectively, with the US-led coalition assisting the Northern Alliance fighting against the Taliban. Rwanda's support for the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL) against the Democratic Republic of Congo's government in 1996, instead, is an instance of one-sided support. External state support to non-state armed groups is commonly seen as a direct relationship between a state sponsor and a rebel group, but this may not necessarily be the case: powerful states often use third-party states as conduits of military aid, such as the United States did when providing

[73] Kalyvas 2019, 17.
[74] For a discussion of the relationship between proxy wars and alliances, see Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023.

support to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan and to UNITA in Angola (channeled through Pakistan and Zaire, respectively).[75] Hence, sponsorship channels are not always simple. This dissertation will focus on simple and direct sponsor-recipient relationships.

Despite their joint effort and common adversary, the goals of sponsors might not be the same as those of the beneficiary. As Tyrone Groh argues, sponsors may want the local actors to win the war, but they may also want to delay the conclusion of the conflict, sponsoring various actors in a strategy aimed at "meddling" and "feeding the chaos."[76] Recipients too might have interests in prolonging the conflict, perhaps because they benefit from a war economy, like Syria's proxies were during the Lebanese Civil War, and external support represents a subsidy they want to exploit for as long as possible, which may put them at odds with sponsors who do want the conflict to end as soon as possible.[77] Potential disagreements between sponsors and local recipients does not prevent sponsors from working with and through civil war parties, just like differences between states do not prevent interstate alliances from being formed.[78]

Foreign sponsors may be states or non-state actors, the latter including political groups such as diasporas, refugees, and transnational insurgencies.[79] The reasons why states and nonstate actors provide support may differ widely: for instance, in the first global study of nonstate sponsors, Moghadam and Wyss (2020) claim that states "conceive of proxies as an indirect, predominantly military tool", whereas "nonstate sponsors use proxies as 'political ancillaries.'"[80] Evaluating whether the objective of nonstate actors in enlisting surrogates in

[75] Karlén and Rauta 2023, 107.
[76] Groh 2019, 20.
[77] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.
[78] Snyder 1997.
[79] Byman 2013, 981.
[80] Moghadam and Wyss 2020, 120.

other states is to advance their political goals whereas state actors mostly care about military objectives is beyond the purpose of this project. In fact, as the theoretical and empirical chapters will suggest, sponsors may have as prominent a political objective as a military one motivating their involvement. However, it is going to be complex to provide a general explanation which applies equally to states, transnational terrorist groups, diasporas, and refugees. Such diverse actors are likely to evaluate support type according to different logics. On the other hand, providing an explanation that applies to states is more feasible. Hence, this dissertation will limit the pool of sponsors to state actors.

Recipients

The other key actor of the support relationship is the *recipient* of support. In the literature, this actor is also called client, agent, beneficiary, or, of course, proxy. The choice of "recipient" as a term emphasizes the key feature of this actor for the dissertation: it is an actor that *receives* support. Moreover, this term will reduce theoretical confusion later on in the dissertation: a recipient could receive either direct or indirect support (see next section), whereas a proxy is generally regarded as an actor that can only receive indirect support. In this thesis, the recipient could be any organized group who directly engages in a civil war due to an incompatibility with another group about the type of central government the country should have, or the territorial or policy extent of its authority.[81] This definition encompasses both the incumbent government and rebel groups who, at the beginning of the conflict, were subject to the authority of the incumbent government.

[81] Newman 2014.

Most studies of foreign support tend to restrain the analysis to non-state recipients, excluding state-to-state relationships of support.[82] However, the sharp distinction between the government and rebel groups challenging its monopoly of power is based on the often-large capability gap between the two types of actors, the different complexity of their organizational structures, and the unequal level of international legitimacy that they enjoy. These differences are maximized when rebels deploy guerrilla and terrorist tactics, hiding from the government who on the other hand aims to showcase a high degree of territorial control.[83] These two types of actors, the literature seems to assume, may vary so much that foreign support for government must be radically different from foreign support for rebels. Additionally, because foreign assistance to incumbent governments is recognized under international law whereas support to rebels represents a break of the norm of non-interference, the latter justifies more scholarly attention than state-to-state assistance.[84]

Instead, this dissertation includes both state and non-state actors, for two main reasons. First, the difference between the government party and its competitors is not always as clear cut as it is often assumed. An incumbent government fighting an internal rebellion is weaker than it would be in peacetime. This hinders its governance capacity, i.e. the ability to perform all the functions that allow citizens—and scholars—to identify that actor as the government. Most importantly, the monopoly of legitimate violence, which is the central assumption in Max Weber's definition of the sovereign state, is challenged. Often, rebels set up parallel institutions

[82] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019; Groh 2019; Hughes 2014; Mumford 2013a; Tamm 2016a.
[83] Jones 2017; Kalyvas 2006.
[84] This attention has not prevented the emergence of a strand of literature on state support for incumbent governments fighting counterinsurgency (Elias 2020; Ladwig 2017; Tankel 2018.). Yet these forms of support are not usually included in the same conceptual category as foreign external assistance for rebels.

and governance structures in the territory they control, which make them very similar to a government.[85]

Additionally, the quest for international legitimacy—often regarded as falling within the purview of states—is pursued by rebel groups too.[86] Rebel groups often engage in diplomatic activity and show their respect for international law in order to present themselves as legitimate actors.[87] Rebel groups that have a focus on political programs, forge deep social relations, or seek to attract human rights-conscious external sponsorship are those that are more likely to exhibit compliance with international law.[88] This further reduces the distinction between state and nonstate actors in the context of a civil war. In some multiparty contests such as Afghanistan during the 1990s or Libya after 2014, the distinction between the government and rebels was so reduced that no government party was clearly identifiable, and the faction in control of the capital city was coded as the government.

Second, and crucially, despite organizational differences between a state and rebel organizations, both types of actors seek foreign support to increase the pool of financial, logistical or military resources at their disposal to tilt the balance of power to their advantage, as well as to help their quest for international legitimacy. The main incentive for support is to gain power. As the definition of civil war suggests, the incumbent governments and warring parties share a fundamental incompatibility, on the basis of which they resort to fighting.[89] In

[85] Arjona 2014; Arjona 2016; Mampilly and Stewart 2021; Sinno 2010.
[86] Clifford 2016; Fazal 2018.
[87] Gleditsch et al. 2018.
[88] Jo 2015.
[89] Cederman and Vogt 2017, 1993.

doing so, each side seeks to assemble sufficient power to be the prevailing force and incentivize the other side to capitulate.[90]

In this contest, foreign support serves a fundamental power-enhancing purpose. External assistance allows the recipient to increase the pool of financial, logistical or military resources that each side has at their disposal, thereby offsetting the domestic balance of power in their favor or reducing the gap vis-à-vis adversaries. This rationale may apply regardless of whether the recipient has an overall power advantage or disadvantage and is therefore applicable to both states and nonstate combatants.[91] In fact, the majority of civil wars witness competitive support, as both sides seek assistance to counterbalance the opponent's capabilities.[92]

A further purpose of requesting foreign support is that it may increase the recipient's chances of winning—or regaining—recognition by the international community. According to thinkers such as Max Weber and Charles Tilly, the rise of the modern state was as much an ideational battle for legitimacy as it was a material struggle for the centralization of power.[93] This has influenced the development of international law: according to the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, one requisite for statehood is recognition by the international community. In the context of a civil war, contestants may use foreign support to enhance their image as legitimate representatives of a group or of the whole population of the state.[94]

[90] Christia 2012.
[91] Gent 2008.
[92] Anderson 2019.
[93] Tilly 1992; Weber 1997.
[94] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 719.

Yet, as argued the paragraphs above, the quest for legitimacy is not a prerogative of states. Rebels too may exploit foreign support as a means to rally support for and recognition of their cause, as well as to set up their diplomatic network in a post-conflict light.[95] Incumbent governments may also use foreign support in order not to lose international legitimacy and to continue presenting themselves as the only government. Once again, this rationale for support applies to both incumbents and rebels. Hence, there is no need to restrict the analysis to either sponsors or recipients.

Identifying two logics: indirect vs. direct support

As mentioned before, foreign support encompasses both direct intervention by foreign powers with combat forces, as well as material assistance to the recipient, such as financial support, arms transfers, intelligence, and training. However, there is a fundamental difference between intervention with combat forces and the other types of support. By providing financial support, intelligence, weapons, or training, a sponsor state can affect the fighting only *indirectly*, as the recipient factions remains the only one to engage in combat or counterinsurgency operations. This type of assistance, which corresponds to proxy warfare because it follows the logic of conflict delegation, can be described as *indirect support*.

On the other hand, the other type of assistance requires that the sponsor's forces directly engage in combat against the opponent side in the civil war. The provision of a state's ground military forces to carry out significant combat action entails that the sponsor and recipient would fight side to side, or that the sponsor even substitutes the recipient's forces in fighting—in either

[95] Huang 2016; Huang and Sullivan 2021; Jo 2015.

case, the sponsor would be directly engaging in combat. Because this type of assistance follows the logic of direct intervention, it can be named *direct support*.

Figure 2.4 illustrates the difference between direct and indirect support. The foreign sponsor, intervening from outside the country at war (which is marked by a dotted line), can choose to transfer resources to the recipient, who then used them to fight on the battlefield (indirect support), or can partake in combat directly on the recipient's side (direct support).

Figure 2.4. *The difference between indirect support and direct support.*

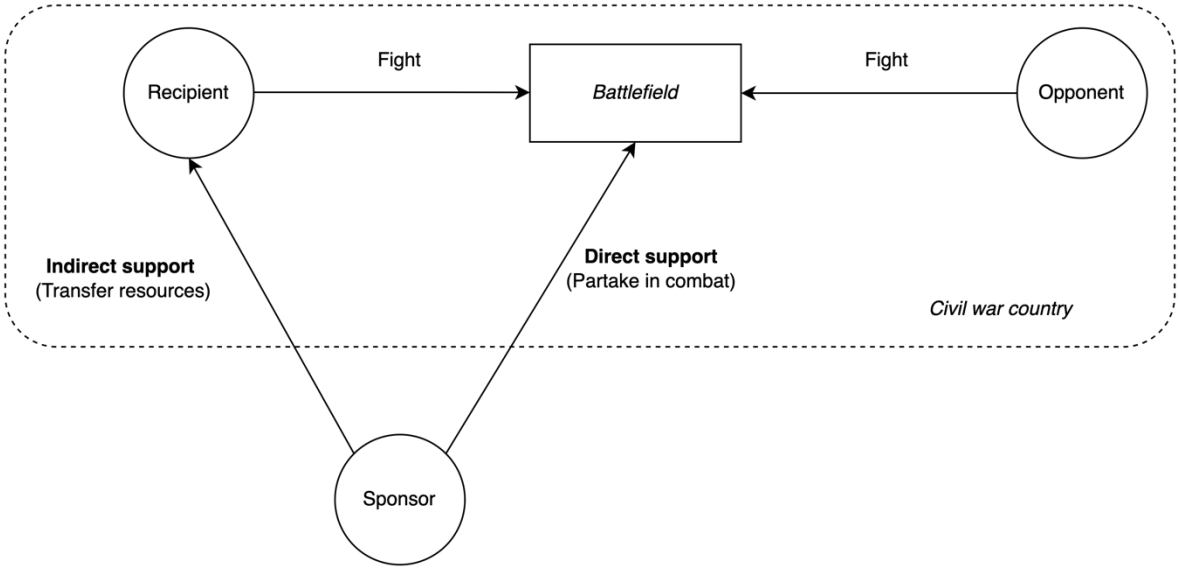


Figure 2.4 presents the simplest picture, with only three actors and two support types, to illustrate the basic difference between these two types of support, but the reality of external support is more complex. For instance, the opponent's forces could in turn be backed by foreign sponsors, who in turn will make their own decision whether to resort to indirect or direct support. Moreover, some forms of assistance fall in between the two categories of indirect and direct support. For example, foreign military personnel who are sent on an advisory mission may (and often do) end up engaging in combat for short spells, whereas some combat forces

could limit themselves to intelligence, policing and reconnaissance rather than kinetic action. Alternatively, private third parties could be deployed instead of the state's own troops, raising questions as to whether they should be regarded as "direct" or "indirect" support: over the past decade, for example, the Wagner Group acted often on behalf of Russian forces in Sub-Saharan Africa, and more recently in Ukraine.[96]

The difference could be questioned even when the sponsor engages in kinetic action, such as in the context of air support, which has profusely been used over the past two decades in counter-insurgency operations. The United States and its allies resorted to small footprint or "by-with-through" support to partners, often limiting their intervention to the use of air power in support of indigenous forces fighting on the ground.[97] To what extent is this an instance of direct or indirect support?

The point of the distinction in Figure 2.4 is to highlight the distinction between the two logics. In reality, external support may fall on a spectrum, with indirect support in the form of weapons shipments and training (responding to a "pure" logic of conflict delegation) on one extreme and the sponsor's participation in combat with a major ground contingent (responding to a "pure" logic of direct intervention) on the other. Inevitably, some forms of assistance fall in between. Nevertheless, the basic logic described in Figure 2.4 remains valid. In order to study the difference between direct and indirect support, and to theorize the transition between the two in the next chapter, this dissertation will focus on the ideal points: direct support will therefore be taken to mean the deployment of a state's official forces (most often, ground troops)

[96] Marten 2019; Reynolds 2019.
[97] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker 2018; Borghard and Pischedda 2012; Cragin 2020; Tankel 2018.

to engage in kinetic activity alongside, or instead of, the recipient. Chapter 7, however, will also consider in-between cases.

The costs and benefits of direct support for the sponsor

The distinction between direct and indirect support is more relevant for the sponsor than for the recipient. For the recipient, foreign support of any kind acts as a subsidy, reducing the costs of war for the beneficiary and transferring them to the external sponsor, while increasing the beneficiary's benefits. [98] While some recipients may prefer direct support in some circumstances and indirect support in others—e.g., to have more autonomy—we can assume that the main benefit they obtain from the two forms is not analytically different—in both cases, the recipient's power increases. While this assumption may need to be checked empirically, it is not essential for the purpose of the theory. Chapter 3 provides more details on the role of the recipient and the possibility of preference for direct as opposed to indirect support.

On the other hand, direct and indirect support are significantly different for the sponsor. When a foreign state supports a warring party, it will necessarily bear some of the costs of war, but the type of assistance provided will entail different costs. When the sponsor provides indirect support, the costs it bears will be limited to the value of the resources transferred, which we can call monetary costs. However, the costs of fighting—in terms of loss of lives, destruction of assets, the costs of occupation and holding of territory, international repercussions and the risks of escalation—will be taken up entirely by the recipient.

[98] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.

Direct support, instead, involves *both* monetary and fighting costs for the sponsor. It still entails the costs of paying the troops and equipping them, and usually this will come together with some form of continued (and costly) indirect support to the recipient—for instance, weapons to keep the recipient's forces a viable partner force, or training to ensure interoperability between sponsor's and recipient's troops. In addition, direct support requires the sponsor to directly incur the costs of fighting, which are no longer borne exclusively by the recipient actor. These costs can be very significant: democracies, for example, tend to be very sensitive to casualties, therefore the death of soldiers on foreign soil can cause major internal discontents.[99]

Moreover, the sponsor is more likely to remain entangled in the conflict when it commits its forces, as opposed to remaining removed from the fighting. As fighting continues, the sponsor risks being marred in a quagmire, fighting for many years. The risk of international escalation increases significantly if foreign troops are sent abroad—and although the foreign actor can partly minimize this risk by carrying out a "secret" or unacknowledged intervention,[100] this will not be a risk that most sponsors are willing to take if there is a lower-cost alternative at hand. Hence, for the sponsor, direct support tends to be costlier than indirect assistance. This explains the attractiveness of indirect support: other things equal, this type of assistance is appealing when a foreign state wants to influence a conflict through supporting one of the sides without incurring the fighting costs.

Yet, despite the costs, direct support is still the preferred choice in some circumstances, as it provides two benefits: it allows the sponsor to have an *unmediated* and *immediate* impact on

[99] Carter 2017; Fearon 1994; Lake 1992.
[100] Carson 2018.

the battlefield, without needing to rely solely on the recipient or to carry out extensive and time-consuming training.

First, direct support could make the sponsor more likely to achieve a military objective in a shorter period, bypassing the need to go through the recipient. Indirect support such as training or advising requires the sponsor to transfer its expertise and know-how to the recipient actor. However, learning and perfecting the new skills usually takes time.[101] Some forms of training can be quite fast, especially when it comes to teaching simple weapons systems or tactics. But more in-depth training programs aimed at teaching a completely new form of fighting to the recipient can take time, such as months if not years. For example, Ukraine's armed forces were so successful at defending against the invading Russian army in 2022 due to the years-long training they received from Western instructors since 2014. Yet, despite their effectiveness, they still required several months of additional training to master large-scale combined arms maneuver.[102]

More intrusive forms of external assistance aimed at deeply reforming the recipient's military structure or even their political system tend to be more effective, but they require years. Often they are met with resistance from the recipient's government or cadres, which further slows down progress.[103] On the other hand, short-term programs can actually nurture bad practices, encouraging military coups.[104] Consequently, the benefits of indirect support might take longer to materialize. However, immediate effects might be necessary to steer the course of a war, to make quick progress, to forestall an impending defeat, or to gain the strongest possible

[101] Christia 2012; Sinno 2010.
[102] Chinchilla 2023; Lange 2023.
[103] Ladwig 2017; Elias 2020.
[104] Savage and Caverley 2017; McLauchlin, Seymour, and Martel 2022.

bargaining position at the negotiating table. Due to the removal of the time needed to train the intermediary, direct support allows the sponsor to apply its military force and skills to the theater with as little delay as possible, or in any case in a shorter amount of time than training and advising would require.[105]

Second, as Figure 2.4 makes clear, direct support allows the sponsor to bypass the recipient. The absence of an intermediary allows the sponsor to exploit its own forces' combat effectiveness. Combat, or military, effectiveness is a key variable in the strategic studies literature.[106] It refers to "the specific knowhow, skills and abilities to convert the endowed resources into fighting power" [107] Effectiveness can be measured at the strategic level—"the power that states generate from their resources in war, distinct from war outcomes alone"[108]—as well as at the operational and tactical levels, in term of the set of skills which are most appropriate to prevail in engagements. Military effectiveness is often necessary to win conflicts and achieve military objectives, and it can compensate for material inferiority in resources or manpower.

In a situation of external support in civil war, an external sponsor can reasonably believe its forces to have higher combat effectiveness than the recipient party's ones—at least when it comes to using the weapons systems that the sponsor provides to the recipient via indirect support. For instance, the transfer of technologically advanced weapons can have a significant

[105] Within the realm of direct support, there are still variations. For instance, if we take a broader definition of direct support by the sponsor to include air power, its effectiveness may depend on the level of skill of local allies who are fighting on the ground, which in turn may require training, and therefore time. Nevertheless, this intervention would still be shorter than if the sponsor were to build the proxy's air power and avoid intervention altogether. See Biddle 2005; Borghard and Pischedda 2012.

[106] Although the terms "combat effectiveness", "military effectiveness", and "battlefield performance" may refer to different levels of analysis in military studies, this chapter uses the terms interchangeably. See Abbott et al. 2020a, 5; Ashour 2021, 17; Biddle 2004; Biddle 2021; Millett and Murray 2010, 6–7; Talmadge 2015, 4.

[107] Talmadge 2015, 4.

[108] Millett and Murray 2010, 6–7; Talmadge 2015, 4.

impact on the battlefield, by tilting the balance of power in favor of the recipient, and they can be deployed to have immediate effects on the battlefield. However, if the recipient's army deploying them has little combat effectiveness, the new weapons might not have as strong an impact as they would otherwise. The sponsor's armed forces, instead, are likely to be more familiar with the weapons provided—because presumably they were the first ones to use them, and have had time to integrate them in their training and operational doctrine, which likely results in a higher level of combat effectiveness. If the sponsor had concerns about the recipient's battlefield effectiveness, it could then resort to direct support rather than indirect.

Direct support also minimizes the negative consequences of goal misalignment between recipient and sponsor. As mentioned above, when a state delegates fighting to an external actor it does not fully control, the classic problem of PA relations emerges: the recipient may shirk, diverting the resources provided by the sponsor to the pursuit of its own goals rather than to the sponsor's. Sometimes, the goals of sponsor and recipient are not aligned.[109] Even when recipient and sponsor both want to win the conflict, they may prefer different strategies to achieve the objective. For instance, warring parties in the Lebanese Civil War wanted to carry out a low-intensity campaign, while the sponsors—such as Syria—wanted them to bring the war to a quick conclusion by means of a high intensity campaign.[110] There may also be other differences in preferences regarding values other than the goal of defeating the opponent, such as risks proneness towards escalation between the recipient's opponent and the intervener, or respect for humanitarian law. Direct support allows the sponsor to minimize the costs of misalignment. Because of its unmediated and immediate impact, this form of assistance may

[109] Groh 2019.
[110] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020, 121–131.

allow the sponsor to implement its preferred strategy, as opposed to spending time and resources monitoring and influencing the recipient.

The paragraphs above do not imply that indirect support does not possess features of immediacy or directness in isolation. Some forms of indirect support, such as weapons and materiel transfers, can have an immediate effect, but they are not unmediated, because the recipient uses them in battle. Other forms of indirect support, such as training and financial assistance, have neither an immediate nor an unmediated effect. It is the *combined* immediate and unmediated military impact that significantly differentiates direct support from other forms of assistance. These unique features of direct support make it appealing to the sponsor when it comes to choosing a form of escalation that prevents a collapse of the recipient side, as the next chapter will show.

One is unlikely to find other dimensions than immediacy and directness along which to draw a theoretically relevant boundary between direct support and other assistance types. For illustrative purposes, let us consider three prominent dimensions in the literature on foreign support: fungibility, visibility, and sponsor's control.

First, it may be argued that direct support is the least fungible form of assistance. Types of assistance such as funding are the most fungible, because the beneficiary can deploy the funding received for multiple scopes, from training to weapons acquisition and recruitment.[111] Once these forms of support are issued, a concerned sponsor should closely monitor how they are used because their fungibility generates commitment problems .[112] On the other hand, direct

[111] Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017.
[112] Abbott et al. 2020a.

support appears to much less fungible at first glance because troops and special forces, by virtue of their loyalty, are bound to obey the sponsor's directives.

Yet, direct support is not necessarily the least fungible form of support. Weapons such as surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), for instance, can only be used to take down aerial threats; they cannot be adapted to other tasks such as policing. Troops, even foreign ones, can instead be adapted to various purposes. For instance, the role of foreign forces can vary from close-combat and air support, to reconnaissance, and to the deployment of specialized systems (e.g. air defenses, or drones). Sometimes, foreign forces could be used to perform unpopular tasks which the warring parties do not want to be associated with, such as sexual violence.[113] Hence, direct support does possess some features of fungibility.

Second, the defining feature of direct support may be visibility – the extent to which foreign intervention is observable to third parties and traceable back to a specific actor. Covertness is often regarded as a key feature of intervention in the domestic affairs of another country.[114] Acting in secret, for instance, by sending agents to train rebel groups or to create the conditions for a coup, can be especially important to sponsors who want to maintain a degree of plausible deniability.[115] Direct support is instead regarded as the most visible and overt form of assistance, since foreign troops can easily be observed, and plausible deniability is more difficult to claim.

[113] Cohen and Nordås 2015; Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017.
[114] Robertson 2020.
[115] Poznansky 2021; O'Rourke 2020.

However, this is not always the case. Often, interventions in civil wars are covert, and states go to great lengths to maintain the secret of their combat operations.[116] In interventions throughout the 20th-century, from Spain before WWII to Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War, the degree of overtness—and third parties' incentives in denouncing intervention if they detect it—has varied: for Carson (2018), overtness depends on the risks of international escalation of the conflict. Hence, choosing direct support does not necessarily amount to higher visibility, although it may increase the risks of being caught red-handed. At the same time, however, other types of support may be more visible than direct support: when Afghan mujahedeen started using Stinger SAMs, it was obvious that the U.S. was supplying them.[117] Similarly, financial flows from donor countries to Jihadi groups including the Islamic State have become more easily traceable and attributable.

Third, perhaps the distinctive feature of direct support is the higher degree of control the sponsor can exert over the recipient. Foreign assistance can vary in the extent to which the sponsor manages the recipient, using hard control instruments to shape the latter's behavior, as opposed to adopting a less hierarchical, more persuasive form of governance.[118] Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl (2022) argue that forms of assistance such as troop support correspond to a hierarchical form of delegation, whereas other types resemble orchestration models because the sponsor can only use inducements to persuade the agent.[119]

However, direct support may not necessarily increase the degree of hierarchy than other types. Foreign troops and local forces are often required to practice inter-operability, which requires

[116] Carson 2018.
[117] Monten 2014; Sinno 2010.
[118] Abbott et al. 2020b.
[119] Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2022.

coordination as opposed to hierarchical control. In some cases, foreign forces are placed within the recipient's military structure, hence they become subordinates of the highest authorities of the beneficiary actor. In the Spanish Civil War, the German Condor Legion and the Italian Corps of Volunteer Troops were placed within the organigram of the rebel Nationalist Army, hence under the authority of Franco, the leader of the forces who had risen up against the Spanish government. This structure would not have easily allowed foreign sponsors to control their recipient.[120] In 2009, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal, the commanding US general in Afghanistan, stated that "President Karzai is the commander. I work for President Karzai."[121] Although one might question the extent to which this claim reflected reality as opposed to being a mere façade statement for public consumption, the fact remains that the head of the largest American operation since the end of the Cold War still felt—or was told to be—subordinate to the local ally. Moreover, the higher degree of control that foreign forces exert on the battlefield might not necessarily transfer to political control: as Chinchilla (2021) argues, advisors are often the instrument sponsors use to politically control recipients.[122] Direct support, instead, is often limited to military action. Hence, a distinction between direct and indirect assistance based on control is questionable at best.

Conclusion

In the existing international relations and conflict studies scholarship, the concepts of intervention and proxy war have been treated separately by two literatures who talk past each other. This chapter sought to link the two concepts while creating a better analytical distinction between them, showing that they reflect two different logics which nonetheless can interact.

[120] Esdaile 2019.
[121] Elias 2020, 10.
[122] Chinchilla 2021.

To accomplish this aim, this chapter overviewed and organized links between the various literatures of intervention, proxy warfare and external support, highlighting gaps and inconsistencies, and solving them through conceptualization. It introduced a new conceptual distinction between indirect and direct support, two forms of foreign assistance that respond to two different logics. It further explained what the pros and cons of indirect and direct support are. The main take away of the discussion is that, while indirect support is cheaper than direct support for the foreign sponsor, the latter provides certain advantages that indirect support does not: directness and immediacy.

Table 2.1 summarizes the concepts that were discussed in the chapter. The concepts that have emerged in this chapter constitute the fundamental building blocks of this dissertation. The next chapter delves into the central argument of the book: the transition, or escalation, from indirect to direct support within the same conflict.

Table 2.1. *Overview of the concepts discussed in the Chapter.*

Concept	**Definition**	**New or existing?**
Foreign intervention	The use of military force abroad by one or more states, either as neutral party or in support of one of the warring parties	Existing (e.g. Thompson 2018)
Proxy war	A conflict between two (or more) actors in which at least one of them entrusts another party to fight on their behalf	Existing (e.g. Karlén et al. 2022)

External support	A relationship between a warring party and a foreign state, whereby the latter provides militarily relevant assistance to assist the former's war effort	Existing (e.g. Meier et al. 2022)
Sponsor	A foreign state providing external support to a warring party	Existing (e.g. Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023)
Recipient	A warring party (state or non-state actor) that receives external support	Existing (e.g. Meier et al. 2022; Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023) but often used interchangeably with 'proxy' (not in this dissertation)
Indirect support	The provision of material resources from the sponsor to the recipient, which the latter deploys in combat	New
Direct support	The provision of the sponsor's military forces to carry out combat action in the conflict	New

Conflict dynamics, proxy effectiveness and closing windows: A theory of escalation from indirect to direct support

Introduction

Building on the distinction between different logics of external support, this chapter puts forward a theory of escalation from indirect to direct support. It argues that foreign sponsors' incentives to escalate their involvement in a conflict may arise in response to changing conflict dynamics, such as defeats suffered by the recipient, shifts in the balance of power in the opponent's favor, or changes in the expected duration of the war. Under these conditions, the sponsor will be pushed to re-evaluate whether the extent of its ongoing assistance to the recipient is serving to achieve the sponsor's goals. Based on this reckoning, some sponsors may decide not to increase their level of involvement, preferring to withdraw or reduce their support, whereas others will select into providing more assistance.

However, the increase in assistance will not always lead to an escalation to direct support: sponsors may decide to provide more indirect support, such as additional weapons, subsidies, or training. Therefore, the chapter argues, escalation to direct support is defined by two conditions: (1) sponsors believe that the recipient is unable or unwilling to obtain significant battlefield success; and (2) they perceive that the costs of achieving its goals will increase substantively if no immediate action is taken to reverse these outcomes. In other words, although direct support is costlier than indirect assistance and carries higher risks, if indirect

support takes too long to have a desired effect, it will not be worth the cheaper costs for the sponsor. With no time to transfer skills to the recipient via training and advising, sponsors will be incentivized to intervene directly before the window closes and costs rise. On the other hand, if the sponsor does not perceive that a window is closing, or if the recipient is regarded as a sufficiently effective proxy, escalation will be limited to indirect support.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the concept of "escalation" as used in the International Relations literature, and applies it to the context of external support: escalation of support is defined as the crossing of significant thresholds of foreign involvement, such as direct participation in fighting. Second, the chapter defines the scope of conflicts to which Support Escalation Theory applies: civil wars experiencing an ongoing indirect support relationship between the sponsor and the recipient, and a negative conflict spell leads the sponsors to consider changes in support. The chapter also explores the conditions under which sponsors prefer deepening involvement instead of ending the support relations, thereby "selecting into" the escalation phase. Third, the chapter presents a decision model to evaluate the sponsor's choice of the form of escalation: it analyses the two variables, costs of delaying battlefield action and perceived degree of proxy effectiveness, in isolation and then combines them to determine escalation to direct support. Fourth, it discusses whether this sponsor-centric theory underestimates the role of the recipient. Finally, the chapter returns to the relationship between direct support escalation and escalation of the fighting, discussing how sponsors' support escalation decisions may be affected by the risks of the conflict turning into a major interstate war.

Escalation in the context of external support

As the previous chapter showed, a recurring pattern in intrastate conflicts witnessing external intervention is that foreign actors initially provide assistance short of combat forces (which was defined as indirect support), and later expand their involvement to dispatching military forces for the purpose of fighting (direct support).

Despite the frequency of this phenomenon, the transition from indirect assistance by external actors short of combat forces to direct intervention has not been explained in existing scholarship. Corbetta (2015) argues that "social proximity" between sponsor and recipient—essentially, socio-political, ideological, and ethnic links—leads to costlier interventions. Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl (2022) show that the sponsor's leverage over the recipient affects the degree of recipient autonomy, which in turn affects the type of support, as it comes with a higher or lower number of strings attached. Karlén (2022) argues that "negative feedback" from the conflict pushes foreign sponsors to alter their level of support.[123] None of these articles, however, explicitly engages with the distinction between indirect and direct support that was made in the previous chapter, nor do they identify when a foreign sponsor shifts from one type to the other.

How, then, should we define changes in support in the context of civil war, such as in the aforementioned conflicts? This dissertation defines the introduction of direct support as a form of assistance over the course of the conflict as *support escalation*. The International Relations literature developed the concept of escalation during the Cold War, focusing on the dynamics of superpower confrontation. Escalation can be broadly defined as "an increase in the intensity

[123] Corbetta 2015; Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2022; Karlén 2022.

or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants."[124] The threshold that usually comes to mind is the nuclear one: one party deciding to launch a nuclear strike in the context of a crisis or conventional war. Indeed, the foundational theories on escalation were developed in the nuclear deterrence literature.[125] However, the crossing of thresholds can be applied to other areas of conflict, such as in the decision to pick up arms, expand violence, or victimize civilians.[126] Recently, escalation has become a relevant concept in the study of cyber conflict or in military applications of emerging technologies.[127]

Scholars highlight that escalation is a relational concept and it is highly context dependent. What constitutes escalation in one case may not be escalatory in another, and vice versa. According to Zartman et al. (2005), "[e]scalation is the dynamics of determining where the conflict peak is and if it has been reached."[128] That is, escalation is determined by the actors involved in it. Precisely because of this relational dynamic, escalation is not always a deliberate act by one side: states may cause "inadvertent escalation" when they undertake behaviors that they do not perceive to be escalatory but are interpreted that way by the opponent side.[129] Within the set of nuclear escalation scenarios, for instance, Posen defines inadvertent nuclear escalation when "large-scale conventional operations may come into direct contact with the nuclear forces of an adversary and substantially affect the victim's confidence in his future ability to operate these forces in ways that he had counted upon", thereby triggering a nuclear

[124] Morgan et al. 2008, ix; Talmadge 2019, 867.
[125] Colaresi and Thompson 2002; Danilovic and Clare 2010; Huth 1988; Morgan 2003; Morgan 2012; Schelling 1980; Schelling 1966; Staw and Ross 1989; Wilkenfeld and Murauskaite 2023.
[126] Farrell 2020; Karlén 2020; Mustasilta and Svensson 2023; Duyvesteyn 2017.
[127] Lonergan and Lonergan 2023; Lin-Greenberg 2019; Talmadge 2019.
[128] Zartman and Faure 2005, 3.
[129] Morgan et al. 2008, 23.

response from the victim, even though the attacker did not aim to degrade the victim's nuclear arsenal in the first place.[130]

How does the concept of escalation relate to external support? As shown above, in many conflicts external sponsors alter their level of commitment to their recipients over the course of the war. This change in commitment may take the form of additional or reduced supplies of weapons, funding and material (quantitative changes in support), the deployment of additional types of assistance which the sponsor did not previously provide (qualitative increase), or the withdrawal of some type of support (qualitative decrease). As Karlén (2022) argues, "both change in type and variation in quantity of support can be seen as increasing or decreasing the overall support commitment."[131] The question arises, however, whether all these changes in commitment can be considered an escalation—or, in the case of a reduction, a de-escalation. Did the provision of Stinger missiles to Mujahedeen rebels in Afghanistan constitute an escalation of support from the United States? Or can the provision of humanitarian aid to the Free Syrian Army be considered support escalation?

The two main takeaways from the escalation literature can help answer these questions: the crossing of thresholds and the relational nature of escalation. First, support escalation should entail the *crossing of a threshold* by the sponsor, which has not been crossed up to that point in the conflict. Second, the sponsor should cross a *significant* threshold, such that its actions are understood as an escalation in the context of the conflict.

[130] Posen 2013, 2.
[131] Karlén 2022, 3.

On the basis of these two criteria, it can be argued that the sponsor's decision to provide direct support represents a *clear-cut case of support escalation*. Direct support, as explained in the previous chapter, entails a transition from a logic of conflict delegation (in the form of indirect support) to one of direct intervention. As such, it crosses one significant threshold: that of the sponsor's direct participation in combat with its own armed forces. Moreover, this participation in combat is likely to be recognized as a significant threshold across virtually all conflict contexts.

As mentioned, direct intervention—even if in support of a local party—is likely to carry with it a number of risks for the sponsor. Among others, it can cause a heightened risk of conflict escalation in the conventional sense in a way that indirect support does not.[132] Although it is not a civil war, the discussions surrounding Western support to Ukraine against Russia since February 2022 help illustrate this dynamic: the United States and other European allies have been, so far, unwilling to provide any combat support to Ukraine, as that would significantly increase the likelihood of direct fighting between Western and Russian forces, which in turn may cause a broader war between NATO and Russia (horizontal escalation) in which parties could resort to nuclear weapons (vertical escalation). However, indirect support to Ukraine, either in the form of additional weapons transfers or in training, has not increased the likelihood of such direct exchange, despite continued threats from Russia.[133] This illustrates how the provision of direct support represents a significant threshold in the context of the war, and it would represent a form of support escalation, whereas indirect support is not always seen as escalatory.

[132] Carson 2018; Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz 2008, 480.
[133] Chinchilla and Rosemberg 2023.

The rest of the chapter theorizes a mechanism to explain the sponsor's decision to escalate assistance to direct support. Before proceeding, there are three clarification points to be made. First, the additional provision of other forms of support such as training and weapons supplies may also deemed forms of support escalation in certain contexts. In fact, the sponsor may choose to increase support for reasons other than what are presented below. For example, a sponsor may want to increase control over the recipient of support, and thereby send advisors to increase oversight.[134] In some cases, this will also be regarded as the crossing of a significant threshold. To be sure, the model presented in the next sections does envision the possibility of sponsors moving to additional forms of indirect support rather than escalating to direct support under certain conditions. However, this dissertation will not provide a comprehensive mechanism explaining all forms of support escalation. As we move on with the explanation, it is important to keep in mind that there are other forms of escalation of support which fall outside the scope of the dissertation.

Second, escalation to direct support does not necessarily require the conclusion of indirect assistance. Empirically, escalation to direct support happens when the sponsor sends combat support when it was not previously providing it. However, usually indirect support continues to be provided even after direct support starts being issued. The commitment of ground troops to the fight does not imply a sudden stop in the flow of weapons or in training: if anything, the recipient is likely to receive more weapons and more training as it needs to remain a viable and reliable partner for the sponsor's own forces. Hence, it is not appropriate to talk about transition from indirect to direct support, but rather to the addition of direct support on top of indirect assistance. When describing alternative explanations to Support Escalation Theory, sometimes

[134] For the use of support to control recipients, see Abbott et al. 2020a; Chinchilla 2021; Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2022; Tamm 2020.

the phenomenon will be referred to as "transition" from indirect to direct support, even though this is not the most appropriate term. However, this does not prevent us from recognising this as an escalation of support, for the reasons provided above.

Third, the focus of Support Escalation Theory will be on the sponsor's decision-makers or leadership. The sponsor and the recipient are the two main parties of the support relationship, and the latter maintains a degree of autonomy and independence such that it cannot be reduced to a "pawn" in the sponsor's hands.[135] However, as described at length in the previous chapter, direct and indirect support are significantly different for the sponsor, in terms of costs that it would face. Hence, the sponsor is the key actor who decides whether the immediacy and directness of direct support are worth the higher costs and risks. Moreover, regardless of the recipient's degree of autonomy and strength, the sponsor maintains ultimate control over the type of resources that it provides, whereas the recipient may only gain control after the resources are issued, not before. Consequently, it makes logical sense to focus on the sponsor. Having said that, the recipient may affect the type of support that is provided through its behavior and in certain circumstances. This will be discussed in later sections of the chapter.

A theory of escalation from indirect to direct support

The following section proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the conditions that are necessary for the theory to hold: an ongoing indirect support relationship between the sponsor and recipient. Second, it describes the conditions under which the sponsor may come to question the utility of the indirect support it is providing, as a result of changing conflict dynamics.

[135] Fox 2019; Moghadam and Wyss 2018.

Third, the section presents the key variables that affect the sponsor's decision to escalate or not to direct support.

Initial condition: an ongoing indirect support relationship

As the previous chapter argued, direct support is generally costlier than indirect support for the sponsor, because the former requires the sponsor to take up the costs of direct fighting in addition to monetary costs. However, the key features of direct support—its immediate and direct (or unmediated) impact on the battlefield—may make it more useful than indirect support under certain circumstances. But when do sponsor states escalate from one form of assistance to the other over the course of the conflict? When do the features of direct intervention become necessary?

To understand the mechanism of escalation, we first need to postulate an *initial condition of indirect support*: a situation in which the sponsor is already providing assistance to a warring party. Without this assumption, escalation to direct support over the course of the conflict could not be observed. This is not a strong assumption, as foreign actors who end up intervening with their own troops in conflicts taking place abroad, such as South Africa in Angola, Saudi Arabia in Yemen, or Russia in Syria, did begin by supporting warring parties indirectly. Quantitatively, according to data by the External Supporter Dataset (ESD), out of 50 instances of direct support onset that are observed in civil wars between 1975 and 2017, *zero* take place in wars that are not already experiencing indirect support.[136] This is not to say that a foreign actor may not begin interfering with a conflict by intervening directly on behalf of a third party, rather than

[136] Meier et al. 2022. The data is analyzed more in detail in Chapter 4.

first providing indirect forms of assistance. However, the mechanisms described below would not apply to such cases. Therefore, they remain out of the scope of this theory.

The initial condition of indirect support implies—as the existing literature on conflict delegation shows—that sponsors have a minimum degree of interest in influencing the conflict but face high costs of direct war, so they prefer to locate like-minded conflict actors to whom they can provide resources, who can pursue the sponsor's strategic goals. First, the sponsor must be sufficiently interested in affecting the evolution of the conflict, either because it is engaged in a rivalry with one of the parties at war, or with the latter's patrons, or for ideological and ethnic affinity with the would-be recipient.[137] Interests for foreign support may also emerge from domestic factors, including the leadership's desire to counter internal threats, either by cementing national unity via a "rally round the flag" effect, or by using external support as a diversionary factor for public opinion.[138] Second, the sponsor faces high costs of open war, which make sponsorship of warring parties a viable alternative. The reasons listed above may all generate sufficient interest to support one or more conflict parties, but not enough to openly declare war.[139] The consequences of intervention may entail open war with the invaded country and the prospects of never-ending occupation but also international condemnation, sanctions, and collective military retaliation. Additionally, sponsors may face domestic opposition to open conflict.[140] In short, this theory accepts, and builds upon, the existing knowledge on why foreign states sponsor warring parties.

[137] Hughes 2014; Karlén et al. 2021a; Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011.
[138] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019; Innes 2012; San-Akca 2016.
[139] Lake 2016.
[140] Elias 2020; San-Akca 2016.

The reasons leading the sponsor to question indirect support

Even when a sponsor has initially opted for indirect support for a recipient, the unfolding of the civil war may cast doubt over the durability and effectiveness of the strategy. As the sponsor-recipient relationship evolves with the conflict, in turn, sponsors are likely to re-evaluate the extent of their commitment, leading to changes in external support. Given an initial situation of indirect support, what factors could change this equilibrium? The focus of this theory is on one important pathway which may lead to a reckoning over the ongoing indirect support relationship: the *military evolution of the conflict*, and in particular negative developments such as defeats suffered by the recipient, the latter's inability to attain a decisive victory despite an overall advantage, or an increase in strength from the adversary. There are at least two other pathways to support change: *domestic developments* within the sponsor state, or the influence of the *sponsor's international allies and patrons*, which this section will discuss.

The first pathway—*military evolution of the conflict*—focuses on changes in the balance of power and in the results of victories and defeats experienced by recipients and their opponents over the course the conflict. This dissertation builds on the idea that war is a continuous bargaining process, in contrast to earlier theories of war, which suggested that conflict onset represents the failure of bargaining.[141] A new generation of bargaining scholars argues that war is a continuation of bargaining: as parties fight, they use victories and defeats as a way of gauging each other's real power, motivations, and resolve, and eventually find either a negotiated settlement in the form of an armistice or peace agreement, or continue fighting until

[141] Schelling 1966; Schelling 1980; Zinnes 1976.

the opponent is eliminated.[142] This is consistent with existing research on foreign policy: decision-makers continuously evaluate information on the basis of whether or not it brings them closer to or further away from the intended end goals, and are likely revisit past decisions when there is new information that suggests that the current policy is suboptimal or even counterproductive.[143] Hence, the course of events, such as military engagements, can significantly alter policy choices.

Civil war is, in this aspect, not different from international conflict: the incumbent government, rebel groups, and their backers use conflict events as a way of gauging the real balance of power, estimating the other side's resolve, and determining their strategy in the face of the most likely outcome. Victory and defeat in battle are likely to affect actors' calculations as they are the most direct reflection of the "true" balance of power. In non-conventional civil wars, where battles are rare, the balance of power may be determined by the number of attacks on government forces, the population's willingness to denounce insurgents or collaborators, and the effective control of territory by the various factions. Other, non-battlefield events may also affect the actors' calculations, including internal crises, coups, and splinters within warring factions. Alternatively, the expectation of the balance of power may be upset as one side obtains new natural resources or additional foreign support from its own external backers. Shifts in the level of violence against civilians may also be interpreted as reflection of changes in the "true" balance of power, because civilian victimization tends to happen when territorial control is not

[142] Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce 2008; Cunningham, Skrede Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Brandt et al. 2008; Balcells and Kalyvas 2014; Reed et al. 2008; Kydd and McManus 2017.
[143] Hermann 2012; Levy 1994; Staw and Ross 1989.

absolute.[144] These events affect bargaining by changing expectations about how future confrontations between belligerents will end.[145]

In the context of external support, conflict events are also likely to affect sponsors' evaluation of their recipients and of the assistance they are providing. The sponsor opts for indirect support under the assumption that it could attain its strategic goals by supporting the recipient. The evolution of the conflict can significantly alter the sponsor's estimate of the recipient's ability to deliver on these goals. On the one hand, the sponsor could witness a positive conflict evolution, as evidenced by sudden favorable spells, for instance, after defeating the opponent in decisive battles. While the sponsor's belief in the recipient's ability to win is strengthened, it is quite unlikely that a positive conflict evolution would create the conditions for a potential escalation to direct support, given that foreign support is costly, and that the recipient is doing well with the assistance it has been provided with already, so there is little need for policy change. On the other hand, differences between the external sponsor and the victorious recipient may start to emerge, leading the sponsor to reduce rather than increase assistance.[146] For instance, a sponsor may decide that the recipient no longer has need for a costly subsidy, which could cause frictions between the two sides.[147] Hence, the likely outcome of a positive conflict evolution is not escalation of support, but either no change, or a pressure for reduction.

[144] Costalli, Moro, and Ruggeri 2020; Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012; Kalyvas 2006.
[145] Many of these factors are the same variables that scholars use to predict civil war duration and outcome, such as those cited in Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce 2008; Cunningham, Skrede Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Brandt et al. 2008; Balcells and Kalyvas 2014. The factors suggested above relate to warring parties' perception of their chances of victory or the prospects of obtaining a favorable settlement in negotiation. This paragraph argues that they may influence not only the duration of conflict and its outcome, but also the parties' decision to adopt new strategies.
[146] Fox 2019; Karlén 2019.
[147] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.

The recipient may also experience a negative conflict evolution. Karlén (2022) calls this condition "adverse feedback" and describes it as "an event… that could be interpreted as bringing the state sponsor further away from the envisioned goals."[148] Such adverse feedback signals what Hermann calls "policy failure", referring to leaders' perception of a negative shift that trigger changes in the support commitment.[149] If conditions in the domestic and international environment remain stable or changes occur that only increase the probability of success, there is little need to revisit past decisions. A negative event instead "underscores the need for policy change and provides a basis for how those changes can be justified, prompting leaders to acknowledge that the existing policy is not working (policy failure) and that new actions are required."[150]

A negative conflict outlook will likely affect the sponsor's calculations of the balance of power of the conflict it is influencing from abroad: after a major defeat or an unsuccessful spell, the sponsor may realize that the recipient has become too weak relative to its opponents (a resource issue), or is otherwise unable to convert the amount of assistance received into sufficient fighting power (a problem of competency). It may also appear that the recipient is capable yet unwilling to use the assistance to realize the objectives the sponsor initially supplied (a problem of divergent preferences).[151] All the points above may indicate to the sponsor that it will be harder to achieve the goals for which it started providing indirect support. The temporal dimension will also be affected: a negative conflict outlook indicates that the war will continue for longer than initially expected. Foreign support is costly, and the longer the conflict drags on, the more the sponsor will have to bear the costs of support.[152]

[148] Karlén 2022, 78.
[149] Hermann 2012.
[150] Karlén 2022, 78; Hermann 2012; Levy 1994; Staw and Ross 1989.
[151] Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2022; Abbott et al. 2020b.
[152] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.

Various types of information can constitute evidence of a negative conflict evolution. Events that are often taken as indicators of negative conflict evolution include significant military defeats and territorial losses for the recipient. Between 2014 and 2015, Houthi rebels seized Yemen's capital Sana'a and then declared a general mobilization to expel the forces loyal to then-President Hadi from the country and take over the southern provinces of the country.[153] In 2015, the Assad government lost a significant swath of Syrian territory, causing panic in Damascus and in the capitals backing it, such as Tehran and Moscow.[154] These cases are significant because they resulted in an escalation of support from the defeated party's sponsor. In each case, the defeat provided new information to the sponsor regarding the "real" balance of power and the strength of the recipient vis-à-vis the opponent, prompting the sponsor to re-evaluate the effectiveness of its indirect support strategy.

Another possible upset in the conflict's balance of power could be caused by external factors, for instance by the intervention of another foreign actor on the opponent's side. For instance, if an external actor starts providing assistance to the recipient's opponent, or if they increase their initial amount of assistance, that will have a significant impact on the battlefield—either immediately or in the future. Russia's calculus to escalate support to Assad in the Syrian Civil War was influenced not only by Assad's losses to the Syrian rebels and ISIS but also by the support provided by the United States and Turkey to the Syrian opposition.[155] In Yemen, Saudi Arabia's intervention was dictated by Iran's support for the Houthi faction through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah.[156] It is important to note that the actions of other

[153] Hill 2017; Stark 2019.
[154] Ashour 2021.
[155] Charap, Treyger, and Geist 2019.
[156] Hill 2017; Naghizadeh 2019.

external parties affect sponsors' support calculations *through their expected impact on the battlefield*: the additional support for the other side leads sponsors to expect future defeats for the recipient, or a harder path to reach the goals of the support strategy. In other words, it is the same logic as that of actual defeats on the ground, not a separate one.

The sponsor could take other factors into account to assess the evolution of conflict. Increases in the level of violence against civilians—especially if carried out by the opponent side against the recipient's support base—might indicate both negative and positive conflict evolution: on the one hand, a civilian victimization strategy is likely to reduce the level of support for the opponent or the size of its support base, so it suggests a weakening of the recipient relative to the opponent, which the sponsor is incentivized to contrast. On the other hand, violence against civilians can be a symptom of worsening conflict dynamics for the opponent: as a conflict actor weakens relative to its adversary, it employs increasingly violent tactics toward the civilian population as a means of reshaping the strategic landscape to its benefit or improving its control over tenuous territory.[157] In the latter case, violence against civilians in an indicator of a positive conflict outlook. Therefore, the effect of increased levels of violence and civilian victimization on the sponsor is hard to predict a priori.

Although the focus of this study is on developments on the battlefield and within the civil war, factors unrelated to the conflict evolution may push sponsors to change support. Domestic developments within the sponsor state, and electoral cycles in particular, are one such powerful driver.[158] While the initial decision to start a proxy war might be the result of the population's opposition to open conflict (making proxy war the least bad option), over time public opinion—

[157] Costalli, Moro, and Ruggeri 2020; Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012; Kalyvas 2006.
[158][158] Payne 2023.

or the relevant "selectorate" in authoritarian regimes—could shift towards belligerent positions. The sponsor's leadership may detect this shift and decide to create a "rally round the flag" effect, which would strengthen the leader's power, by escalating assistance to the recipient.[159] The sponsor's leaders may also want to change support—either increasing or decreasing it—before an electoral contest in order to strengthen popular support, perhaps by turning the recipient's opponent into a scapegoat against whom additional force must be used.[160] Alternatively, electoral concerns could push state *not* to escalate. The sponsor could delay increases in support, or even withdraw assistance. During the Vietnam War, for instance, President Johnson postponed any discussion on the escalation of US troop involvement until after the 1964 election.[161] The end of American military commitment to foreign theaters such as Vietnam and Iraq has also been tied to electoral concerns.[162]

Hence, the sponsor's own domestic developments should be regarded as an alternative mechanism to explain changes in support. On the other hand, if these developments take place in the domestic arena of the recipient, the opponent, or in that of the opponent's sponsors, they will affect the calculations of the sponsor through the expected battlefield impact: if a recipient actor suffers a splinter, the sponsor will expect it to result in future difficulties in engagement; if the opponent's sponsor government changes to one that is less willing to provide external assistance, this will increase confidence in future success for the recipient. Hence, while the sponsor's domestic developments could change their support strategy independently of battlefield developments, domestic changes in the other parties will affect the support calculation through the conflict evolution pathway that was already discussed above.

[159] Bueno de Mesquita 2003; Tomz and Weeks 2020; Siverson and Bueno de Mesquita 2017.
[160] Gent 2009; Derouen 2000; Oakes 2020.
[161] Kahin 1986; Logevall 2005.
[162] Payne 2021.

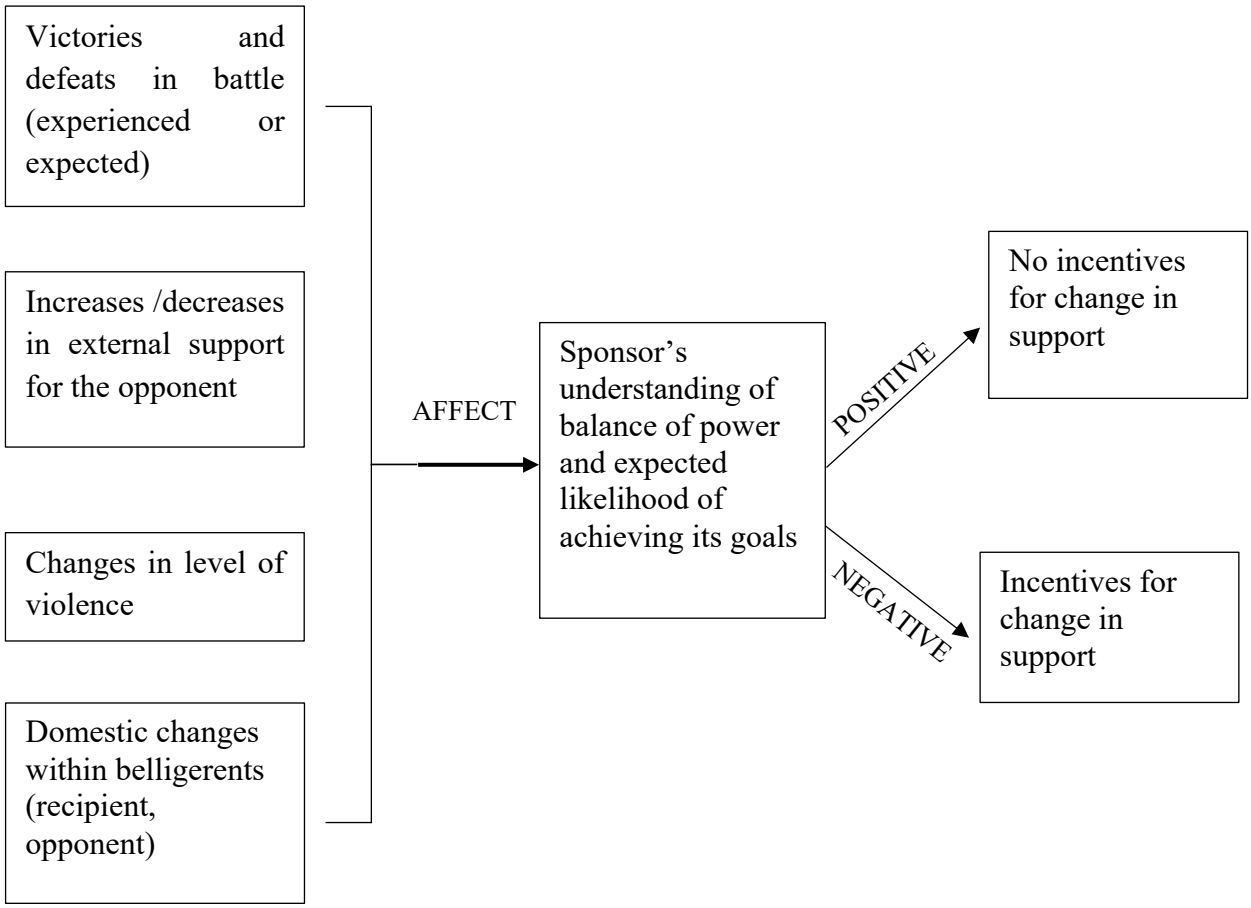
The actions of the sponsor's international allies could also matter for the continuation of support, especially if these are also involved in the conflict. If an ally of the sponsor is also a supporter of the same party, then one's escalation could encourage the others to escalate as well, to show the alliance's unity. Multinational coalitions sometimes intervene in civil wars, as in the case of the Global Coalition to fight ISIS, or the UN-sanctioned no-fly zone over Libya in 2011. Not all participating countries are likely to be motivated by developments on the battlefield: rather, many countries join out of solidarity with their allies, to bandwagon with the winning side, or to show the unity of the partnership to external rivals.[163] Second, the sponsor could receive pressure to change its support strategy if it has a third-party patron: because sponsor-recipient relationships are not always simply bilateral, but part of complex "delegation chains", the state providing indirect support to a conflict party might be acting on behalf of another state itself.[164] For instance, the United States provided its assistance to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan through Pakistan: in that case, Washington-Islamabad dynamics could affect the indirect support to the warring parties in ways that are separate from conflict evolution. Third, sponsors may escalate in response to international organizations' intervention. If the United Nations organizes a peace conference on a civil war, for instance, the sponsor may be incentivized to escalate support to the recipient in order to strengthen the latter's bargaining power by the time international negotiations start. Once again, these represent an alternative explanation for changes in external support.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the argument made in this section: conflict evolution, in the forms of events such as battlefield outcomes, changes in the opponent's support, levels of violence, or

[163] Weitsman 2014; Johnson 2016.
[164] Karlén and Rauta 2023, 107.

domestic developments in belligerents, may lead the sponsor to reconsider the extent of support provided by changing its expectation of the likelihood of achieving the goals for which it is providing support. The alternative pathways, such as domestic developments within the sponsor state, and sponsor's international allies or patrons, are excluded because they would not affect the provision of assistance through negative conflict evolution.

Figure 3.1. *How negative conflict events lead to change in support.*



Why not disengage? How sponsors select into escalation

As the paragraphs above suggest, a sponsor may consider escalating support once a recipient suffers a military upset in the form of a series of defeats in battle with the enemy, or after similar conflict events have a negative effect on the balance of power. This may appear counter-intuitive. A negative conflict evolution conveys that the recipient is incompetent, unwilling, or unable to bring about the sponsor's preferred outcome, either because of lack of resources or low effectiveness in employing them. To redress the situation, the sponsor likely needs to supply more resources—be it additional provisions of material, training and reorganization, or direct intervention from the sponsor's own forces. Any of these options entails significant costs and not every sponsor will be willing to incur them. In fact, the opposite strategy may appear more sensible: given the updated information about the balance of power and the recipient's weakness, a sponsor might de-escalate support, move from a proxy strategy to a more conciliatory and peace-seeking stance, or withdraw assistance altogether.

First, a sponsor may choose not to escalate in the wake of a negative conflict evolution when its interests are not sufficiently high. As mentioned in previous sections, the sponsor's decision to start supporting a recipient does not necessarily entail high interests.[165] This means that even states with limited interest in the conflict may become involved indirectly. Groh (2019) shows that some sponsors want the local actors to win the war, but others may also have interests to delay the conclusion of the conflict, sponsoring various actors in a strategy aimed at "meddling" and "feeding the chaos" in neighboring countries.[166] In many African conflicts, foreign countries sponsor rebellion to keep rival countries distracted.[167] The transient, informal nature

[165] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020, 39; Groh 2019.
[166] Groh 2019, 20.
[167] Tamm 2016b, 599; Duursma and Tamm 2021.

of most proxy relationships makes it possible for the sponsor to disengage without paying high costs.[168] In such cases, a worsening conflict environment may lead foreign actors to believe that their limited interests do not justify expanding their involvement and commitment to a less than competent recipient.

For example, the U.S. decision not to expand its support to Free Syrian Army forces in 2012 may fall under this category: as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued, American interests in Syria were limited to denying Assad the freedom to crush the rebellion unpunished but did not extend to assisting Syrian opposition seek victory—and the United States did not directly intervene in Syria until the Islamic State gained a foothold.[169] A similar dynamic took place forty years earlier in Angola: when the MPLA became the most likely actor to inherit the country's government after the departure of the Portuguese, partly thanks to Soviet and Cuban support, U.S. officials decided that an MPLA victory would not threaten U.S. strategic or economic interests, and therefore refused to escalate support to the MPLA's rivals.[170] This was only confirmed by the Congress's decision, in 1976, to limit U.S. foreign troop involvement through the Clark Amendment. Hence, when interests are low, the sponsor is likely to withdraw from the conflict in the wake of the recipient's defeat.

Second, if a defeat has eroded the sponsor's trust in the proxy strategy, the sponsor may opt for alternative ways to affect the conflict. In the context of alliance negotiations, outside options are the policies each participant will pursue if the negotiation ends in nonagreement, including "unilateral action, an alliance with another state, or buck-passing."[171] Similarly, in the context

[168] Fox 2020a, 52.
[169] Welch and Bailey 2016.
[170] Gleijeses 2006, 100.
[171] Poast 2019, 16.

of proxy war or indirect support, a sponsor may look for outside options if the support strategy does not yield the expected results. One such alternative is switching support to another warring party, thereby initiating a new sponsor-recipient relationship. For example, in 1975 Zaire, the United States and South Africa supported the FNLA against the MPLA-run government; however, after the FNLA suffered setbacks due to government offensives, these parties withdrew support from the FNLA, effectively determining the fall of the movement, and shifted support to UNITA.[172]

Third, the sponsor may also renounce a proxy strategy and engage instead in mediation, conflict resolution, or peace enforcement. Historically, it is not rare to see sponsors engage in mediation or negotiation as the civil war progresses and their effort to support one side all the way to victory are frustrated.[173] For instance, during the Libyan civil war, after the Tripoli-based Government of National Authority forced rebel general Haftar out of Tripolitania, the rebel's main sponsors, Russia and Egypt, decided to mediate with Turkey, rather than expanding their commitment to Haftar.[174] In 2020-21, the United States also pursued a similar policy in Afghanistan, seeking an agreement with the Taliban rather than expanding assistance to the Kabul government.[175]

These strategies—withdrawal from the conflict, shift to an alternative recipient, or mediation—would appear to be the most logical options for a state sponsor in the wake of a negative conflict evolution for its recipient. This chapter, however, makes the case for escalation in the face of

[172] Hoekstra 2018, 985; Duursma and Tamm 2021, 10.
[173] Beardsley and Lo 2014; Findley 2018; Regan and Aydin 2006.
[174] Harchaoui and Lazib 2019; Wehrey 2018.
[175] Malkasian 2023.

negative conflict evolution. There are a number of reasons why states would want to keep supporting their recipient.

First, while states with moderate interests support warring parties, other states begin a sponsor-recipient relationship because they have high interests in the outcome of the conflict. The fact that indirect support is cheaper than direct intervention does not prevent actors with a high interest in the war from selecting this strategy. Even if foreign states regard the civil war as essential to the security of their state, regime, or ideology, they may still prefer providing resources to their preferred warring party and exploiting the latter's skills and local knowledge rather than intervening with their own troops. These highly invested sponsors would be the least willing to abandon the support strategy, even in the wake of a negative conflict evolution.

Second, sometimes the significance and stakes attached to a dispute can increase over the course of the dispute itself, perhaps because of past investment, or due to the increasing salience that the conflict assumes. While the traditional bargaining model of conflict assumes constant interests over time, new research on the concept of "dispute inflation" argues that even relatively minor issues can transform into a major conflict due to swelling stakes and interests.[176] In the case of external support in civil war, sponsor states may initially have lukewarm interest in the conflict, yet still provide support due to the relatively low costs involved. However, over time, external backers may attach ever greater importance to the issue. They may not want to give up on the investment already made in the recipient actor over the preceding part of the conflict. Even though, from a rational actor perspective, costs undertaken in the past should not affect present calculations, in practice states may come to believe that,

[176] Hall 2021.

because they have committed in the past, they cannot back down: this so-called "sunk cost fallacy" is a frequent characteristic of international politics.[177]

Third, a foreign state may decide not to back down because of psychological biases in leaders' minds emerging from a negative situation. Prospect theory predicts that people will be cautious when they are in a good position (domain of gains) and more likely to take risks when they are in a bad position (domain of losses).[178] Based on this, leaders may be most likely to alter their support commitment if they believe that the situation is getting worse. Furthermore, even if leaders initially hold certain beliefs about the best trajectory in moving forward (such as increasing or decreasing the support commitment), negative feedback still serves as an important justification to persuade domestic elites of why the current policy should be adjusted at that particular point in time.[179] Major and highly visible events are especially likely to trigger reconsiderations of the current policy.[180]

Finally, in many conflicts there might not be an alternative actor that is readily available for the sponsor to shift support to, or there is no appealing strategy—or not perceived as such—like mediation or peace enforcement. Some conflicts, such as the Vietnam War or the Donbas War, are bilateral: there are only two warring sides, the government and the opposition, with opposite and incompatible objectives. It is quite unlikely that a sponsor supporting one side, whose goals are presumably at least in part correlated with those of the sponsor, could switch sides and support the opponent. In multiparty civil wars, such as in Syria, there are instead

[177] Van Evera 1999.
[178] Boettcher 2004; Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982.
[179] Karlén 2022.
[180] Hermann 2012, 10.

multiple actors that a sponsor could switch support to in case of a worsening conflict outlook, at least theoretically.

However, side switching may be difficult in practice. When support has been provided, a relationship emerges between the sponsor and the recipient, which is likely to get stronger the longer support is provided. This relationship entails sharing of material, training and intelligence, and even the development of personal relationship between the personnel of sponsor and recipient.[181] All these factors may make it harder for a sponsor to shift support to an alternative actor: first, the sponsor would need to develop similar ties with the new recipient, which will require time and entail costs; second, the original recipient will retain knowledge of the sponsor's military resources and practices which could be used to harm the new recipient. Shifting support to an alternative actor while the war is ongoing is expensive, and while feasible, not all sponsors will do it in the wake of a negative conflict evolution.

Furthermore, a sponsor may not always turn into a peace-broker, for a number of reasons. For a sponsor to sue for peace in the wake of a defeat suffered by its recipient, or similar instances of negative conflict evolution, it would need to present itself as a credible mediator and find willing actors on the opponent side; it would also need to persuade, or coerce, the recipient into accepting mediation. However, there are many factors that could make it an unviable strategy: first, if the recipient appears weak, the opponent side could feel emboldened by success, and therefore less willing to sit at the negotiating table, or likely to make very harsh demands. Second, the recipient may be unwilling to cave in to the sponsor's pressure to negotiate: as the literature on proxy wars show, sponsors do not usually have enough control over their

[181] Chinchilla 2021.

clients.[182] And third, if the sponsor itself has high interests in seeking a favorable outcome for its recipient (as described above), this prevents them from seeking a mediation role, when the alternative to double down on support remains available. In fact, empirical research shows that external support reduces, rather than increases, the likelihood of negotiations.[183]

This section suggests that a selection process is at work empirically: escalation is the likely outcome in the wake of a negative conflict evolution when the sponsor has high interests in the recipient winning or remaining a viable actor; moreover, escalation is more likely when there are no acceptable alternatives to supporting the existing recipient that are readily available to the sponsor. Under these conditions, the sponsor prefers to increase the extent of its commitment to tilt the (perceived) worsening balance of power on the ground to the recipient's advantage, and thereby maintain the possibility of achieving the sponsor's goals.

Unpacking the decision to escalate to direct support

Even though only a subset of sponsors will move to the escalation stage, it is uncertain whether they would all be willing to escalate to direct support. A negative conflict evolution, resulting from a worsening balance of power or failure to win engagements, will make it more difficult for the sponsor to achieve its goals by maintaining the same degree of support for the recipient. Sponsors may thus be incentivized to escalate their involvement. Nevertheless, escalation to direct support is not the automatic outcome, as the way in which a sponsor could increase support still presents significant variation. Escalation could remain within the boundaries of

[182] Innes 2012; Hughes 2014; Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023.
[183] Karlén 2020.

indirect support: sponsors may increase the quantity of weapons and funding they provide; or they may send instructors and advisors to train the recipient and address its deficiencies. Often a combination of training and additional subsidies is provided. In neither case is the direct engagement in fighting necessary. So, what explains the qualitative shift to direct support?

This section argues that direct support will be the preferred choice when the sponsor needs immediate and unmediated military impact, that is, when two conditions materialize: (1) the sponsor perceives that the costs of proxy war will increase substantively if no immediate battlefield success is obtained (*high costs of delaying battlefield action*); and (2) the recipient appears unwilling and/or unable to obtain meaningful battlefield success (*lack of proxy effectiveness*). This section describes the two variables in isolation and then explores their interaction.

Closing windows: the costs of delaying battlefield action

As the previous chapter highlighted, the difference between direct and indirect support is that the former can have an immediate and unmediated impact on the battlefield and on the balance of power. Because of its immediate effects, the sponsor's engagement in combat can quickly reverse a negative conflict outlook before it gets even worse. Under this perspective, escalation to direct support happens in the shadow of a "closing window." The mechanism of closing windows, in a nutshell, suggests that actors may prefer to take costly options when they expect a sudden increase in future costs if no action is taken. The basic assumption underlying this logic is that the costs actors face—or expect to face—are not fixed but vary according to the strategic conditions. Hence, time windows can emerge in which actors suddenly find a strategic option less expensive (a "window of opportunity"); symmetrically, actors may also expect the

costs of a given strategy to increase substantially in the future, generating a "window of vulnerability."[184] In both circumstances, actors are incentivized to move immediately before costs rise.

Windows logic is consistent both with a rational approach—expected utility theory allows costs to vary over time and expectations of future costs to affect present calculations—and with psychological perspectives such as prospect theory: actors may be more likely to act before a window of vulnerability opens—i.e., when costs are expected to rise—than before a window of opportunity closes, because of their status quo-bias when in the realm of gains. This reinforces one of the points made above regarding sponsors' incentives in the wake of a negative conflict evolution: leaders will be willing to take more risks to offset present losses and will be willing to offset them in as short a time window as possible.[185] In security studies, a closing window logic has been applied to explain a variety of phenomena, including preventive great power war, authoritarian purges, and inter-rebel fighting.[186]

The perception of closing windows can explain escalation to direct support, for two reasons. First, in the wake of a negative conflict outlook, sponsor states can expect their costs of supporting the recipient to rise. As shown in the previous section, because they have high interests in the conflict and lack appealing alternatives, they are willing to escalate their commitment to prop up the recipient. As expected utility calculations would suggest, sponsors are likely to take riskier and costlier options if that allows them to forestall even costlier outcomes in the future. From a prospect theory perspective, sponsors would be placed in the "realm of losses", which makes them especially wary of future costs. In this case, the costly

[184] Pischedda 2018, 120; Pischedda 2020, 19–20.
[185] Boettcher 2004.
[186] See Levy 1987; Sudduth 2017; Talmadge 2015; Pischedda 2020.

outcome is the collapse of the proxy strategy, which would cause the sponsor to lose all the investment it had previously committed to the recipient, increase its level of insecurity as a result of the opponent's victory, and pay domestic or international costs for its association with the defeated party.[187] Sponsors are more likely to take riskier and costlier options if that allows them to forestall these even costlier outcomes in the future.

Second, usually the sponsor will detect a limited time span before these costly outcomes materialize. The sponsor may fear that the opponent side will capitalize on the recipient's weaknesses and seek to dismantle it with a decisive offensive, potentially supported by external assistance provided by other actors.[188] Faced with this fear of an impending offensive, the sponsor will be incentivized to act immediately before it materializes. Alternatively, a worsening conflict outlook can have an internal effect within the recipient side. For example the recipient's army may suddenly dismantle because of low morale and defection to the stronger side, which tends to happen in civil wars in the wake of negative conflict spells.[189]

The sponsor may also experience a closing window in the case of a failed offensive, for instance, if their recipient is unable to completely defeat the opponent. This does not necessarily mean that the recipient will collapse. However, it could make it seem that victory is not within reach. The longer the situation remains stalled, the harder it may become to break the deadlock, and victory could seem unattainable. This is also a negative outcome that the sponsor may want to forestall. When the sponsor detects such events to be imminent, a window of vulnerability opens up: they want to prevent the costly outcome to materialize, but unless they provide

[187] Beardsley and Lo 2014; Edry, Johnson, and Leeds 2021; K. S. Gleditsch 2007.
[188] Lehmann and Zhukov 2019; Rauta 2018.
[189] Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012; Joo and Mukherjee 2021; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Seymour 2014; Woldemariam 2016.

assistance that has an immediate impact on the battlefield, thereby tilting the balance of power to the recipient's favor, the costly outcome is likely to be realized. Hence, delaying battlefield action will entail much higher costs for the sponsor than acting immediately.

Under these circumstances, the sponsor is incentivized to provide a form of support with an immediate military effect, aimed at capitalizing on the closing window. Recall that the defining feature of direct support—with the sponsor state's own forces joining the fight on the side of the recipient's army—is its immediate and unmediated military impact. By using its own combat personnel, the sponsor can have a significant impact on the balance of power without delay. Hence, they become the logical option when the sponsor is concerned about a further decline in the recipient's chances of victory. This sense of urgency pushes the sponsor to turn from a backer into a direct belligerent: conflict is no longer exclusively delegated to the recipient actor.

Despite the high costs of direct intervention, the mechanism of closing windows incentivizes sponsors to resort to this option to avoid the costs of delaying battlefield action. This would seem to suggest that there is a cross-over point, where direct assistance becomes less costly than indirect support, but in fact, this interpretation is inaccurate. For the sponsor, direct support will always be more expensive than indirect assistance: the reader will recall that direct support requires the sponsor to accept both monetary costs and the costs of fighting, whereas indirect support only entails the former.

Rather than calculating the point in which direct support becomes cheaper than indirect support, it is better to think about the usefulness of the two types: indirect support is no longer useful in the shadow of a closing window, if the sponsor believes that its effects will take too long to

materialize.[190] The more forces or territory the recipient loses, the costlier it will be to set up resources to bring about victory—both for the recipient's leadership and for its backers. If, in the worst-case scenario, the supported party becomes an unviable conflict actor, the sponsor will forgo all the previous investment into that party, and shifting assistance to a new actor could be even more expensive (recall that there is no alternative strategy readily available). This perspective can reduce the appeal of indirect support despite the lower costs. The sponsor will be willing to adopt a direct intervention strategy when it expects the costs of continuing indirect support to increase in the near future.

There could be circumstances in which the increase in costs for shifting from indirect to direct support is minimized. Perhaps the most significant factor in this regard is the risk of escalation, in the traditional sense of the term: the possibility that the conflict spills over either horizontally, by involving other states, or vertically, by enhancing the level of violence and the use of more devastating weapons. If the sponsor is confident that the opponent's own backers will not react to direct support by carrying out their own direct intervention, or that other actors will not be dragged into the conflict, the risks of deploying direct support are reduced. Sponsors could obtain this information via intelligence, or it could be communicated to them through diplomatic channels: as Carson (2018) argues, states who are backing opposite sides in a conflict often continue to communicate "in the backstage" with each other to indicate their willingness to contain escalation.[191]

[190] Even if such a cross-over point in which direct support becomes cheaper than indirect assistance, it would not be easy to identify this precise point, for at least three reasons. First, because the calculations of the benefits between direct support and indirect support entail the expected future costs, it is very difficult to derive them mathematically. Second, these decisions rely, among other things, on leaders' perceptions of the future costs, rather than on objective criteria. Third, the decision is likely to be highly context-dependent: a defeat may appear to be the indication of an impending collapse of the proxy in the near future in one context, but it could simply be regarded as a momentary setback without major repercussions in another.

[191] Carson 2018, 42.

If a sponsor believes that their increase in assistance to direct support is unlikely to bring about a major escalation of the conflict, it would be less concerned about making the move. In fact, this perception might be most likely to materialize in the wake of a negative conflict evolution. As explained in previous sections, any negative spell for the recipient is a positive spell for the opponent; and sponsors are not incentivized to provide more assistance when witnessing a positive evolution. This could generate a sudden window of opportunity in which the costs of direct support are depressed. As mentioned above, windows of vulnerability are not the only type of closing window: according to Pischedda (2020), the sponsor could also experience a closing window of opportunity, that is, a time window can in which a strategic option is suddenly less expensive than before, but will become too expensive later on.[192] Applied to the context of negative conflict evolution, the sponsor would experience a window of opportunity to escalate support when direct assistance suddenly becomes cheaper, such as in the aforementioned scenario of confidence in no conflict escalation. In this case, this window of opportunity would strengthen the effect of the window of vulnerability emerging from the negative conflict spell, maximizing the sponsor's incentives to provide direct support.

At the beginning of the thesis, a quote from the Latin poet Horace read: "*Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*" ("Seize the day, trusting the future as little as possible"). Although extrapolated from its context, this verse is appropriate to reflect the sponsor's conundrum in the wake of a negative conflict spell: direct support is costlier than indirect assistance and carries higher risks, but if indirect support takes too long to have a desired effect, it will not be worth the cheaper costs. If the future cannot be trusted, immediate action is necessary. However, as the next section will point out, a perceived closing window is not sufficient to determine

[192] Pischedda 2018, 120; Pischedda 2020, 19–20.

direct support escalation: the sponsor must also conclude that the recipient is unable to redress the situation on its own, even with additional assistance.

Proxy effectiveness: can the recipient deliver?

Even if the sponsor perceives a closing window beyond which costs of the sponsor's war will increase significantly, this will not by itself determine the type of escalation. Direct support is not the only type of assistance which has an immediate impact on the battlefield. Some forms of indirect support share this feature. For instance, the sponsor may provide additional subsidies, such as more technologically advanced weapons or intelligence details. The recipient can readily deploy the new supplies in combat, thereby immediately offsetting the balance of power. An example of this is Ukraine's quick mastery of Western-provided weapons and its application to obtain tangible battlefield gains against Russia in the late summer and early fall of 2022.[193]

However, additional subsidies are not sufficient if the recipient is or appears unable to translate the resources it has (or that the sponsor provides) into combat power and win engagements, that is, if the recipient lacks combat effectiveness.[194] Subsidies may not be helpful either if the recipient is deemed to be potentially able to win engagements and redress the negative conflict evolution, but is unwilling to do so due to divergent preferences—for instance, if it wants to enjoy the sponsor's war subsidy for a longer period or redirect it from fighting to other purposes.[195]

[193] Zabrodskyi et al. 2022.
[194] Millett and Murray 2010; Biddle 2004.
[195] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019; Salehyan 2010; Schulhofer-Wohl 2020; Karlén et al. 2021a.

To convey this conundrum, this section introduces a second variable that the sponsor must take into account: the degree of *proxy effectiveness*. This dissertation defines proxy effectiveness as the extent to which the recipient is *able and/or willing to obtain meaningful battlefield success*. In other words, proxy effectiveness defines whether the recipient proves to be a good proxy for the sponsor. This variable is derived from the definition of combat effectiveness in strategic studies: an armed force's array of specific knowhow, skills and abilities necessary to convert the endowed resources into fighting power.[196] Combat effectiveness can be measured at the strategic level—"the power that states generate from their resources in war, distinct from war outcomes alone"[197]—as well as in term of their battlefield or combat effectiveness, that is, the set of skills which are most appropriate to prevail in engagements. This may also apply to recipient forces, encompassing their ability to convert resources (including the sponsor's material subsidies) into effective combat power, and in practice, to win battlefield engagements.

Effectiveness highlights the importance of nonmaterial variables in addition to resources, and "among the most important of these variables are the methods and behavior adopted by combatants on the battlefield."[198] These skills differ across types of conflicts and engagements. In a conventional conflict, characterized by pitched battlefields and clear frontlines, effective recipients must possess the set of skills which are required to win conventional battles: holding ground and accepting decisive engagement to contest territory, concentrating firepower to the point of attack, organizing forces into uniformed and functionally differentiated units, and ensuring coordination and interoperability.[199] In an asymmetric civil war, effective insurgents should instead be able to conceal themselves among the population, substitute decisive

[196] Abbott et al. 2020a, 5; Ashour 2021; Biddle 2004; Talmadge 2015.
[197] Millett and Murray 2010, 6–7; Talmadge 2015, 4.
[198] Biddle 2021, xv.
[199] Kalyvas and Balcells 2010. See also Biddle 2004.

engagement for hit and run tactics, and rely on coercion as opposed to brute force.[200] The counter-insurgent actor, on the other hand, can succeed if it adopts a "hearts-and-minds" approach aimed at winning the support of the population, but must also be able to use violence selectively to identify, isolate and destroy insurgents.[201] Effectiveness and external support are endogenous: by providing forms of support such as training and intelligence, the sponsor will affect the recipient's abilities and skills. And likewise, sponsors will consider the recipient's skills endowment plus the abilities that they will receive from external sponsors to determine whether they are effective enough to be worth supporting.

The array of tactical and operational skills listed above should maximize the probability of success in war. We might therefore expect sponsors to use these criteria objectively to identify an effective recipient. However, would-be sponsors might not always look at these indicators objectively, because (1) perceptions of effectiveness may vary across time and space; and (2) disagreement between sponsor and recipient may significantly affect the former's assessment of the latter's effectiveness.

First, the measures of effectiveness may vary according to the perceptions of what is required to win which are held in each historical context. As Talmadge (2015) notes, evaluations of effectiveness usually involve "the question of doctrine—that is, whether the operations performed are appropriate to the actual challenges posed by the adversary."[202] For instance, the United States in the 1960s believed that a sufficient demonstration of firepower would have sufficed to compel the Vietcong and North Vietnam to stop their insurgency campaign in the

[200] Biddle 2021.
[201] Elias 2018; Hazelton 2021; Kalyvas 2006.
[202] Talmadge 2015, 7.

South.[203] The U.S. army was effective at this task, whereas the ARVN was not, but "the problem was that the content of these operations did little to undermine an adversary that mostly avoided conventional fights, especially prior to 1968."[204] This misunderstanding contributed to the U.S. decision to send a significant combat force to Vietnam. Although with hindsight this was a strategic mistake, it was the doctrinal approach held by many in the U.S. armed forces and administration at the time. This highlights that proxy effectiveness may not always be treated objectively: like the expected costs of delaying battlefield action, the sponsor's perception is what matters.

Second, although sponsor and recipient agree on the general strategic goals (e.g., to defeat the opponent, or to destabilize a country), they may disagree on how to achieve this goal, i.e., there might be disagreement at the level of operations and tactics to attain such goals. For instance, sponsors who want to conclude the conflict as quickly as possible would pressure their recipients to use additional support to wage a more offensive and conventional form of warfare, imposing high costs on the opponent and therefore achieving victory in a shorter timeframe; however, the conditions on the ground, such as the need to maintain support of the local population, may push the recipient to pursue a non-territorial form of fighting, which will usually make the war drag on and last longer.[205] In this case, sponsors may regard the recipient as a less effective proxy because they do not use the resources in the desired way, even though the recipient might actually be selecting the most appropriate form of fighting given the constraints.

[203] Herring 1979.
[204] Talmadge 2015, 7; Krepinevich 1988; Nagl 2005.
[205] Biddle 2021; Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.

This latter point helps to highlight why the dissertation uses "proxy effectiveness" instead of "recipient effectiveness": the first formulation depends on the sponsor's own view of how the recipient is able or willing to achieve the sponsor's goals. A recipient could be effective in combat but still be ineffective as a proxy. As the case study chapters will show more in detail, this was one of the features that led Fascist Italy to intervene directly in the Spanish Civil War: Franco opted for a slow territorial advance campaign, whereas Mussolini preferred a quick advance. The latter came to regard the former as ineffective—even though, arguably, a slow campaign was the right approach. Hence, proxy effectiveness is not just about the ability to fight—it also depends on the level of like-mindedness between sponsor and recipient about strategy and operations. Although the recipient may be able to win engagements, he could be unwilling to follow the sponsor's preferred course of action due to divergent strategic preferences.[206] This reduces the level of proxy effectiveness as perceived by the sponsor.

The variation in the sponsor's perception of proxy effectiveness over time is consistent with the findings of the indirect governance literature. While Principal-Agent (PA) theory presumes that any agents a principal selects will be—and remain—effective, indirect governance theory problematizes this concept, arguing that "governors" (a synonym for principals) may choose less competent but more controllable intermediaries, and that these may become more or less competent over time.[207] In the complex and murky environment of a civil war, information is unlikely to be perfect. The sponsor may not have enough information to judge all available actors and make the rationally optimum decision. Consequently, the sponsor is at risk of suffering one of the most common pathologies of a Principal-Agent or governor-intermediary relationship: poor agent selection due to information asymmetry.[208] Even when perfect

[206] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019; Salehyan 2010; Schulhofer-Wohl 2020; Karlén et al. 2021a.
[207] Abbott et al. 2020a, 5–7; Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond 2001.
[208] Abbott et al. 2020b; Bendor, Glazer, and Hammond 2001; Hawkins et al. 2006.

information is available, and the recipient is competent enough at the time in which support is granted, it may become less competent as time progresses due to a number of factors, including the strengthening of opponents, loss of resources, or increasingly divergent goals with the sponsor.[209]

In sum, proxy effectiveness, as a function of both ability and will, is another key variable that affects the sponsor's decision to provide additional support in the wake of a negative conflict evolution. If the sponsor believes that the recipient is unable or unwilling to affect the balance of power, providing only indirect assistance with the potential for immediate effect such as additional weapons will not be in the sponsor's interest if the ineffective proxy is regarded as incapable of deploying it to meaningfully affect the balance of power. Direct support, on the other hand, allows the sponsor to target this deficiency, by providing personnel who can generate sufficient combat power and is loyal to the sponsor's leadership. The sponsor can also solve deficiencies in proxy effectiveness through other forms of indirect support such as training and advising: the deployment of personnel in a non-combat capacity may allow the sponsor to address the lack of proxy effectiveness, e.g., by restructuring the armed forces, providing the necessary tactical and operational training, or influencing the recipient's leadership in a more direct way.

Combining the two variables: when direct support escalation takes place

The two sections above describe two conditions that make the transition to direct support possible. These two variables reflect two aspects of the recipient's problem that the sponsor has to face. The costs of delaying battlefield action depend on the opponents' ability and/or

[209] Fox 2020a, 50.

intents to take advantage of the recipient's weakness in the immediate wake of a negative conflict window. Therefore, it refers as much as to the recipient as to its adversaries. Proxy effectiveness is more oriented towards recipient's own characteristics: it measures whether the recipient is proving to be a good proxy, due to either its skills or due to its willingness. Although the two variables are not purely exogenous to each other, they can still be defined as independent since they refer to different aspects of the problem.

To predict empirically when sponsors provide direct support, these two variables should be combined. This section, therefore, explores the interaction between the two variables: (1) the perceived costs of delaying battlefield action, as detected by the sponsor; and (2) the sponsor's perception of proxy effectiveness in combat. The first variable measures the key implication of the presence of windows logic at work within the sponsor's decision-making apparatus: whether there is a limited time span before the costs of continuing the proxy strategy become untenable. The second variable measures the extent to which the recipient is able and willing to obtain meaningful battlefield success.[210] The combination of the two variables allows to make empirical predictions on the likelihood of escalation to direct support, as shown in Figure 3.2.

[210] Note that in both cases what matters is the sponsor's *perception*: this will be based on analysis of the reality on the ground, but may also be biased by domestic processes and the context in which factors are analyzed.

Figure 3.2. *The different types of support escalation following a negative conflict evolution*.

		Costs of delaying battlefield action	
		Low	*High*
Proxy effectiveness	*High*	No escalation	Indirect support
	Low	Indirect support	Direct support

The bottom-right quadrant represents the outcome of interest to this dissertation: it describes the condition under which direct support is most likely to take place. First, the recipient displays low proxy effectiveness: to the sponsor's eyes, the recipient is ether unable or unwilling to convert additional resources into combat power. This calls for the provision of support that can either change the level of proxy effectiveness (such as training and advising) or bypass the recipient altogether. Second, the sponsor perceives a high cost in delaying battlefield action, indicating a rapidly closing window and the need to provide assistance that can have an immediate battlefield effect. Under these conditions, indirect support is insufficient to solve the conundrum: the recipient's proxy ineffectiveness prevents a deployment of subsidies such as weapons because the recipient would not be able to apply them properly, and the closing

window does not allow the sponsor sufficient time to transfer the necessary skills via training and advising. Faced with the prospect of a collapse of the recipient, and with no time to address the lack of effectiveness via training and advising, the sponsor will be incentivized to intervene directly, deploying its own personnel in a combat role, since only direct support can have an immediate and unmediated impact on the battlefield. Note that the sponsor may decide to provide direct support if it detects proxy ineffectiveness due to either the recipient's weakness in fighting or strategic and operational disagreements between recipient and sponsor. The case studies will reflect elements of both types, with different degrees of emphasis.

In the remaining quadrants of the table, escalation to direct support is unlikely to take place. The top-left cell shows the opposite combination of parameters: the recipient is regarded as an effective proxy, and there is no sense of urgency to redress the situation on the battlefield. This could represent the situation after a small defeat, which is not regarded as significant by the sponsor. Under these conditions, escalation of support is unlikely to take place. In fact, there seems to be no need for any increase in support, hence the cell indicates "No escalation". However, this is only based on the consequences of the evolution of the fighting. There could be other, non-battlefield related circumstances that incentivize the sponsor to change the form of assistance it provides, but are beyond the scope of the analysis. For instance, if there is a change in the recipient's leadership, as consequence of a coup or an election, the sponsor could decide to escalate or de-escalate assistance regardless of the recipient's performance on the battlefield. Alternatively, the sponsor's leadership itself could decide to change assistance for domestic reasons.[211] In any of these cases, it is not combat events that lead to the shift in commitment, hence the theory does not apply.

[211] Karlén 2022; Tamm and Duursma 2022.

The top-right quadrant predicts no direct support escalation when a window emerges, but the recipient is perceived as a sufficiently effective proxy. In the eyes of the sponsor, the recipient can obtain military success on its own, but there is a need for immediate impact on the battlefield to forestall a worsening situation. The sponsor can escalate support without deploying its own personnel but providing material which is readily usable by the recipient. In this case, the sponsor does not need to face the costs of providing direct assistance: the increase would be limited to indirect support, such as higher quantity or more technologically advanced weapons, intelligence sharing to assist the recipient in target acquisition and better situational awareness, logistical support, or any other form of assistance that the recipient can deploy quickly.

The Regan administration's decision to supply the Afghan Mujahedeen with Stinger missiles to fight Soviet helicopter gunships is illustrative: as Secretary of State Schultz claimed in 1985, there was "a narrow window … in which pressure on the Soviets might be effective" to quickly change the balance of power without the need for direct action.[212] A more recent example is the provision of Western weapons to Ukraine to repel Russia's aggression in 2022: the United States and its allies provided weapons to Kyiv to quickly change the balance of forces, which was favorable to Moscow. Ukrainians showed a remarkable degree of mastery in the use of Western-provided weapons to quickly redress the conflict, pushing back Russian forces in the spring and late summer of 2022, thereby reducing the need for direct intervention.

The bottom-left corner displays the diametrically opposite scenario: the sponsor believes that the recipient lacks the necessary degree of proxy effectiveness to win engagements, but there is no urgency to affect events on the battlefield immediately. Yet, under this scenario, direct

[212] Kuperman 1999, 232; Rubright 2016, 141.

support is not needed: the recipient's lack of competences can be addressed by deploying the sponsor's own personnel not on a combat capacity, but to transfer knowledge, instruct, and assist the recipient actor. That is, indirect support is the optimal choice, which will spare the sponsor from assuming the costs of direct engagement. The situation described in this cell resembles several cases of U.S.-Soviet assistance to civil war parties during the Cold War. In Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Washington sent CIA and military advisors to redress the recipient's deficiencies and make it more robust to wage counterinsurgency campaigns.[213] The USSR, on its part, provided indirect support in the form of training and advising to many insurgents, such as the Viet Cong and the African National Congress (ANC), addressing their structural weaknesses and thereby allowing them to outlast their government opponents.[214]

Despite its simplicity, Figure 3.2 provide a clear understanding of the dynamics behind direct intervention in civil war. First, it provides an important addition to the existing literature on the evolution of external sponsorship relations. Most studies focus on how these relationships end. As Fox notes, "proxy relationships are capricious… either transactional or exploitative."[215] The main reason for a proxy relationship breaking down, Fox claims, has to do with the proxy assuming more power over time, by either growing strong enough to stand on its own; or by mobilizing power from actors that are not the principal partner.[216] Alternatively, the relationship may end as the recipient accomplishes the goals that brought it in line with the principal, especially when no strong ideological or ethnic kinship bonds exist between the recipient and the supporting state.[217] While these studies may assume that a suboptimal conflict

[213] Ladwig 2017; Logevall 2010; Westad 2005.
[214] Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Westad 2005.
[215] Fox 2020a, 52.
[216] Fox 2019; Fox 2020a.
[217] Karlén 2019, 757.

evolution would lead to the termination of support, this dissertation argues that, under some conditions, it may instead give way to a more invasive form of sponsor involvement.

Second, the theory behind Figure 3.2 provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between an actor's interests in influencing a conflict and its propensity to intervene. It is commonly believed that sponsors who provide direct support are the ones with the highest stakes in the conflict. While this is usually true, this section suggests that sponsors can also take alternative forms of escalation. High interests are not by themselves sufficient to see foreign forces fighting. The sponsor must believe that the recipient requires immediate support on the battlefield, and that the recipient's skills and intentions are not compatible with the effort required. Moreover, while many works point to a recipient's growing strength as the main driver for the deepening of the relationship, this theory emphasizes the effects of the recipient's (apparent) weakness. By focusing on sponsors facing the necessity to quickly address two issues—the worsening conflict situation and an incompetent recipient—this theory provides a reasonable explanation for a surprising change to a strategy of direct support.

The recipient's role in influencing escalation of support

The theory described in Figure 3.2 is sponsor-centric. This has already been justified: the sponsor is the main actor to study when it comes to the form and extent of foreign support, because the providing state retains ultimate authority over the assistance that is issued. The sponsor can decide whether the conditions on the ground require the deployment of combat troops, on the basis of the perceived lack of proxy effectiveness and the expectations of an increased cost in battlefield action. However, it could be questioned whether the recipient has any say, and why the recipient could not potentially play a key role in shaping and manipulating

the sponsor's perceptions. In an opportunistic relationship such as that of external support in conflict, in which local actors often try to obtain as many resources as they can, it is not surprising that the recipient might try to influence the sponsor's strategic decisions.[218]

According to theories of conflict delegation, foreign support can be interpreted as an equilibrium of supply from foreign states and demand from conflict actors.[219] Consequently, intervention might be a result of changes from the demand side. The PA model accepts that, although the principal maintains hierarchical control, the agent could shape the former's incentives through its behavior.[220] In this context, the form of aid seems to follow the model of market exchange and supply-demand relations, rather than an imposition from the sponsor.[221]

Could the recipient also play a decisive role in extracting combat forces from the sponsor after defeats? The same information asymmetry problem which characterizes a PA relationship at its onset may continue over time, as the principal cannot perfectly monitor the agent or verify its claims. If it is true that sponsors have an interest in escalating in the event of a negative conflict outlook, then we should expect recipients—be they government or rebel groups—to purposely try to appear unwilling or unable to obtain meaningful battlefield success, hiding their true capabilities from the sponsor. Schulhofer-Wohl (2020) has shown that rebel groups seek to maintain their war economy through subsidies from foreign backers, partly by hiding their capabilities, and partly by redirecting the resources that they receive from abroad.[222] The conditions that are theorized here may even incentivize the recipient to take a bolder attitude and lose engagements on purpose, following a moral hazard strategy like some alliance partners

[218]Fox 2019; Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.
[219] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 709.
[220] Abbott et al. 2020b; Salehyan 2010; Sappington 1991.
[221] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 709.
[222] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020, 30–40.

do, to convince the sponsor to escalate assistance and provide troops.[223] This strategy would be particularly effective vis-à-vis sponsors with high interests in the outcome of the conflict because they are the ones who select into providing more assistance in case of negative conflict spells. This would place significant doubt over the choice to concentrate on the sponsor.

However, this argument relies on the assumption that recipients would always prefer direct support, but in reality, this assumption is not always valid. While it is safe to argue that more assistance is better than less, and that direct support may add significant strengths to the recipient's odds of victory while reducing the burden of fighting on the recipient's own forces, this kind of assistance also entails significant costs for the recipient, especially in terms of control over fighting and reputational concerns. Conflict parties need to present themselves as legitimate representatives of a group or of the whole population of the state, and civil wars in particular are often battle of hearts and minds regarding who should be the legitimate ruler over a given territory and population.[224] In this context, direct support and the presence of foreign troops in combat may de-legitimize the warring party vis-à-vis the local population, who may regard the warring faction as a foreign pawn, and their struggle as nothing but an attempt at foreign encroachment. This legitimacy deficit may result in loss of support for the faction, which may imperil the war effort and is particularly fatal in insurgency campaigns. This risk should make recipient hesitant to request troop support unless it is necessary; and when sponsor's troops are provided, the recipients may want to minimize their visibility, highlighting the autochthonous elements of their fight.[225]

[223] Arnott and Stiglitz 1988; Benson 2012.
[224] Cederman and Vogt 2017.
[225] This latest explanation—that direct support is likely to reduce the proxy's legitimacy—may be more relevant in center-seeking than in separatist conflicts, especially when the latter is carried out by actors who want to be annexed to another country. Self-determination movements whose reference population is ethnically linked to a foreign country might find a source of pride and legitimacy in foreign intervention. These actors might be more likely to request direct support. See Butt 2017.

A second reason for which recipients may not always want direct support is that they risk losing some degree of autonomy when it comes to fighting the conflict. Although the previous chapter highlighted that political control is not the main benefit of direct support for the sponsor, the provision of combat forces allows the external party to have more of a say over the way the fighting is carried out: this may take the form of a joint command and control center with officers from the sponsor and the recipient, the integration of sponsor's officers within the various armed divisions and battalions of the recipient's armed forces, or a level of coordination between separate commands during battles. This could be a problem for the recipient, especially if the source of perceived proxy ineffectiveness is due to disagreements between recipient and sponsor. Hence, recipients need to balance the possible gains from direct support against these reputational and control risks. This places doubts on the recipients' desire to request this type of support unless it is indeed necessary.

Even in cases in which recipients do want direct support from the sponsor, there are grounds to object to the idea that most recipients follow the moral hazard strategy of feigning weakness and losing engagements, because of the costs and risks entailed, including infighting, the risk of compromising the war objective, and the lack of guarantee that sponsors will escalate. First, while conflict actors are not just pawns in the great game of foreign powers, they often face very limited options over what they can obtain from external powers.[226] This also applies to foreign support: sponsors will not bend to every request. Despite their opportunism, local actors are not always free to get what they want, when they want it and when they most need it. Second, if recipients try to appear weak and incompetent so as to receive more support, this strategy poses significant risks: losing an engagement or a campaign might demoralize recruits,

[226] Hazen 2013, 3.

encouraging further surrender,[227] defection,[228] elite splits and within-group fratricide.[229] Nor is it certain that the sponsor would provide additional support in response: as explored above, foreign actors will only escalate assistance when they have sufficiently high interest to remain involved and support the same recipient. Even highly interested sponsors could still opt for additional indirect support rather than direct assistance unless the two conditions (low proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action) materialize. Hence, feigning weakness is a very risky strategy for the recipient, and not everyone will follow it.

In short, the paragraphs above cast doubt over the claim that recipients will always seek to obtain direct support from the sponsor, and that they would follow a risky strategy entailing losing engagements on purpose to reach their goals. Instead, it is more likely that recipients will ask for direct support mostly when they believe that foreign combat troops are necessary. When in dire needs, recipients will likely inform their sponsors and try to influence their calculations of effectiveness and urgency. However, this is not manipulation, but a consequence of negative battlefield outcomes – which is consistent with the theory enunciated above.

Conclusion: support escalation in the shadow of conflict escalation

This chapter has outlined the key argument of the dissertation. The bottom line is the following: direct support is costlier than indirect assistance and carries higher risks, but if indirect support will not bring about the desired effect, or if it takes too long to achieve it, it will not be worth the cheaper costs for the sponsor.

[227] Lehmann and Zhukov 2019.
[228] Oppenheim et al. 2015; Seymour 2014; Staniland 2012.
[229] Christia 2012; Staniland 2014; Tamm 2016b.

Before concluding this discussion, we must return to the possible effects of escalation to direct support. The relationship between support escalation and escalation in the traditional sense of the term—that is, the direct involvement of more parties and/or a significant increase in the level of violence—remains important to understand the puzzle of external intervention, and one that likely affects many would-be interveners' calculations. As mentioned several times in this chapter, direct support carries additional costs for the sponsor, including a heightened risk of precipitating intervention by other states, creating the conditions for a horizontal and vertical escalation of the war. Although in the aftermaths of a negative conflict event, there might be a window of opportunity in which the sponsor sees these risks as reduced, this may not always be the case: for instance, the worsening conflict scenario could have been caused by the intervention of another party on behalf of the opponent, which bolstered the latter's strength: if the weakened party's sponsor responded in turn by providing direct support, this could put the armed forces of the two external states in direct collision course, significantly increasing the likelihood of turning the civil war into an all-out international conflict.[230]

Hence, it is possible that even actors who do have high interest and no alternatives may still refrain from escalating to direct support. Even if the sponsor's interests are high, it is possible that the costs of war are still unacceptable and outweigh the benefits of intervention, making direct support unlikely. In these circumstances, sponsor states may opt against direct support even when a window is closing and the recipient is regarded as ineffective. Regime type could also affect tolerance for escalation: for example, democracies tend to face higher costs of war compared to authoritarian states, and might thus be less likely to intervene with their forces.[231]

[230] Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz 2008.
[231] Carter 2017; Lake 1992; Tomz and Weeks 2013.

Therefore, just like there is a lower boundary to direct support—whereby states with limited interests will select out of escalation to direct support in the wake of negative conflict events—there might also be an upper boundary to support escalation, delimited by the risk of escalation. This is an issue to keep in mind when considering why sponsors may not provide direct support even though a closing window is detected and the recipient is regarded as unable or unwilling to quickly redress the situation.

However, it should also be remembered that not all forms of direct support escalation are necessarily "escalatory" in the traditional sense, and that states can still intervene while keeping the risks of letting the war run out of control low. Escalation management has been discussed in detail in recent literature. The most applicable case to external intervention in ongoing conflict is Carson (2018), who argues that competing interveners often talk in the backstage to manage escalation: states who do want to intervene but are not first-movers can still contain the costs of escalation by acting covertly rather than overtly, and by denying their involvement.[232] During the Cold War, the Soviet Union used its air force in Vietnam and Korea, even though the United States was already fighting in those theaters with its own troops: yet, the two sides used secrecy and denial as tools to keep escalation risks low, tolerating the other side's intervention.[233] Competitive interveners also tend to contain escalation by forbidding the targeting of foreign forces (limiting their targeting to local actors' forces), thereby reducing the chances of collision and signaling a desire to keep intervention limited.[234]

As mentioned in the previous chapter, direct support still entails significant variation, from large-scale ground troop contingents to airpower support. It also entails significant variation

[232] Carson 2018; Carson 2016.
[233] Carson 2018, 41.
[234] Anderson 2019, 694.

on the extent to which the intervention is acknowledged and made public, like the U.S. in Vietnam, or denied and kept secret, like Russia's operation in the Donbas in 2014. The goal of this dissertation is not to discuss this variation: the objective is to study the decision to provide direct support. To maximize a distinction between direct and indirect support, the focus of the dissertation will be on significant ground troop interventions. Yet, in the two main case studies, the sponsors tried to keep their escalation secret, with mixed results. This reflects how states are able to escalate support without necessarily turning the civil war they into a full-scale international war. In other words, direct support escalation can happen in the shadow of conflict escalation.

Research design: Tracing the sponsor's decision to escalate to direct support

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research design that will be used test the theoretical argument of this dissertation. As the theory explores a complex, multi-stage decision-making process, process-tracing appears to be the most appropriate methodology for testing it. Key components of process tracing include the development of empirical implications, both for the theory under analysis and for alternative explanations, and a justification for the methodology.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it develops testable empirical implications of Support Escalation Theory, as well as empirical indicators that would provide evidence in support of each step. Second, it makes the case for process tracing as the appropriate methodology to test the empirical validity of the theory. Third, it discusses alternative explanations that could account for the provision of direct support in a foreign civil war, and against which the theory will be tested in the case studies. Fourth, it presents the case studies that will be used for process tracing in Chapter 5 and 6, as well as the short cases to probe the theory's external validity in Chapter 7.

Finally, the chapter discusses the application of quantitative techniques to the analysis of support escalation. After reviewing the issues that available data pose to causal inference, it employs large-N data to analyze patterns of direct intervention in civil wars since 1946.

Empirical implications of Support Escalation Theory

The theory chapter enunciates the causal process that, from a negative conflict evolution, leads to escalation to direct support or to alternative outcomes. The theory can be reassumed in the following four empirical implications:

1. ***Initial condition****: A state may choose to support a warring party in a foreign civil war (recipient) if it has a minimum level of interest in the conflict, but faces high costs of direct war.*
2. ***Negative conflict effect:*** *If the recipient experiences a negative conflict evolution, the sponsor is likely to re-evaluate the type of support it is providing.*
3. ***Selection into escalation:*** *The sponsor is more likely to provide additional assistance to the recipient in the wake of a negative evolution when it has high interests in the recipient winning or remaining a viable actor. Escalation is more likely when there are no acceptable alternatives to supporting the existing recipient that are readily available—or perceived as such—to the sponsor.*
4. ***Escalation to direct support:*** *When the sponsor perceives the recipient as an ineffective proxy and the costs of delaying battlefield action as high, it is likely to escalate to direct support. If either one of these conditions is not met, the sponsor is unlikely to escalate to direct support, but could escalate while remaining within the boundaries of indirect support.*

These implications are operationalized in Table 4.1. The central column lists the variables that characterize each implication. The right column suggests empirical indicators which, if

observed, would provide empirical support for the implication they refer to.[235] Indicators are not all necessary to support the implication they refer to: i.e., any of the examples would increase the probability that a given conjecture be true.[236] For example, we would observe support for the assumption that sponsors have high costs of war either if there was domestic opposition to direct engagement or if the sponsor's leadership had concerns about international escalation. Either indicator would increase the strength of our inference; however, the presence of both indicators would increase it further.

Table 4.1. *Empirical implications and indicators.*

Implication	**Values of relevant variables**	**Empirical indicators (examples)**
(1) Initial condition	(a) The sponsor has interest in influencing the civil war	• Geographical proximity of the would-be sponsor to the country at war • Rivalry between sponsor and warring parties or their backers • Ideological or ethnic affinity with one or more warring parties

[235] Goertz and Mahoney 2012; Peters and Fontaine 2020.
[236] Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier 2008; Bennett and Checkel 2014.

		• Potential for strategic economic gain by intervening
	(b) The sponsor faces high costs of open war	• Domestic opposition to direct engagement, war-averse public opinion • Concerns about international escalation • Limited capacity for direct intervention
(2) Negative conflict effect	Recipient experiences a negative conflict evolution	• Recipient is defeated in engagements • Recipient is expected to be defeated in upcoming engagements • Recipient-to-opponent force ratio grows unfavorable • Increasing levels of violence against recipient's forces • Recipient loses internal backing

		• Increase in resource stock or foreign backing for the opponent side • Negative expectations about recipient's ability to redress the negative conflict evolution
(3) Selection into escalation	(a) Sponsor's interests are sufficiently high	• Examples in point (1-a) apply here • Concerns in point (1-b) are reduced • Sponsor's leadership would face reputational or other costs by withdrawing • Fear of recipient's defeat trumps concerns of international retaliation • Sponsor fears losing past investment
	(b) Alternative options are not available or appealing	• No alternative recipients available • Other would-be recipients pose similar problems as current recipient

		• Past investment ties the sponsor to the recipient • Mediation or international resolution mechanisms are not appealing to sponsor • There are no other actors to whom sponsor can shift support
(4) Escalation to direct support	(a) Costs of delaying battlefield action: high	• Opponent is expected to begin new offensive • Recipient's remaining strongholds are under threat • Recipient's domestic support base is under threat • Significant strategic objectives are under threat • A costly stalemate is about to ensue • Recipient is or is likely to suffer internal crisis or defections

	(b) Proxy effectiveness: low	• Recipient's forces lacks necessary expertise • Recipient lacks sufficient forces to change battlefield dynamics • Significant differences between recipient and sponsor in strategy and/or tactics • Significant political differences between sponsor and recipient

Table 4.1 is limited to describing the pathway for escalation to direct support, as this outcome is the theoretical focus of the dissertation. However, other paths which are predicted in the theoretical chapter can also be studied by using this table and adjusting the conditions and indicators. For instance, the alternative forms of escalation, in the provision of additional material subsidies, and training of the recipient, while not the main focus of the empirical chapter, will be detected in the empirical analysis of case studies. Additional subsidies would be the prevalent form of support escalation if the costs of delaying battlefield action were high but the no proxy ineffectiveness was found. The empirical indicators would only vary from Table 4.1 inasmuch as the recipient *would* be deemed able to transform additional weapons and finances into combat power. That is, the empirical indicators for point (4-b) would be

absent or positive (the recipient does not need time to master new skills, or there are no major political, strategic or tactical differences).

When it comes to escalation of indirect support in the form of training, these expectations are reversed. The recipient would still lack the ability to transform additional subsidies into combat power, so the sponsor's combat effectiveness, expertise and knowhow would be necessary. However, the costs of delaying battlefield action would *not* be deemed high, for instance because the opponent does not appear willing to launch a decisive offensive, or the recipient's sources of political or military power were not under imminent threat. In this case, the empirical indicators for point (4-a) would be absent or positive.

Alternative explanations to Support Escalation Theory

The mechanism describing how a sponsor comes to escalate support will be tested via process tracing on historical cases of civil wars. A complete case study will need to evaluate the expectations from the theory, in the form of observable implications, and test them against competing explanations. This section outlines alternative mechanisms which may lead to the same outcome. Some of these mechanisms have already been mentioned in the theoretical chapter. The five alternative explanations that are illustrated below can be grouped into three categories: explanations related to the sponsor's internal dynamics (domestic political developments and the independent role of specialized bureaucracies or the military); explanations related to the recipient (rewards and punishments); and explanations concerning the effects of international rivalries and alliances between multiple sponsors (outbidding between different sponsors and complex delegation dynamics). A summary of these alternative explanations, their central prediction and key variables is provided in Table 4.2. Note that in

all these explanations, poor proxy effectiveness and closing windows are not relevant factors for the decision-making calculus of the sponsor's leadership.

Table 4.2. *Alternative explanations to Support Escalation Theory.*

Alternative explanation	Prediction	Key variables
1. Sponsor's domestic political developments	Sponsor's leadership escalates foreign support to strengthen domestic consensus.	• Domestic support for leadership prior to escalation • Upcoming election or domestic political contest
2. Independent role of the sponsor's bureaucracy	Military or intelligence agencies organize intervention without approval from sponsor's leadership.	• Degree of bureaucratic autonomy • Size of operation
3. Rewards and punishment	Sponsor provides direct support to reward loyal recipient.	• Recipient preference for direct support • Recipient compliance and effectiveness
4. Outbidding between	Sponsor provides direct support to increase influence	• Presence of other sponsors on same side

different sponsors	over the recipient vis-à-vis other sponsors.	• Sponsors compete for ideological or political influence
5. Complex delegation dynamics	Sponsor provides direct support when pressured by ally or patron.	• Sponsor is unwilling to provide direct support • Another state has interests in escalation and leverage over sponsor

1. Sponsor's domestic political developments

One alternative pathway to changes in support may emerge from domestic developments within the sponsor state. Electoral considerations are particularly relevant, especially in democratic countries: recent research shows that "leaders habitually take electoral considerations into account when making decisions about military strategy in war."[237] The American intervention in Iraq, for example, has been linked to the U.S. electoral cycle – and so have other interventions during the Cold War, from Vietnam to Guatemala and Zaire.[238] Even in non-democracies, domestic politics considerations could be at work: often leaders exploit external conflicts as opportunities to generate "rally round the flag" effects, that is,

[237] Payne 2020, 163.
[238] Payne 2023; Yoon 1997.

internal national cohesion against a common enemy—which in turn tends to increase domestic support for the government.[239] Foreign wars also present opportunities to eliminate domestic rivals: leaders could carry out interventions abroad to strike the sponsors of domestic rebel groups, or create an external scapegoat that justifies crackdown at home.[240]

All the mechanisms above generate empirical implications that are inconsistent with Support Escalation Theory. For example, the timing of the provision of combat troops would be in anticipation of an electoral contest rather than to prevent a closing window of vulnerability from materializing. Alternatively, direct support could be provided not to compensate for proxy ineffectiveness, but to strengthen support for the government and discredit—or even crack down on—the opposition. Further, changes in domestic opinion due to factors that are unrelated to battlefield events could be the main reason behind shifts in assistance. These changes could also have the opposite effect, leading to a reduction rather than an increase in support: for instance, the public in foreign sponsors might believe that the recipient's misfortunes are the sponsor's own fault, which would increase pressure to reduce support or to withdraw troops that have been previously provided.[241] While the conclusion of external assistance goes beyond the focus of the dissertation, their link to domestic processes may suggest that their initial provision was also a result of the same dynamics. In all the cases above, the provision of direct support would not be the result of conflict dynamics and proxy effectiveness considerations, and consequently would cast doubt on the validity of the escalation theory.

[239] Asal, Conrad, and White 2014; Kobayashi and Katagiri 2018; San-Akca 2014; San-Akca 2016.
[240] Duursma and Tamm 2021; Gent 2009; Tamm 2016b; Polo and Wucherpfennig 2022; Tamm 2016a.
[241] Karlén 2022.

To evaluate whether domestic political considerations affect the transition from indirect to direct support, two variables could be evaluated. The first variable is the degree of domestic support for leadership prior to the escalation of support: if the value is low, the sponsor would have an incentive to use military force abroad to increase internal support. The second variable is whether an election or domestic political contest is expected by the sponsor's leadership. In a democracy, leaders could take important foreign policy decisions—such as escalation of support—to rally voters ahead of the election. In the politics of the United States, this is often referred to as the "October surprise", a news event that may influence the outcome of the upcoming November election. In an authoritarian state, the rise of a potential domestic challenger (either political or military) could push the state's leadership to escalate support either to distract the domestic public or to make a connection between domestic and foreign threats—and therefore justify a crackdown.

2. Independent role of the sponsor's bureaucracies

Support Escalation Theory has some commonalities with Principal-Agent models, not the least because it accepts the assumption that states initially delegate the act of fighting to civil war parties. Yet, the PA model generates numerous predictions, not all of which are compatible with this dissertation. For one, there could be more than one PA dynamic in a sponsor-recipient relationship: if a unitary actor model is assumed, then the sponsor only delegates to the recipient; but if the sponsor is disaggregated into its component organs and bureaucracies, then we may add additional steps to the delegation chain. More complex delegation models have been extensively discussed in other literatures, such as in the study of international

organizations,[242] economics,[243] and bureaucratic politics.[244] Sponsors providing assistance to a recipient might themselves be proxies of other actors.[245]

In the context of external support, the non-unitary sponsor model would argue that the sponsor first delegates the task of dealing with the recipient to the secret services, the foreign ministry, or the armed forces; these in turn interact with the recipient's organs for the issuing of aid and support. Foreign sponsors might face domestic pressure not to spend resources in a foreign war—and this should be especially true when it comes to considering direct interventions.[246] To insulate themselves from domestic criticism, and potentially keep their proxy strategy secret, leaders may prefer to delegate the specific decisions on how to administer support to subordinate, yet autonomous, bureaucracies.[247] These specialized bureaucracies face comparatively lower accountability costs vis-à-vis the public, but may have different interests from those of the central government: they view the civil war from a different perspective, and some of them may prefer direct intervention. The army, for example, may privilege military options out of organizational culture: hence, they might be more prone than other agencies to resort to direct support.[248] On the other hand, the foreign office might be prone to more diplomatic and less openly coercive measures, and therefore prefer to eschew direct intervention. Bureaucratic culture will influence the type of assistance that they will be inclined to provide. Moreover, if these agencies have sufficient autonomy, they might start providing direct support without authorization from the sponsor's leadership.

[242] Nielson and Tierney 2003; Michaelowa, Reinsberg, and Schneider 2018.
[243] Laffont and Martimort 1998.
[244] Bennedsen and Schultz 2011.
[245] Karlén and Rauta 2023.
[246] Mumford 2013b.
[247] Borghard 2014.
[248] Soeters 2018.

As a result, government agencies and organs may decide to provide direct support for reasons other than poor conflict evolution and the fear of immediate collapse of the recipient, and they could do so separately from the central government. This does not mean that any intervention from the military or other agencies in the sponsor's decision calculus will necessarily be incompatible with Support Escalation Theory. Personnel from the sponsor's armed forces or intelligence services may be deployed in a non-combat role, for instance to gather information on the ground, to train the recipient or to provide intelligence and logistical support.[249] They will be instrumental in the sponsor's re-evaluation of the recipient's competences. They may make direct support more likely if they have a vested interest in intervening. However, this observation would be consistent with the theory if (1) the ultimate decision-making capacity remains within the sponsor state's leadership, and (2) the decision is still based on an assessment of the recipient's proxy effectiveness and the perception of a closing window. In this case, secret agents and soldiers influence the process but do not act without a final authorization from the political leadership. On the other hand, this alternative explanation argues that these agents would act independently, implementing direct support without a mandate from the top leadership.

The set of empirical implication that derive from this explanation are incompatible with those of Support Escalation Theory: the central leadership does not decide on support, but delegates to a subordinate bureaucracy; the latter decides what kind of support to provide to the recipient without input or approval from their principal. In this case, poor conflict evolution, need for immediate action and proxy ineffectiveness are irrelevant factors. If there is evidence of independent action by military commanders or foreign agents, the theory of escalation provided in this chapter would not apply. Two variables that would constitute evidence of independent

[249] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker 2018; Chinchilla 2021; Elias 2018; Ladwig 2017.

action, as indicated in Table 4.2, are the degree of autonomy that agencies enjoy—for instance, a high degree of mission control—and the size of the intervention: if the operation is small enough, local commanders or intelligence officers would have more opportunities to carry out an intervention without the approval of the central government.

3. Rewards and punishment

A further alternative explanation is related to the sponsor's need to reward or punish its recipient. In PA models, the principal faces a number of risks, such as adverse selection (the principal selecting a bad agent due to lack of information), shirking (the agent being unwilling to follow the principal's requests), and misaligned intentions.[250] In the context of external support, one of the strategies the sponsor could use to deal with these risks is to use assistance as "carrots" and "sticks", to reward or punish the recipient.[251] A sponsor seeks to shape the recipient's behavior by providing more assistance when the latter behaves in accordance with the former's wishes, and punishing it when it behaves erratically by withdrawing aid.[252]

As suggested in Chapter 3, direct support not always the preferred option for the recipient due to the legitimacy costs it could pay vis-à-vis the local population, the lower degree of control over battlefield outcomes, and the risks that of taking risky actions such as losing engagements in order to manipulate sponsor's perceptions of the war. Nevertheless, for some recipients, direct support would be welcome. Assuming that the recipient has indeed a preference for direct support from the sponsor, the rewards and punishment explanation would expect the sponsor

[250] Abbott et al. 2020a; Ladwig 2017; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Popovic 2017; San-Akca 2016; Thaler 2021.
[251] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019, 3.
[252] Findley and Teo 2006; Mitchell 2021.

to provide direct support—an increase of assistance—as a reward for good performance from the recipient, such as a major victory, or for following the sponsor's commands and suggestions. In other words, the empirical implication of this theory would be the opposite to those of the escalation paradigm, which instead ties direct support to negative events or low effectiveness. The rewards and punishment paradigm would also imply that sponsors are generally more willing to provide their own combat forces to support loyal recipients, which Abbott et al. (2021) call "vassals", as opposed to more opportunistic recipients whose trustworthiness might be questioned.[253] On the other hand, a disloyal act by the recipient would be punished by a withholding of additional support, or even with the reduction of assistance.

For this explanation to hold, we need to consider two variables: first, the recipient should request direct support, because loyal recipients who do not want direct assistance would not be rewarded by getting it. Second, a pattern of compliance by the recipient to the sponsor's commands and requests would need to be detected, as a loyal recipient is more likely to be rewarded. The recipient's success in combat—for instance, following the sponsor's advices—could also be rewarded with the provision of combat troops.

4. Outbidding between different sponsors

More than one external state could be sponsoring the same recipient in a conflict. Sponsors on the same side usually share similar goals, such as a willingness for the recipient to win the engagement, or opposition to the same target government or group. However, not always these sponsors have fully aligned and compatible interests. Because of the transactional and

[253] Abbott et al. 2021.

opportunistic nature of many sponsor-recipient relationships, sometimes coalitions of support could bring together actors with incompatible goals. One good example is the complex pattern of external alignments in the Syrian Civil War, where the United States and Turkey jointly supported the Free Syrian Army (FSA) against the Assad regime, while being at odds about the post-war settlement, including the FSA's alliance with other actors—such as the Kurdish YPG and the Islamic Front.[254] During the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union and China were both supporting the Viet Cong; however, the two actors were also in competition for the leadership of the Communist world, in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, which affected their support strategy in Vietnam.[255] Actors supporting the same group could end up clashing over their competing priorities as well as over the loyalty of the faction they are supporting.

In this context, direct support could be the result of an outbidding process: states who support the same conflict party may want to outcompete each other by providing more assistance, and in the process obtain more influence over the recipient of support.[256] Outbidding could also lead sponsors to provide direct support: although the main goal of this type of assistance is not control, it could still be used as a way of gaining more influence, by shaping the recipient's warfighting effort, increasing the sponsor's personnel present in the country, and generating gratitude from the recipient which could then be translated into a future alliance.

For this argument to be plausible, the empirical record should show, first, the presence of more than one sponsor on same side, supporting the same recipient, and second, a reason for competition between these sponsors for influence over the recipient, on economic, ideological or political grounds. For example, a sponsor could push the recipient to adopt their political

[254] Gade, Hafez, and Gabbay 2019; Phillips and Valbjørn 2018; Walther and Pedersen 2020.
[255] Luthi 2008; You 2023.
[256] Christensen 2011, 13.

ideology over that of another sponsor. Direct support could be a way to forward this battle for ideological or political influence. Once again, in this case conflict dynamics, expectations of future losses and proxy effectiveness would be irrelevant to the decision for direct support.

5. Complex delegation dynamics

An additional line of argument can be developed by looking at the international context, yet this time regarding the relationship between sponsor states and their allies. In some wars, sponsors may decide not to provide direct support themselves but to request other states to intervene.[257] States may thus eschew the costs of war, while still addressing the situation on the ground in the conflict by sending forces to support the recipient in combat. This is a different form of extended delegation chain: rather than to an autonomous state bureaucracy, the original sponsor delegates to a third-party state, perhaps in exchange for side payments or in light of a patron-client relationship. Karlén and Rauta (2023) call this dynamic "complex delegation."[258] One actor with a high interest in the conflict but potentially fearing retaliation and escalation could also push another party with lower interests to intervene under assurances of reciprocity—i.e. that they would come to the latter's help in case of future need.[259] According to this alternative explanation, the state opting for intervention and the actor carrying it out would be different. Support via middleman took place during the Cold War, when great powers provided support through regional or local allies, such as United States providing support to the Mujahedin fighters in Afghanistan through Pakistan.[260]

[257] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019.
[258] Karlén and Rauta 2023, 107; Rubright 2016.
[259] Karlén et al. 2021, 2060; Hughes 2012.
[260] Karlén and Rauta 2023; Karlén et al. 2021a, 2060; Hughes 2014.

If this alternative explanation holds true, the state intervening does not escalate to direct support because of its own concerns about a worsening scenario and proxy ineffectiveness. Rather, it acts on the request or pressure from another state. While the escalation theory does not exclude the possibility of sponsors coordinating their intervention—more than one actor could recognize proxy ineffectiveness and a limited time window—it would not be compatible with the case of a war-averse sponsor using its own forces on behalf of a third party. Variables that can indicate the presence of this alternative explanation at work are, first, the sponsor's unwillingness to provide support independently, and second, the presence of another actor who has both an interest in support escalation and some leverage over the sponsor to induce it to escalate on its behalf.

The method: process tracing

Process tracing is the most appropriate methodology for uncovering causal processes, and it is increasingly diffused in the study of conflict processes, including the international and transnational dynamics of civil war.[261] Process tracing aims at "the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of … testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case."[262] Process tracing is ontologically consistent with mechanism-based understandings of social reality such as the one purported in this dissertation. In addition, the empirical enquiry must suggest that the process through which the outcomes are realized is consistent with the proposed logic and not with alternative explanations for support escalation. Process tracing can gauge equifinality by

[261] Bennett and Checkel 2014; Box-Steffensmeier, Brady, and Collier 2008; Lyall 2014.
[262] Bennett and Checkel 2014, 7.

comparing empirical indicators that are consistent with one theory, such as those listed in Table 4.1, with indicators for alternative explanations listed in Table 4.2.

Convincingly testing the theoretical argument requires paying heed to fine-grained measures of the sponsors' perceptions, battlefield developments and the strength and intentions of recipients of support. The ideal evidence for testing the argument is information on the calculus of the sponsor's leadership regarding conflict events and their effect on the evaluation of the recipient's competences, the incentives for escalation, and pros and cons of different form of escalation, if any. The evidence that this dissertation uses for the purpose of process tracing was collected, as much as possible, from primary sources such as policy documents, meeting notes, public statements, cables, letters between agencies and personal memoirs. These sources were obtained from declassified archives, when possible, or from authoritative historical sources.[263]

When discussing conflicts that are closer in time, and for which primary sources are unavailable or still classified, this dissertation relies more heavily on secondary source material comprised of media reports, academic publications, and reports from policy institutes. These sources of evidence allow to obtain, as much as possible, first-hand accounts from the time and from actors who operated in close proximity to the protagonists of decision-making, if not the decision-makers themselves. This contemporaneity allows to uncover "how actors understood the strategic environment in real time."[264] These sources also provide access to actors' biases at the time—which does not necessarily constitute a liability for the argument, given its emphasis on perceptions. Historical works also have their unique strengths which can be used

[263] Art 2016; Balcells and Sullivan 2018.
[264] Balcells and Sullivan 2018, 147.

for inference. Although the author's perspective may act as a filter, history books allow to check the primary data against the broader context of the civil war in which the proxy policy was being implemented. When the written record was lacking, interviews were conducted with subject-matter experts and policymakers, to peer into decision-making processes and get an insider perspective on the issues, and to corroborate the secondary sources.[265] When quantitative statistical data is presented within the case study chapters, it is not used as mere correlational analysis but rather as additional pieces of process-tracing evidence.

Case selection for the empirical chapters

Case selection is an important, if not crucial, element of qualitative research.[266] There is a range of techniques to select a case study out of a population, which depend primarily on the purpose of the case and on the research question.[267] In the context of this dissertation, the population of interest corresponds to all intrastate wars in which at least one foreign power provides one-sided assistance to at least one of the conflict parties. This definition allows to exclude all civil wars that do not experience foreign support as well as all interventions which take place in situations other than domestic conflict, while still allowing for cross-case and within-case variation in the form of assistance provided. The case selection method aims at explaining why escalation to direct support took place. Hence, cases were not chosen at random from the population. For similar reasons, there was no reliance on quantitative techniques such as nested analysis which select cases regardless of the outcome.[268] Instead, cases are selected purposefully to showcase episodes of support escalation, to highlight whether the decision-

[265] Bryman and Bell 2015; Fujii 2018.
[266] George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2004.
[267] Gerring 2017; Seawright and Gerring 2008.
[268] Lieberman 2005.

making calculus follows the prediction of Support Escalation Theory, and whether the latter is a better explanatory framework than alternative explanations.

As Chapter 2 shows, the concept of "proxy war" or "internationalization of civil wars" is often linked to the context of the Cold War, and specifically to the practice of superpower intervention in foreign civil conflicts. However, Support Escalation Theory is not meant to be applicable to one specific period of the 20th century. It could be at play in any civil war with external support in the age of the Westphalian state system. In order to ensure generalizability and control for confounding due to contextual variables, therefore, this dissertation selects cases from different geographical areas and historical contexts.

Within each case, there can be multiple sponsor-recipient dyads, not all of which experience escalation to direct support—or even escalation at all. Moreover, each sponsor-recipient dyad could experience multiple episodes of escalation and de-escalation. This feature allows for controlled comparisons within a single case. To allow for a more detailed analysis of decision-making, the focus will be placed on the first instance, within a sponsor-recipient dyad, that direct support is issued. Because direct support is the threshold marking the distinction between proxy war and the sponsor's direct involvement as a belligerent, the first instance of escalation represents the first time that the threshold is crossed. Hence, crossing this threshold is bound to be a significant escalation decision for the sponsor, which makes it more relevant for the purpose of testing the theoretical framework under examination. However, before the first escalation to direct support takes place, there could be other forms of support escalation, remaining within the realm of indirect support (e.g., new weapons transfers, or a training mission). When escalation to indirect support takes place, it is also included in the analysis.

The empirical part of this dissertation includes two in-depth case study chapters, and a third chapter with four short cases for the purpose of generalizability. The two case studies have been selected from the pre- and post-Cold War period, in order to maximize the geopolitical and historical differences as well as highlight the theory's ability to apply to cases beyond the Cold War. They provide in-depth process tracing evidence for Support Escalation Theory. Within each case, two escalation episodes are explored, either leading to direct support (positive cases) or remaining within the boundaries of indirect support (negative cases). Hence, this dissertation carries out four process-tracing exercises. These are complemented by an additional chapter that seeks to test the theory's generalizability by applying to four short additional cases.

Chapter 5: Direct support escalation by Fascist Italy in the Spanish Civil War (1936)

The first empirical case study is Fascist Italy's intervention in the Spanish Civil War. This conflict, unfolding from 1936 to 1939 after a failed coup d'état, is well-known for the high degree of foreign meddling and intervention, which was arguably a key factor in determining its outcome in favor of the rebels, or Nationalists, led by Francisco Franco.[269] Popular accounts refer to this civil conflict as the training ground for the Second World War, and the Axis between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany was created precisely in the context of the Spanish Civil War.[270] The relationship between Franco and Fascist Italy is particularly interesting because it displayed remarkable variation over time, starting with indirect support in the form of twelve transport airplanes in July 1936, and leading up to a 70,000-strong troop contingent sent in the winter of 1936-37. Italy's actions represent a clear case of transition from indirect

[269] Beevor 2014; Payne 2012; Viñas 2012; Alpert 2019a.
[270] Spatafora 2023.

to direct support, which can be used to test the empirical implications of the escalation theory against alternative explanations.

The chapter considers two cases of escalation: one in early fall of 1936, and one in late fall-early winter of the same year. The first escalation remained within the boundaries of indirect support, in the form of an Italian advisory mission to Franco, because the latter appeared unable to overcome the Republican government's resistance after the failed coup d'état. However, time appeared to be on Franco's side, hence investing in the recipient's training appeared to be a more appropriate and cheaper solution. However, by late fall the rebels still appeared ineffective, being unable to conquer the capital, Madrid, and seemed keen on waging a slow war against the sponsor's wishes. Furthermore, the Italians started to believe that the Republicans, backed by the Soviet Union, would soon be able to reverse the rebels' gains. Hence, poor proxy effectiveness and the perception of a closing window pushed Fascist Italy to escalate to direct support in December 1936.

Given the historical distance and the wide availability of declassified documents, this chapter is rich in primary evidence. It relies on data collected from the diplomatic and military archives at Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Archives, and the Archives of the Army in Rome. The chapter also includes data from Franco's rebel faction, collected from the General Military Archive in Avila and the General Archive of the Administration in Alcalá de Henares. For cross-checking purposes, but also for contextualizing primary evidence and completing the account, the chapter also relies on respected historical sources. These data are used to test the relative strength of Support Escalation Theory against alternative explanations.

Chapter 6: Direct support escalation by Russia in the Donbas War (2014)

The second in-depth case is the Russian intervention in the Donbas War in the summer of 2014. The conflict in the Donbas is at the root of the largest interstate conflict in Europe since the Second World War, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[271] But 2022 was not the first time that Russia sent troops to Ukraine: the Kremlin also escalated its support for the insurgency in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces of eastern Ukraine, moving from providing weapons, advisers and commanders in the spring to sending thousands of soldiers to prevent the rebels from being overrun.

The chapter considers two instances of escalation: one in April-May 2014, and one in summer (August).[272] The first escalation took place when the Ukrainian government's strong response to the rebellion in Donbas, in the form of the Anti-Terrorist Organization (ATO) created a significant challenge for the self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, who needed quick support to resist. However, the rebels appeared to be well-organized, supported by the population, and led by Russian citizens, which ensured loyalty to the Kremlin's goals. Hence, the costs of delaying battlefield action were high, but proxy effectiveness was also high. Putin could therefore limit himself to providing weapons to the rebels and avoid direct intervention. By July, however, the ATO received a new push, and all indicators of proxy effectiveness were reversed: the commanders appeared disloyal and disunited, local support proved weaker than expected, and the rebels were unable to stop the Ukrainian army. The latter appeared on the verge of severing ties between rebels and Russian territory, threatening the very survival of the separatist territories. It was under those circumstances, with high costs of delaying battlefield

[271] Spatafora and Rauta 2022.
[272] The chapter distinguishes between Russia's quasi-instantaneous and almost bloodless annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, and focuses on the latter.

action and poor proxy effectiveness, that Russia carried out its first direct intervention in Ukraine.

Studying the Russian intervention in the Donbas presents significant challenges in data collection, since the war is still ongoing and poses significant obstacles to the collection of primary evidence, either via archival work (documents are classified) or via fieldwork. Second, as the unit of analysis is the Russian Federation's leadership, evidence would need to be collected in Moscow by interviewing subjects who were involved in or well-informed of the decision-making process in the Kremlin in 2014. This appears impossible due to the restrictions on travel to Russia, the hostility of Russian actors to Western researchers in the current geopolitical environment, and the high sensitivity of the topic. As a consequence, the chapter relies on evidence from the growing secondary literature on the topic, as well as background interviews with experts and elites. The amount of evidence collected allows to make well-documented inferences and to process trace Support Escalation Theory and to check its robustness against alternative explanations.

Chapter 7: Additional cases to probe external validity

Generally speaking, qualitative methods such as process tracing and within-case analysis privilege internal validity over external validity or generalizability. To expand the analysis beyond the two case in-depth case studies, Chapter 7 probes the theory's generalizability by presenting four additional cases of direct support escalation. The cases are the following:

1. *Nazi Germany's support to Franco in the Spanish Civil War (1936)*: this case is selected because it can be compared with the case of Fascist Italy in Chapter 5, maintaining the

same historical context and the same recipient of support, while varying the provider of support. Additionally, this case can test the extent to which the theory travels to cases in which direct support does *not* take the form of ground troop intervention: in fact, Nazi Germany intervened primarily from the air, setting up the Condor Legion.

2. *Cuba's support to the MPLA in Angola (1975)*: this case allows to look at dynamics of direct support escalation during the Cold War. Cuba's intervention in Angola is one of the most significant in the 1970s and is highly surprising, considering Havana's distance from Angola and its relatively small geopolitical weight. This case also tests the alternative explanation on "complex delegation", by enquiring the extent to which Moscow was behind Cuba's actions.

3. *The United States' support to South Vietnam in the Vietnam War (1965)*: the Americanization of the Vietnam War is one of the most studied cases of external intervention, and the role of domestic politics behind the decision to send a significant contingent to Saigon is well documented. This section reviews the U.S. decision to, first, set up a military mission and then to become directly involved in the conflict, probing whether Support Escalation Theory applies to this case as well, and comparing it to the alternative explanation related to domestic politics within the sponsor state.

4. *Turkey's support to the GNA in the Second Libyan Civil War (2019)*: the Turkish escalation of support for the Tripoli-based Government of National Authority in 2019 is peculiar for its form, as it consisted in a combination of drones, military officers to operate specialized weapons systems, and a combat force consisting of Syrian mercenaries. This section can therefore be used to evaluate to what extent the escalation

theory can be applied to forms of support in between the ideal types of indirect and direct support. The short case also tests the robustness against the rewards and punishment logic.

Quantitative analysis: describing interventions

The limits of quantitative analysis for this dissertation – and its added value

Combining within-case inference and large-N analysis to provide empirical support for the theory raises both epistemological and data availability issues. First, as existing studies of social science methodology and multi-method research have shown, the evidence that quantitative and qualitative research methods yield is hardly comparable in a meaningful way.[273] As Seawright puts it, "it is only possible to assess such convergence very abstractly… effectively, everything but the sign of the inference must be disregarded."[274] In the specific case of this dissertation, the theory of direct support escalation aims to uncover a causal mechanism as it unfolds in the sponsor's decision-making process. The coefficients from regression analysis yielding an estimated average treatment effect on a large-N sample would not provide supporting evidence for why sponsors provide direct support to warring parties, other than the sign of the coefficient. This requires essentially ignoring the magnitude of the quantitative effect estimate, as well as qualitative inferences about sequence and context that go along with the discovery of a role for this variable.

[273] Samii 2016; Seawright 2016.
[274] Seawright 2016, 5.

Second, observational data on foreign support pose their own obstacles to inference. The flourishing literature on third-party involvement in civil wars has been matched by an outgrowth of several time-series cross-sectional data collection efforts, which has led to the availability of a variety of datasets for quantitative research agendas to exploit.[275] These datasets vary by geographical and temporal scope, actors and actions included, as well as the level of aggregation at which they provide information. Global datasets, such as the UCDP External Support Data (ESD, covering external military assistance to warring parties from 1975 to 2017)[276], the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database (ACD, which codes third-party interveners in armed conflicts between 1946 and the present)[277] and the Dangerous Companions Dataset (DCD, on support for nonstate actors from 1946 to 2009)[278] report yearly observations. Other datasets on military interventions in civil war, such as Lyall and Wilson (2009), while stretching back to 1808, code observations at the conflict level of analysis, hence not reporting within-war variation in support.[279]

These datasets are not ideal to evaluate the effect of changes in the balance of power and battlefield events, which may happen in the shorter span than a year. The same year may witness a series of negative conflict events for one side, which may lead the sponsor to escalate commitment, followed by a streak of positive results, which may lower the danger and lead to the reduction of assistance. A time series of one observation per year would not be able to detect such variation in support. Only a few datasets provide finer granularity, including the External Intervention in Africa dataset[280] and the Diplomatic Interventions and Civil War

[275] Rauta et al. forthcoming.
[276] Meier et al. 2022; Meier 2021; Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011.
[277] Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2023; Gleditsch et al. 2002; Pettersson et al. 2021.
[278] San-Akca 2016.
[279] Lyall and Wilson 2009; Pickering and Kisangani 2009; Regan and Meachum 2014; Sullivan and Koch 2009.
[280] Real P. Sousa 2015.

Dataset.[281] These are at the conflict-month level of analysis, hence allowing to follow the evolution of the civil war more closely. However, they are not disaggregated by dyads of sponsors and recipients, making it harder to distinguish who is supporting whom. Moreover, they are heavily limited in geographical and temporal scope. This contrasts with the available global datasets tracking conflict events, including battles, at a much fine-grained level events, such as the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset.[282]

Finally, existing conflict event datasets are vulnerable to reporting biases and measurement error.[283] Most notably, the variable at the heart of the analysis—the provision of external support to civil war combatants—carries a significant risk of false negatives. Since data are gathered from open sources, domestic combatants may be coded as having received no external support when, in fact, support did exist. Existing datasets have been found to systematically under-represent the extent of foreign support to belligerents in African conflicts, especially cross-border logistical support to armed groups.[284] The data represent, at best, conservative estimates of the true extent of external support in civil wars. This may further bias the inferences that can be made, since the processes described in this dissertation are not always easily recorded in open sources.

Nevertheless, quantitative data can still play a role in this dissertation. Although findings from quantitative and qualitative research should not be used for the purpose of obtaining a comparable answer to the research question, they can still be combined to answer different parts of the research puzzle. For instance, quantitative data can serve as the background, overall

[281] Regan, Frank, and Aydin 2009.
[282] Pettersson et al. 2021.
[283] Weidmann 2016.
[284] Twagiramungu et al. 2019.

picture against which the case study chapters will be evaluated. The remaining section of the chapter will, therefore, provide descriptive statistics on patterns of direct support in civil war.

The following analysis will rely on both the ACD and on the ESD, which are the most complete and reliable global datasets on armed conflicts and external support. They are also among the most cited datasets in the civil war literature. Whenever possible, the ACD will be the main source of data. The ACD which covers state-based conflicts from 1946 to the present.[285] The UCDP defines a "state-based armed conflict" as "a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year."[286] Since the scope of the dissertation is on direct intervention in civil wars, the following analysis will be limited to intrastate conflicts in the ACD, that is, armed conflicts between a government and one or more non-government parties. Crucially, the ACD includes a variable coding "secondary warring support."[287] Secondary parties are "states that enter a conflict with troops to actively support one of the primary parties."[288] Since this variable codes *troop support* from a foreign state to a warring party, it is close to an operational definition for the concept of direct support.

The ESD latter provides detailed information on many forms of external support provided in conflict, both direct and indirect (see Chapter 2).[289] However, the ESD only covers a fraction of the timeline covered by the ACD, from 1975 to 2017. Furthermore, the ESD's variable for

[285] The cut-of date for the graphs developed below is 2020. However, by the time of writing, the ACD has been expanded to 2022.
[286] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) 2024.
[287] Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2023, 692.
[288] Pettersson 2023, 1.
[289] Meier et al. 2022; Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011.

"direct troop support" is not coded separately, but is based on the ACD's variable for "secondary warring support." This is confirmed by Meier et al. (2022)'s description of the variable, which explicitly excludes interventions that are not in support of a warring party:

> "Foreign troops can be deployed as part of external support provisions, but it differs from some conceptualizations of military interventions in that at least the implicit consent of the recipient is required, and missions need to be actively supporting a recipient rather than solely opposing an opponent."[290]

As the following analysis is centered on direct support rather than on indirect support, it makes more sense to rely on the ACD's longer time period whenever possible. The ESD will still be useful for two reasons. First, since the ACD does not provide data on forms of support short of direct intervention, the ESD will be used when comparing direct and indirect support. As shown in Chapter 2, the ESD codes forms of assistance such as financial aid, training, intelligence sharing, logistical support, and others, which all fit within the conceptual definition of indirect support.

Second, to gauge the most frequent sponsors and recipients of support, it is necessary to look at the ESD. The ESD triad-level dataset contains yearly information on the external sponsor and the recipient of support specific to the conflict-dyad the recipient is involved in.[291] It thus contains one observation for each combination of sponsor, recipient, and opponent per year. The triad-level dataset is useful to count separate observations for each sponsor, which is not feasible in the ACD. Furthermore, the ESD makes it possible to compare the most frequent interveners with the most frequent sponsors overall. We therefore can get a sense of the frequency of direct support as opposed to indirect support.

[290] Meier et al. 2022, 545.
[291] Meier 2021.

Showing patterns of direct support, 1946-2020

The ACD records 223 intrastate conflicts between 1946 and 2020. As Table 4.3 shows, one every three civil wars in that period experiences at least one intervention by foreign states in support of either the government party or one of the rebel (or non-state) parties.[292] More frequently, interventions are carried out in support for governments, as the total of pro-government interventions (60, or 27% of the data) is almost the double of the instances of pro-rebel interventions (33, or 14.8% of the data). In 19 civil wars (8.5%), support is provided to both rebels and governments. One example of the latter is the Syrian conflict between the Syrian government, supported directly by Russia, and Syrian insurgents who benefitted from Turkey's direct intervention. Conflicts with exclusive pro-government intervention include, for instance, Afghanistan's counter-insurgency against the Islamic State, which saw direct intervention from the United States. On the other hand, the conflict in 1996 between the Democratic Republic of Congo's government and the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL), which was directly supported by Rwandan troops, is an example of pro-rebel intervention.

[292] This section refers to the empirical outcome as "intervention" to highlight the empirical nature of this analysis, and to distinguish it from the concept of "direct support" identified in Chapters 2 and 3. This stylistic choice is used to highlight that session aims to discuss descriptive patterns and not test the theory.

Table 4.3. *Counts of civil wars experiencing intervention by foreign states, 1946-2020.*

Type	Count	Percentage
Either pro-government or pro-rebel interventions	74	33.2%
Pro-government interventions	60	27.0%
Pro-rebel interventions	33	14.8%
Both pro-government and pro-rebel interventions	19	8.5%

Interventions over time

Figure 4.1 displays the temporal distribution of civil wars, considering all conflicts that are active in each year between 1946 and 2020, and distinguishing between conflicts that experience no direct intervention, wars with pro-government interventions, and wars with pro-rebel interventions. The chart displays a number of interesting elements. First, the vast majority of active conflicts do not experience any form of external troop intervention. While one every three wars experiences, at some point, foreign troop support, only 389 out of 2,253 conflict-years (17.3%) actually see the involvement of foreign troops as secondary warring parties. This suggests that, even when direct support is provided, it may happen later in the conflict rather than at its onset, and it may end earlier than the conflict ends.

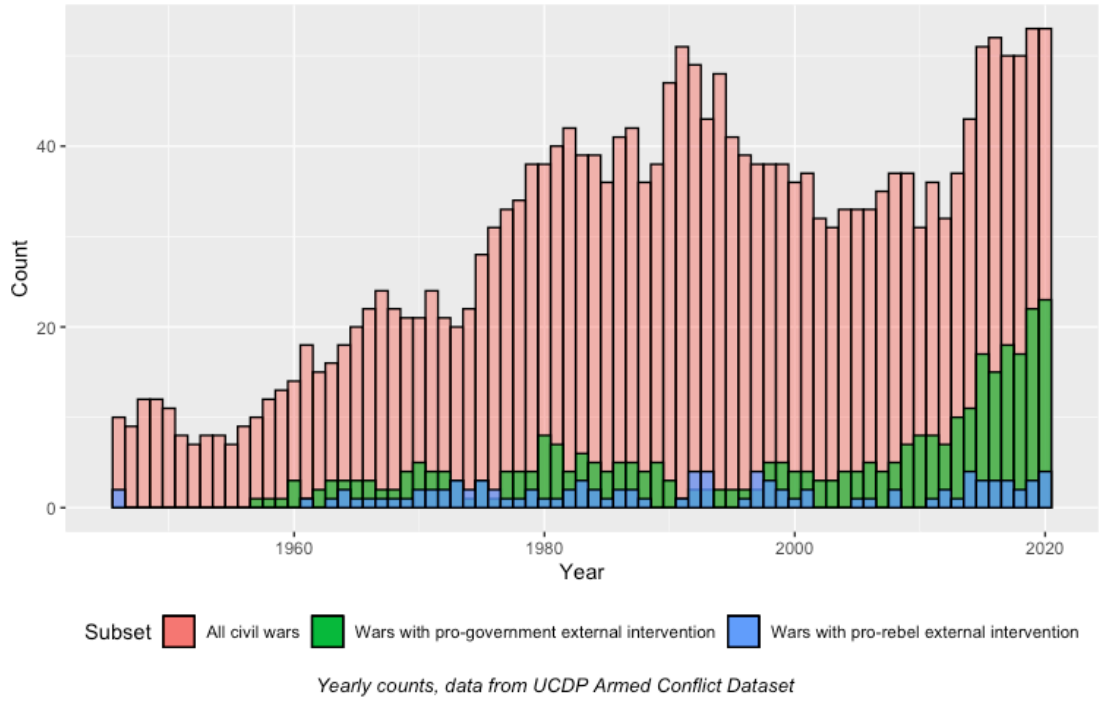
Second, the trends in direct support for rebels and for governments have diverged over time. The number of active conflicts grows throughout the Cold War, peaks in the early 1990s and falls during the 2000s, only to grow again after 2014 and reach the maximum values of the

series in 2019 and 2020 (with a count of 47).[293] The count of conflicts that experience direct intervention in support of state or nonstate actors, instead, remains steady at low yearly counts (less than 10 per year) throughout the Cold War. After the year 2000, however, the trends start diverging. The number of active civil wars with pro-government foreign intervention grows significantly, reaching a peak of 22 conflicts per year in 2020. Conflicts with troop support for rebels, however, remain within the bandwidth of earlier trends.

The rapid growth of pro-government interventions is likely due to the rise of transnational jihadism, and regional and Western responses to it, in the context of the Global War on Terror.[294] This policy framework entailed the support for local governments fighting insurgencies of Salafi-Jihadist orientation. Not all forms of intervention are similar: since 2000, there has been significant variation in the extent of direct support, from high-end, personnel-intensive interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early to mid-2000s to low-footprint involvement "by, with and through" local recipients, mostly since 2010.[295] However, the ACD data from Figure 4.1 cannot show the difference between these two forms.

[293] This confirms the findings in Fearon 2017, 20; Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2023, 692.
[294] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019; Byman 2018; Lyall and Wilson 2009; Walter 2017.
[295] Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker 2018; Elias 2018; Ladwig 2017; Metz 2023.

Figure 4.1. *Active civil wars, by year, 1946-2020.*



Interventions across the world

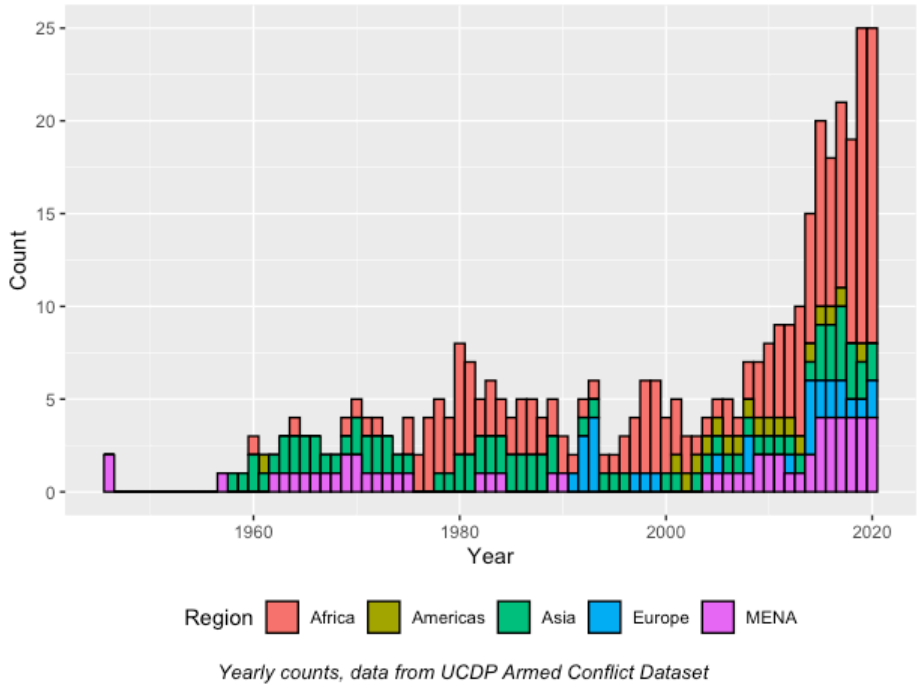
Zooming into the interventions, we can learn more about their geographic location. As Table 4.4 shows, more than half of civil wars experiencing direct support from foreign states take place in Africa. Figure 4.2 suggests that the upward trend in foreign intervention in Figure 4.1 is mostly driven by interventions in African civil wars since 2010, such as Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, or Uganda. In many of these conflicts, the recipient of support is the government, and the insurgent is the Islamic State, an IS-affiliated group, or another Jihadi rebel group, such as Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JMIN) in the Sahel or al-Shabaab in Somalia. This provides additional support for the claim that the Global War on Terror has been driving the increase in foreign interventions. Other regions that have experienced an increase in foreign interventions in recent decades are the Middle East (in cases such as Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen) and Asia (mostly linked to the Taliban insurgency

in Afghanistan). European civil wars with external intervention are concentrated in the 1990s (former Yugoslavia) and post-2014 (eastern Ukraine and Caucasus).

Table 4.4. *Counts of civil wars with foreign intervention, by region, 1946-2020.*

Region	Count	Percentage
Africa	42	56.7%
Americas	2	2.7%
Asia	11	14.9%
Europe	9	12.2%
Middle East and North Africa	10	13.5%

Figure 4.2. *Active civil wars with interventions, by region, 1946-2020.*[296]



Most frequent sponsors and recipients

Figure 4.3 shows the ten most frequent sponsors in the ESD, distinguishing between providers of any form of support (top) and direct support only (bottom). The two pictures differ significantly in scale: Libya, the 10th most frequent provider of support overall (with 181 appearances), is more present than the top provider of direct support, Russia/the Soviet Union (89 instances). This comparison underlines the difference in the relative frequency of direct support versus other type of assistance: 85.9% of observations in the ESD (1975-2017) code the presence of some forms of external support, whereas direct intervention is observed in only

[296] The first – and temporally isolated – conflict with external intervention in the dataset, in 1946, is the war between Iran and the Kurdish movement KDPI, during which the Soviet Union intervened in support of the Kurds. The conflict was perceived as evidence of Soviet expansionism, and was one of the factors that pushed the United States to elaborate the containment doctrine.

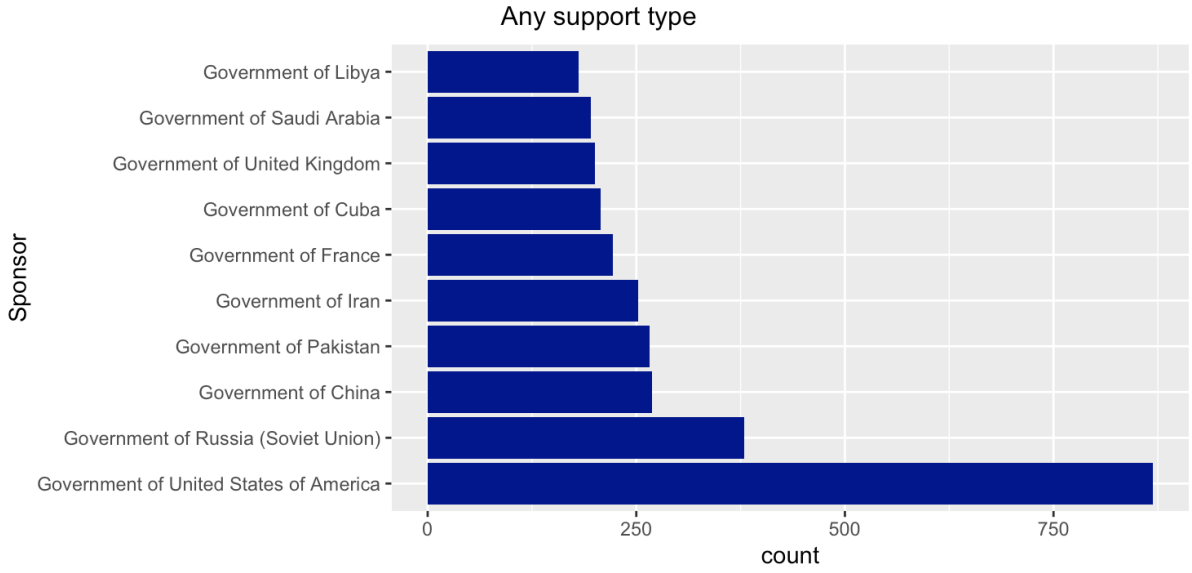
23.8% of the data.[297] Hence, despite its increase in recent years, direct support remains, in relative terms, less frequent.

Figure 4.3 also reveals further patterns and surprising results. First, the United States is by far the most frequent sponsor, present in more than twice the number of observations than the second one, Russia/USSR (869 and 379 cases, respectively). However, the latter is the most frequent intervener when it comes to direct support, with 89 cases as opposed to 81 for the United States. China is the third most frequent sponsor, with 269 appearances, but it drops out of the top ten sponsors for direct support (it is 35th, with only 14 appearances). This is in line with Beijing's historical tendency not to send foreign troops abroad, although this practice may be changing.[298]

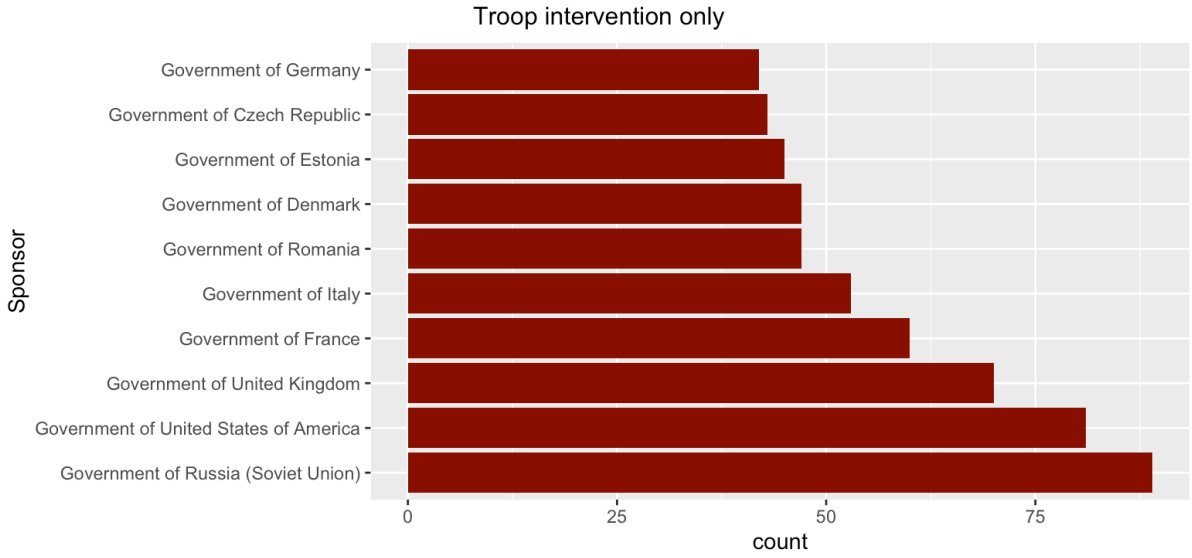
The top ten also includes relatively small states, such as Cuba. The presence of countries that have gained independence only after 1989, such as Estonia and the Czech Republic, is particularly strange, and hints at an issue with the data. These countries were present in the "coalitions of the willing" led by major powers (such as the United States and France) as part of global counter-insurgency efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Mali. This outcome seems more related to small states band-wagoning under the leadership of major states (and often under the aegis of the United Nations) than with the small states' own foreign policy activism. This suggests that the data is in fact biased towards multi-national interventions, as the bulk of observations comes from a handful of cases.

[297] This is in line with the frequency of direct intervention in the ACD, as listed above.
[298] Paul 2018; Schmidt 2013.

Figure 4.3. *Most frequent sponsors, 1975-2017.*



Appearances in dataset, data from UCDP External Support Dataset



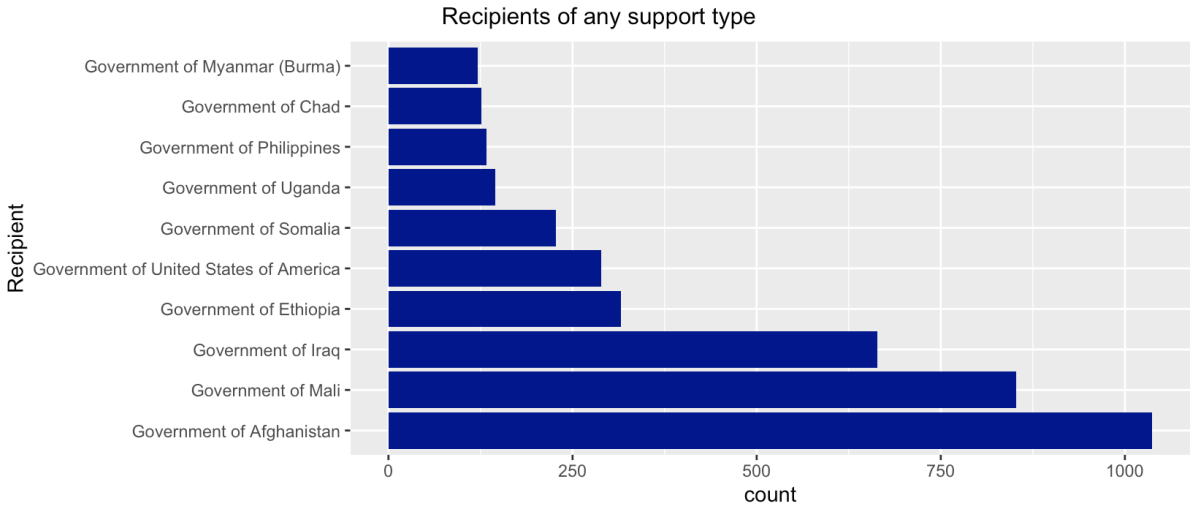
Appearances in dataset, data from UCDP External Support Dataset

Figure 4.4 displays the most frequent recipients of support. The top graph shows recipients of any assistance, most of which are governments fighting major insurgencies who are received the support of a multinational coalitions (Afghanistan, Mali, Iraq). The graph also includes, surprisingly, the United States. This refers mostly to the international support in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The ESD and the ACD regard this as an intrastate war (al-Qaeda is listed as the opponent). This case makes little sense as an example of a civil war with external

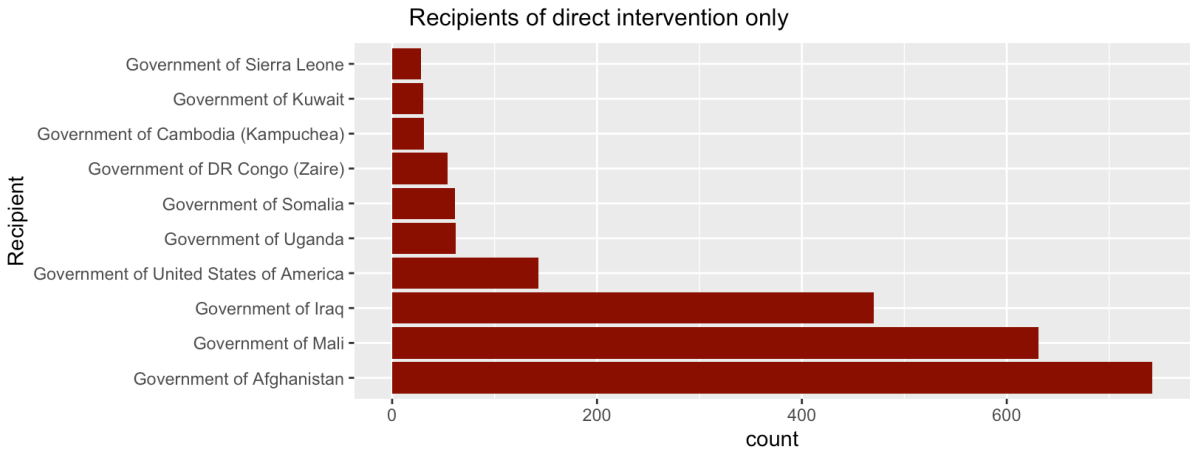
support, and could hardly be used as a case study in the empirical chapters. The data could be including other similarly strange cases.

The middle and bottom graphs of Figure 4.4 focus on beneficiaries of direct support, and distinguish between state and nonstate recipients. The middle graph mostly reflects the results of the top graph, the first four positions remaining unchanged. This suggests that the vast majority of instances of direct support in the ESD (and also in the ACD) is tied to the global counter-insurgency interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali. The bottom graph looks only at nonstate recipients of direct support. The most common recipient (present in only 26 cases, compared to Afghanistan's 742) is the forces backing Hadi, the former president of Yemen who was ousted by the Houthis in 2014. Hadi's forces received the support of a multinational air campaign led by Saudi Arabia. The second most frequent recipient is the UCK, the Kosovo Liberation Army, which also benefitted from a multinational air campaign, led by NATO in 1998. The tendency of the data to cluster around multinational interventions is confirmed in this case as well.

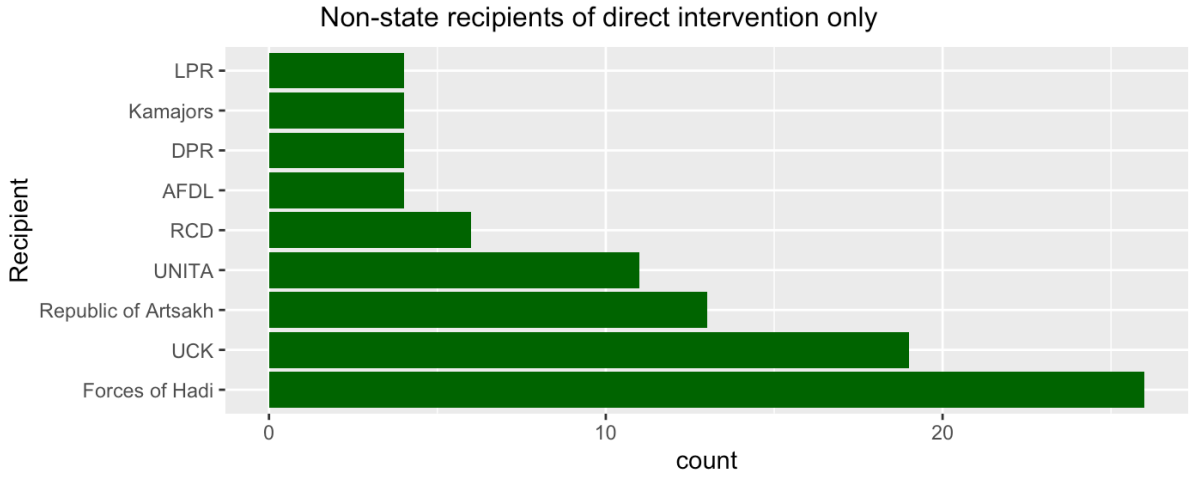
Figure 4.4. *Most frequent recipients, 1975-2017.*



Appearances in dataset, data from UCDP External Support Dataset



Appearances in dataset, data from UCDP External Support Dataset

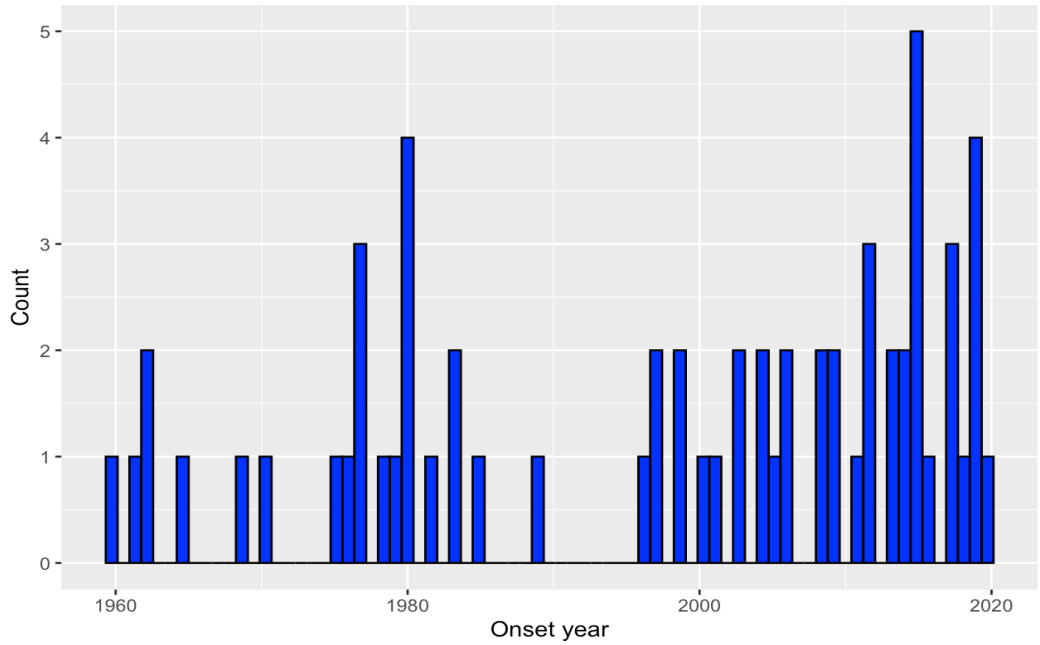


Appearances in dataset, data from UCDP External Support Dataset

Overlap and transition between indirect and direct support

Since this dissertation focuses on the escalation from indirect to direct support, it is worth analyzing what the quantitative data say about this transition. Figure 4.5 displays the onset year of foreign interventions between 1960 and 2020. This differs from Figures 4.1 and 4.2 as it records the year in which a foreign sponsor is observed for the first time as sending troops to the civil war, even though the conflict may have started years before. The dataset lists 64 cases of intervention onset (2.8% of the total), making it a rare event. As we know from Table 4.4, more than half of these conflicts take place in Africa. The frequency of onsets increases after 2000 (in 2014, five civil wars experiences new interventions), in line with the findings from previous pictures, but it is less marked than in Figure 4.2: this suggests that many interventions tend to endure over the years, thereby resulting in an increase in yearly counts.

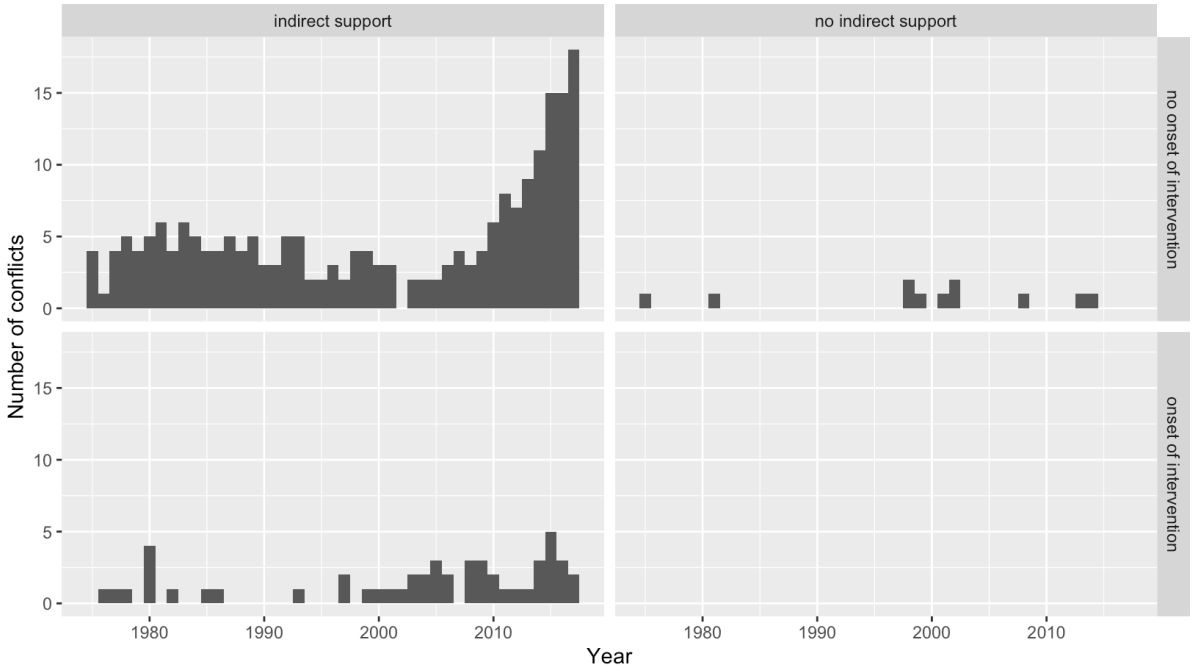
Figure 4.5. *Onset of foreign intervention in civil wars, 1960-2020.*



Yealrly counts, data from Armed Conflict Database

Finally, Figure 4.6, drawing on the ESD, studies how the onset of direct support and the provision of indirect support overlap. 50 cases of intervention onset take place over the timeframe covered by the ESD. The most striking graph of Figure 4.6 is the one on the bottom right, which displays *zero* cases of intervention in conflicts that are not already experiencing indirect support. The graphs may suggest, in line with the theoretical argument made in Chapter 3, that intervention in foreign civil wars do not take place separately from other forms of assistance. The inferential value of Figure 4.6 is limited, as it cannot show whether intervention is carried out by the same actors that provide indirect support, but at a first glance there appears to be consistency.

Figure 4.6. *Onset of foreign intervention and indirect support in civil wars, 1975-2017.*



Yearly counts, data from External Support Dataset and Armed Conflict Database

Conclusion

This chapter set the stage for the empirical part of the dissertation by summarizing the empirical implications of the theory, defining alternative explanations, and presenting the case studies against which the implications of the theory will be process traced. The intervention of Fascist Italy in Spain represents a typical case for the theory, despite its historical distance, and is best suited to flesh out dynamics transition from indirect to direct support. Russia's intervention in the Donbas could be regarded instead as a hard case, given the presence of Russian troops within neighboring Crimea prior to the escalation. Within each case, two escalation episodes are explored, either leading to direct support (positive cases) or remaining within the boundaries of indirect support (negative cases). The four short cases are chosen to test external validity and to probe the theory's robustness against alternative explanations.

While quantitative data will not be used in the theory testing chapters, this chapter analyzed the most complete global datasets of external support and intervention available (the ACD and the ESD) to complement the case study chapters. The analysis has revealed that intervention by foreign states is a feature of civil wars during the Cold War, and that its frequency has increased since the year 2000, mostly driven by pro-government interventions in the context of the Global War on Terror. It also showed that indirect support is way more common, and that most if not all interventions take place in conflicts where indirect support is already being provided.

However, limitations in the quality and granularity of the data prevent additional inferences. For instance, the lack of distinction between full-scale and low-footprint interventions prevents us from identifying cases that most closely approximate the ideal type of direct support.

Moreover, the vast majority of interventions tend to cluster around a few cases – global coalitions contributing to counter-insurgencies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Mali – which are likely to skew the results. For these reasons, the next chapters will rely on the research design identified prior to the quantitative analysis.

From airlift across the Straits to Black Shirts on the Meseta: Tracing the escalation of Fascist Italy's support to Franco in the Spanish Civil War

Introduction

Between July 1936 and April 1939, a raging civil war unfolded in Spain, pitting the legitimate Republican government against a rebel faction consisting of high-ranking military officers, conservative sectors, and the Church, and led by General Francisco Franco. While the conflict did not spread beyond Spain, it witnessed a major degree of external meddling. According to most historians' assessment, foreign support played an important role in the unfolding of the conflict and was the main determinant behind its outcome, tilting it in favor of Franco.[299] Franco received a significant stream of resources from Europe's Fascist and far-right regimes, chiefly Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, and to a lesser extent Salazar's Portugal. This level of foreign involvement ultimately outbid the international support provided to the Republican government. The latter came to rely almost entirely on the Soviet Union, but Moscow's degree of support was never as high as the one provided by the Axis. In addition, the Moscow-based Comintern recruited an international volunteer force to fight the rebellion and support the Republic, the International Brigades. Countries such as Mexico and Czechoslovakia played a smaller role in supporting the Republican government with weapons and funds. Spain's neighbor, France, despite being led by a similar government in 1936, provided limited assistance to Madrid throughout the war, while Britain and the US remained neutral.[300] The

[299][299] Balcells 2017, 65; Payne 1998; Spatafora 2023.
[300] Beevor 2014; Buchanan 1997; Payne 2012.

extent to which foreign powers intervened led O.W. Riegel to coin the term "proxy war"[301] in 1937, to refer to the particular situation of Spain: "The presence of political and economic issues of international significance … makes the Spanish conflict in fact a 'proxy war'."[302]

Among the foreign powers supporting the rebel cause, Fascist Italy carried out the most significant intervention in terms of troops, sending over 70,000 men in total—the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie*, (Volunteer Troop Corps, or CTV)—to the Iberian Peninsula to assist Franco and "liberate Spain" from a perceived "Bolshevik peril."[303] Italian support to Franco also displayed remarkable variation over time, especially in the first six months of the sponsor-recipient relationship.[304] It began with the dispatch of twelve transport planes in late July 1936, a few days after the military coup failed, sent by Mussolini to help Franco's elite troops cross the Gibraltar Strait. Over the course of the war, Rome assumed an increasingly prominent role as the rebels' main patron. After one month of fighting, with the rebels on the offensive but with the government holding its ground, Fascist Italy set up a training and advising mission (Missione Militare in Spagna, or MMIS). The increase in support allowed the Nationalists to reach the gates of Madrid.

However, the conquest of Madrid did not take place, due to strenuous Republican resistance and to an increase in Soviet support for the latter.[305] Following the failure of the numerous offensives for Madrid, Italy opted for a new form of escalation. On 6 December 1936, Mussolini agreed to send a full combat force to Spain, the CTV. Italy also deployed its own air

[301] The word "proxy" existed in the context of financial transactions and stock market but had never been adopted to discuss external meddling in conflict in the English language. I thank Michel Wyss for sharing this interesting anecdote.
[302] Riegel 1937, 131.
[303] Rodrigo 2019, 87.
[304] Coverdale 1977; Rodrigo 2016.
[305] Coverdale 1977, 150.

forces: albeit less famous than the German Legion Condor, the Aviazione Legionaria also played a key role in the conflict.[306] The Italian Navy carried out extensive submarine warfare in support of Franco's weak navy, sinking Soviet and Spanish Republican ships carrying weapons in the Mediterranean.[307] Hence, by the winter of 1936-37, Fascist Italy became a full belligerent in the war.[308]

Logic of case selection

The case is appealing, both in terms of general interest and for usefulness to test the theory, for a number of reasons. First, the Spanish Civil War had a massive impact on the international system, yet it is relatively understudied in the political science literature.[309] It is at the root of several features that characterized the onset of the Second World War: external interveners introduced tactical innovations such as aerial bombing of civilian areas, and the conflict contributed to cementing the Berlin-Rome Axis, an alliance of Fascist powers which would shatter European peace in 1939-40.[310] It is therefore a very relevant case to understand how the international system of WWII came about.

Second, this case is representative of civil conflicts with a high degree of external meddling such as Angola during the Cold War, or Syria and Ukraine after the Cold War.[311] Despite the temporal distance separating them, these are all highly internationalized conventional civil wars in which most warring parties have important external backers. The Spanish Civil War

[306] Pedrialli 1992.
[307] Campo Rizo 1997.
[308] Schwartz 1999.
[309] However, there is a growing number of political science studies who rely on the Spanish Civil War. See Alonso, Kramer, and Rodrigo 2019; Balcells 2017; Carson 2018; McLauchlin 2020.
[310] Alonso, Kramer, and Rodrigo 2019.
[311] Seawright and Gerring 2008, 294.

can teach us a lot about the mechanisms of escalation that take place in similar conflicts, even as the context varies.

Third, this case allows to extend our knowledge of external support further into the past. Most studies of civil war and of external support look at either the Cold War or post-Cold War conflicts. However, the problems that external sponsors face today, such as concerns of proxy ineffectiveness and the variable costs of intervention, are comparable to the dilemmas that interveners faced in Spain in 1936. It is therefore worth going back in time to test these dynamics, taking advantage of the largely declassified material that is available.

Fourth, as mentioned above, this case displays remarkable variation in the extent of foreign meddling by at least one external sponsor: Fascist Italy moved from supplying a handful of transport airplanes to sending a large ground contingent to Spain with the purpose of direct engagement in fighting. These two forms of support approximate the conceptual categories of indirect and direct support defined in Chapter 2. Hence, Italy's actions represent a clear case of transition from indirect to direct support, which can be used to test the empirical implications of the escalation theory against alternative explanations.

Fifth, primary evidence on this case is widely available, as Italian archives on the Spanish war survived the fall of the Fascist regime.[312] The bulk of evidence collected for this case study comes from the Italian diplomatic and military archives at Italy's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recorded in Series IV and V of the Italian Diplomatic Documents (DDI), for a total of 1,539 documents.[313] These documents allow to peek into the decision-making process involving

[312] Alpert 2019. On the other hand, the records of other interveners such as Germany were lost or destroyed during World War II.
[313] DDI IV 1993; DDI V 1994.

Benito Mussolini, his foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, and their ambassadors and envoys. Military archives in the National Archives and the Chief of Staff's Office (USSME) in Rome were also consulted.[314] This collection provides detailed information on the activities of Italian armed forces in Spain, reports to their superiors, and their interaction with political authorities. For cross-checking purposes, but also for contextualizing primary evidence and completing the account, the account is completed with primary evidence from Franco's wartime archives, memoires by the protagonists, and authoritative secondary sources.[315]

Overview of chapter and results

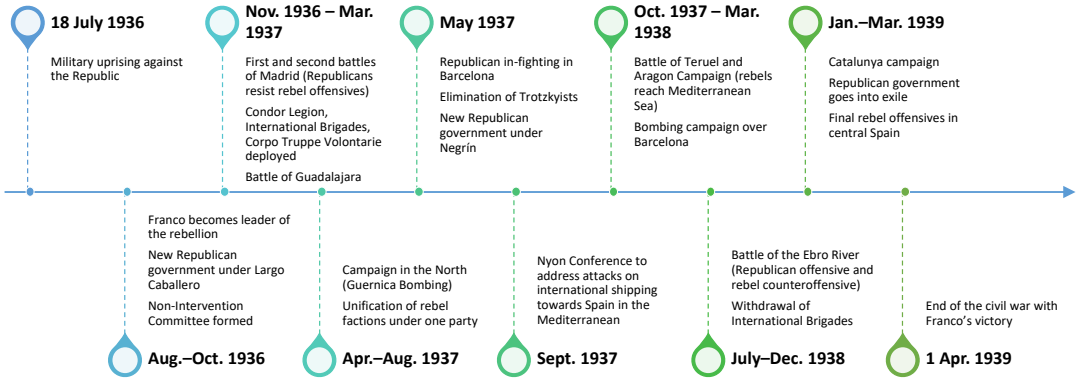
Figure 5.1 presents a timeline of the entire civil war, spanning from 1936 to 1939. The conflict began with an uprising which failed to overturn the Republican government, but still came to control a significant portion of Spain's national territory. The rebel, or Nationalist, side coalesced around General Francisco Franco, and received external support from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The Republican government reorganized itself to include members of the far left, including the Communists, and eventually received support from the USSR and from the International Brigades. The international community set up a Non-Intervention Committee to prevent the conflict from spilling over beyond Spain's borders.

After a first failed attempt to take over the capital, Madrid, from government control in the winter of 1936, the Nationalists focused on conquering the Northern coast of Spain in 1937, and then sought to split the Republican zone in two through the Aragon Campaign. Meanwhile, the Republicans suffered infighting in Barcelona in 1937, changed government, and remained

[314] USSME n.d.
[315] AGA-AB n.d.; AGMAV n.d.; ACS n.d.; Cantalupo 1948; Faldella 1939.

chronically underfunded from abroad compared to Franco. The seven month-long battle of the Ebro river in 1938 terminated with a Nationalist victory, and by the end of the year the USSR withdrew the International Brigades from Spain. In 1939, Franco conquered Catalunya and central Spain, pushing the Republicans into exile and bringing the war to an end on 1 April.

Figure 5.1. *Timeline of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).*[316]



Although the conflict lasted for three years, Fascist Italy's transition from a provider of indirect support into a direct belligerent in the war took much less. By the end of 1936, Mussolini had decided to send a major troop contingent to Spain. The focus of this chapter, therefore, is on Italian support to Franco between July and December 1936. Figure 5.2 zooms into the evolution of Italian support in 1936, highlighting the onset and escalation of support as well as the key events in the evolution of the conflict over that period.

[316] Spatafora 2023, 126.

Figure 5.2. *Timeline of the escalation of Italian support to Franco in 1936.*



According to the theoretical framework, escalation would follow a change in war conditions, and in particular a negative conflict evolution for the recipient. Escalation to direct support would only take place when the costs of delaying battlefield action are high, but the recipient is perceived as too ineffective to carry out such action. The argument put forward in this chapter is that Support Escalation Theory explains two episodes following a negative conflict evolution in 1936: (1) in August 1936, Italy's decision not to escalate to direct support in the wake of the Republican resistance to the initial Nationalist assaults, but rather escalate within the boundaries of indirect assistance; and (2) Mussolini's decision for a direct intervention in December 1936, after the repeated failures by Franco to take over Madrid. Table 5.1 summarizes the results of the analysis, showing the values that the key theoretical variables score in each episode of escalation.

Table 5.1. *Escalation to direct support: Fascist Italy in the Spanish Civil War.*

		Values of key variables		Outcome
Period	**Negative conflict evolution?**	**Perceived degree of proxy effectiveness**	**Costs of delaying battlefield action**	**Direct support?**
Late August-September 1936	**Yes**: Rebels fail to quickly defeat Republican government	**Low:** lack of training, war material and expertise	**Low:** Belief that improving effectiveness will allow rebels to prevail	**No**
Late November-December 1936	**Yes**: Franco fails to conquer Madrid; growth in Soviet assistance	**Low:** lack of reserves; poor command; different opinions on how to conduct the war between Franco and sponsors	**High:** Republicans closing capability gap; fear of impending territorial losses; opportunity for a short war closing down	**Yes**

The chapter proceeds as follows. As discussed in Chapter 3, a relationship of indirect support must exist before escalation to direct can support to take place. Therefore, three distinct episodes are discussed in the chapter: *Onset* (July-early August 1936); *escalation limited to*

indirect support (late August 1936-October 1936); and *escalation to direct support* (December 1936). After the analysis, the chapter also discusses the extent to which the case fits theoretical scope conditions, showing that by December 1936 Fascist Italy had sufficiently high interests in the outcome of the Spanish war to be incentivized to escalate, while not being extremely concerned about international escalation. The final section of the chapters discusses three other mechanisms for the provision of direct support in November-December 1936, to gauge the problem of equifinality and overdetermined explanation. None of the three alternative explanations analyzed predicts the provision of direct support in December 1936.

Testing the escalation theory on the Italian intervention in Spain

Origins of the Spanish Civil War

The roots of the Spanish Civil War can be traced to the long-standing political tensions that had accumulated during Spain's modernization, and intensified during Second Republic (1931-36). During the first two years of the Republic, the government of Manuel Azaña, supported by progressive urban elites but also by workers' movements—notably the Socialists (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE)—launched a number of far-reaching reforms, such as land ownership, regional autonomy, and the separation between church and state. These reforms were opposed by the conservative sectors of Spanish society, such as the army, the Church, monarchists, and big landowners. Some high-ranking members of the army attempted a coup

d'état in 1932, but they failed and were exiled.[317] Rightist parties obtained power in the 1933 elections and partly rolled back some of the major reforms.

Challenges to the Second Republic mounted not only from the right, but also from the left. The Spanish Communist Party (Partido Comunista Español, PCE) maintained, in line with Moscow's instructions, a revolutionary, anti-bourgeois stance, remaining outside of government. A bigger threat was posed by the anarchist movement, the National Workers' Conference (Conferencia Nacional de Trabajadores, CNT) and its more activist wing, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (Federación Anarquista Ibérica, FAI), which boasted around one million members by 1936. The CNT/FAI advocated for immediate revolution and for seizing state and private property. Anarchist uprisings took place in Asturias in 1934, as well as in Catalunya, where the revolutionary and independentist movements formed an alliance.

The constitutional system endured until 1936 but tensions were rising. The February 1936 elections were highly polarized between the left and the right. The elections were narrowly won by a broad alliance of centrist and left-wing parties. The Popular Front strategy, designed by Stalin and implemented by the head of the Comintern, Litvinov, allowed the PCE to form electoral coalitions with anti-Fascist parties.[318] Conservative sectors of Spanish society regarded the electoral outcome as the prelude to a Soviet-style revolution. The army, thus, made a new plan for an uprising and a quick takeover or centers of power. Monarchist elements of the conspiracy informed friendly foreign governments such as Germany and Italy of the

[317] The failure of the 1932 coup explains why some of the leaders of the 1936 uprising were exiled (General Sanjurjo was in Portugal) or placed in remote locations (Franco was in the Canary Islands). For details, see Beevor 2014; Thomas 2003; Viñas 1974a.
[318] Viñas 2006, 356.

planned uprising. However, as discussed below in detail, Fascist powers did not directly participate in it.[319]

Onset (July-early August 1936)

The Spanish Civil War began on July 18, 1936, when the *alzamiento* (uprising) by the Spanish legionnaires in Morocco against the Republican government triggered coordinated rebellions in military barracks throughout Spain.[320] However, the coup failed in many places, notably in Spain's largest cities—Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, and Bilbao. Quickly, the failed coup turned into a positional conflict between Republican forces—loyalist sectors of the armed forces, anarchist and communist militias, trade unions, and the regionalist forces of Catalonia and the Basque Countries—and the rebels, who called themselves Nationalists, and included splinter factions from the armed forces, legionnaires from Spanish Morocco, and various right-wing militias such as Falangists, Carlists, and Requetés.[321]

The leader of the uprising, General Sanjurjo, died on a plane crash while attempting to join the rebel forces. The rebels' ability to fight the Republican government quickly came to rely on the Moroccan forces under General Franco's command. However, because the navy and the bulk of the air force remained loyal to the Republic, foreign ships and cargo airplanes were needed to help the Army cross into mainland Spain, as well as planes to escort them. Hence, emissaries from the rebel camp were sent to Germany and Italy—but also to Britain—to obtain these assets.[322]

[319] A detailed history of the German role in the uprising is provided in Viñas 1974a.
[320] Thomas 2003, 315–316.
[321] Balcells 2017, 50.
[322] Coverdale 1977, 66; Payne 2012, 11; Viñas 1974a.

Figure 5.3. *The frontline of the Spanish Civil War in late July 1936, after the failed coup. Nationalist-held areas in beige, Republican-held areas in pink.*[323]



Fascist Italy was not directly involved in the *alzamiento*, but Rome was certainly aware of the conspiracy.[324] As the Italian Consul to Tanger's letter to Mussolini on 25 May 1936 shows: "I have been informed that elements of the Spanish right are preparing a coup d'état by means of a military pronunciamento."[325] Mussolini and his aides regarded Spanish monarchical and military circles as weak and unfit to mount a serious challenge to the Republic.[326] It was partly for these reasons that Mussolini with his foreign minister and son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, initially declined the request for foreign support presented by Franco's emissaries. On 21 July, they advised against agreeing to "general Franco's aircraft purchase request."[327]

[323] Wikimedia Commons 2017.
[324] Coverdale 1977, 66–67; De Felice 1981, 360.
[325] DDI IV, doc. 100, doc. 198. Viñas 2006, 42.
[326] Coverdale 1977, 47–51.
[327] Roatta to Luccardi, DDI V, doc. 582. See also DDI IV, doc. 577, doc. 578.

Yet, on July 27 Italy committed to send twelve Savoia-Marchetti (SM) 81 planes to transfer rebel troops across the Gibraltar Straits. This about-face seems to have been taken following reports that France was starting to supply the Republicans with weapons and advisors, as conveyed by the Italian Ambassador on 26 July.[328] Had the Madrid government crushed the rebellion with the help of French support, Mussolini thought, it would veer even further to the left and would close ranks with Paris. It was the fear that Spain could turn into a French pawn in the Western Mediterranean that pushed the Duce and his aides to help Franco.[329] Hence, Italy did have interests in the conflict's outcome, sufficient to start supporting the Nationalists.

Other motivations also played a role, including the desire to prop up a Fascist state in Spain and therefore expand the regime's ideological clout.[330] Moreover, Italy may have been concerned that Germany—who also started supplying Franco—could become more influential than Italy in Spain: as Franco informed the military attaché when complaining about Italian reluctance to help, "When the rebellion succeeds, support would have allowed Rome to influence future Spanish politics rather than Berlin."[331] Note that the this is one of the alternative explanations listed in Chapter 4, but it will be discussed later.

Italy also faced moderately high costs for open war. Despite the daring attitude characterizing Fascist foreign policy, concerns of exacerbating international tensions were certainly present in Rome. Italy was still subject to international sanctions for its aggression against and occupation of Ethiopia. In that context, Mussolini was wary of being regarded as an expansionist power with territorial aims over Spain, which could trigger further interventions

[328] Pedrazzi to Ciano, DDI IV, doc. 627; doc. 648.
[329] Coverdale 1975, 76–84.
[330] Rodrigo 2017, 470.
[331] USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 462, 23/07/36.

and escalate tensions. As Ciano claimed, only the state of anguish portrayed by Franco and the evidence of French intervention led to first forms of aid. He feared, however, the risk of being bogged down in the peninsula: "we cannot stay for too long", he wrote in his diary.[332] This situation called for a limited, indirect, and covert commitment to Franco. Hence, at the start, the intervention was limited to indirect support. The covert element was quickly discovered, however, as two of the twelve SM 81 were forced to land in French Morocco after running out of fuel, and one crashed in the desert.[333]

After reassurances from Franco's emissaries that, once his well-trained professional forces crossed into mainland Spain from Morocco via the airbridge, these would have easily defeated the loyalist forces, the Italian commands did not deem it necessary to provide more intrusive support and guidance to Franco. The pilots were ordered to follow Franco's orders and not report back to Rome [334]. However, the situation on the ground was more complex: as the loyalist navy fired on the transport planes, Italian pilots did fire upon the ships.[335] Hence, in early August some Italian forces actively participated in combat, but the main role of Italian forces, back in July-August 1936, was limited to transport and providing logistical support, not engaging in combat.[336]

[332] De Felice 1981, 366.
[333] Coverdale 1977, 83.
[334] Ibid., 82–83.
[335] Faldella 1939, 70.
[336] Faldella 1939, 82-86. DDI IV, n. 761. USSME F-18, b. 49.

Escalation within the boundaries of indirect support (late August 1936-September 1936)

The initial extent of support by Fascist Italy to Franco was limited and mostly focused on logistical and transport support, yet it was much more extensive than the amount of aid the Republican government was able to summon over the summer.[337] This initial level of assistance allowed Franco's Army of Africa to cross the Straits, take control of most of Andalucía, and to advance northwards, joining with General Mola's northern army at Badajoz on 15 August and thus occupying the entire Spanish-Portuguese frontier.[338] Overall, then, the rebels were advancing and obtaining significant military successes, while the Republican side appeared in disarray—with the government resigning on 5 September. Why, then, would the need for additional assistance arise?

Things started to change during the month of August. As appears in the conversation between the head of the Italian military's secret service, General Mario Roatta, with his German counterpart, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, who started exchanging daily notes from August 4, the two countries started believing that the initial supplies would not be sufficient to allow the rebel army to capture Madrid.[339] In particular, the recipient seemed to lack some degree of proxy effectiveness. Franco's forces, despite having the offensive momentum, lacked discipline, reserves and the necessary equipment and skills to quickly capture Madrid and defeat the Republican government: reports from Roatta show that, in the rebel camp, "everything is lacking" and "operations do not serve any real military purpose", showing the ineptitude of

[337] Viñas 2006, 213.
[338] Alpert in Payne and Tusell 1996, 128.
[339] DDI IV, doc. 685.

commanders.[340] Roatta further believed that "the Spaniards [were] incapable of using modern weapons without significant degree of training."[341] The only valid troops, the "Tercio" and "Regulares" of the Army of Africa, are under Franco's direct command.[342] However, Franco himself receives some criticism. He did not stop at the first request for aircraft, and kept asking for more weapons and logistical assistance, and even submarines with appropriate equipment and guns.[343] Members of Fascist Italy's military establishment—especially the Chief of Staff, General Pariani, started to believe that Franco and the other rebel generals "had not sufficiently prepared" for the insurrection: to convey his frustration for Franco's continuous requests, he used the colloquial expression "Manca sempre 30 per fare 31" [lit. "30 is always missing to make 31"].[344] This can be interpreted as evidence of the perceived lack of proxy effectiveness in the rebels.

At the same time, Italy believed that the Republican government was receiving significant reinforcements from abroad. As Franco explained to the Italian consul in Tanger, "Aid by France and Russia… in materials and men—especially as far as aviation is concerned—delay the advance of our troops, who are forced to defend themselves from airstrikes."[345] Intelligence sources also reported that Mexico, France, and the USSR were flooding the Republicans with weapons: "On 20 August, as many as 25 war aircraft with French crews arrived at Barajas airport… From there, planes will fly towards the Guadarrama front with bomb loads of 100 kg each."[346]

[340] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 114.
[341] Coverdale 1977, 96.
[342] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 24-29.
[343] USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 664-665.
[344] USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 14-15.
[345] Franco to De Rossi, DDI IV, doc. 786, 22/08/36.
[346] Magistrati to Ciano, DDI IV, doc. 788, 22/08/36. The day after, the consul in Tolouse argued that the aircraft sent by France consisted of 16 *Devoitine 272* and 7 *Potex 548* (Berri to Ciano, DDI IV, doc. 790. 23/08/36).

What the intelligence missed was that French supplies were extremely limited. Paris had decided not to supply Madrid out of pressure from domestic groups and Britain, and instead proposed the creation of the Non-Intervention Committee to limit the extent of foreign involvement.[347] In order to save face vis-à-vis the Republicans, France agreed to send a few dozen aircraft, stripped of bombs and machine guns, and therefore of very limited utility.[348] The historical reality, however, was less important than the belief that the Italian sponsor held: not only was the rebel army unskilled, it was also facing an opponent who enjoyed sophisticated international support and would not be easily defeated.

The lack of proxy effectiveness warranted additional support, but was it necessary to quickly carry out battlefield action? In the late summer of 1936, no sense of urgency about concluding the war transpires from the documents. As Roatta writes, "It would be more convenient to operate rapidly… However, for security reasons, in practice it is necessary to occupy and cleanse every single village, therefore operations will be slower."[349] The language and the tone used do not suggest a closing window: although it would be better for operations to be quicker, there is a justifiable reason for which they will take time. A word search of document collections shows that, in the August-October period, there is little if any reference to "time", which is in sharp contrast to the period of November-December.[350] It can credibly be argued that closing windows were not perceived. Under these circumstances (low proxy effectiveness and low costs of delaying battlefield action), escalation to direct support was not needed: indirect support, in the form of instructors and advisors to improve the recipient's ability to

[347] Carson 2018, 100; Schwartz 1999, 86–93.
[348] Coverdale 1977, 85; Viñas 2006.
[349] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 24-29, 13/09/36.
[350] Rovighi and Stefani 1992, vol. 1. DDI IV. DDI V.

win, appeared to be the better choice. Once the rebels gained a sufficient degree of proxy effectiveness, they would be able to conquer Madrid and conclude the conflict.

As historical accounts claim, "the end of August saw…a significant increase of Italian and German assistance to the nationalists."[351] To compensate for the lack of proxy effectiveness, on August 26, Mussolini, in coordination with Hitler, decided to establish a military and advisory mission, called the Missione Militare in Spagna (MMIS). Two days later, Roatta and Canaris met again to establish two missions, one per country, to Franco's high command. Importantly, the two missions were not just aimed to "examine the possibility and proposals of additional forms of assistance" but also to "advise the Spanish [rebel] command on the development of operations against the Reds."[352] Ciano added that the officers had to make it clear to Franco that, "because he receives such a high degree of aid from Germany and Italy, he must also accept their suggestions."[353] In addition, significant weapon shipments over the fall of 1936 generated a significant military advantage for the rebels. Italy supplied additional weapons, planes, and tanks, together with crews to train the Spanish rebels to use the new equipment. The emphasis of this escalation of support, therefore, was on training and advising, which is aimed at improving the recipient's capabilities by transferring the sponsor's know-how to the recipient. While the Italian pilots and tank operators remained "free to…participate in combat action,"[354] a practice which they inherited from the first pilots in early August, the main goal of Italian assistance was indirect rather than direct support.[355]

[351] Coverdale 1977, 93.
[352] USSME F-18, b. 49; DDI IV, doc. 814.
[353] USSME F-18, b. 49, 6/c; Rovighi and Stefani 1992, 44.
[354] USSME F-18, b. 49, 6/c.
[355] USSME F-18, b. 49; Faldella 1939, 85-99.

The increase in support was not limited to weapons, know-how, tactics, and strategic advising, but also involved some degree of ideological indoctrination, as illustrated by Italian actions in the Balearic Islands. The archipelago was an important logistical base from which to attack the Mediterranean coasts of Spain, mostly under Republican control. The military uprising had succeeded on the main island, Mallorca, but the Republicans held on to the smaller islands and planned an amphibious landing to recover Mallorca. It was under these circumstances that a Fascist militia leader, Arconvaldo Bonaccorsi, under the pseudonym of "Count Rossi", was sent to lead the defense of the island.[356] Count Rossi reorganized the Falange military units, pushed back the Republican offensive, and was able to occupy the smaller island of Ibiza as well.[357] While in Mallorca, Bonaccorsi significantly enhanced the prominence of Falange, the Spanish Fascist Party, within the rebels' political balance of power, promoting a form of aesthetics and symbolism which closely resembled the one in Rome.[358] Bonaccorsi's work showcased Fascist Italy's growing desire to affect the political structure of the "New Spain" that Franco was building. [359]

Whether it was due to the additional degree of foreign assistance or to the reorganisation of the rebel groups after the initial confusion caused by the failed coup d'etat, the month of September saw significant changes in the patterns of territorial contril. Boosted by additional sophisticated assistance from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and facing a government that did not enjoy a comparable amount of foreign assistance, Franco's troops made significant advances. As Figure 5.4 shows, territorial gains were enjoyed across Spain. In the north, the rebels severed ties between loyalist areas and France. In Andalucia and Extremadura, multiple cities fell to

[356] Coverdale 1977, 127.
[357] Faldella 1939, 85–86.
[358] Vaquero Peláez 2007.
[359] Coverdale 1975, 194; Rodrigo 2017, 469.

the Nationalists and a land connection between Nationalist forces in the north and south was established. The stage was set for a joint military assault by all rebel forces on the capital.

Figure 5.4. *The frontline of the Spanish Civil War in September 1936. Nationalist-held areas in blue, areas conquered by the Nationalists by September in green, Republican-held areas in red.*[360]



Escalation to direct support (late November-December 1936)

Despite the increase in indirect support, by mid-November Fascist Italy considered a new escalation of support. Two factors increased Rome's dissatisfaction with the ongoing proxy war effort, corresponding to a new episode of negative conflict evolution. First, the rebels' quick victory did not materialize. It was believed that rebel forces would conquer Madrid by

[360] Wikimedia Commons 2009b.

early fall. However, the Republican forces put up a strenuous resistance of the capital, blocking three successive offensives between October and November 1936.[361] As Figure 5.5 shows, the patterns of territorial control were essentially unchanged since September.

Figure 5.5. *The frontline of the Spanish Civil War in late November 1936, with Madrid still in the Republican zone. Nationalist-held areas in beige, Republican-held areas in pink.*[362]



The defense of Madrid galvanized the international anti-Fascist movement: many activists volunteered to fight in Spain, including renowned writers such as Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell.[363] The slogan "No pasarán" ("They shall not pass") became a symbol of resistance to right-wing totalitarianism across Europe. The reason why the Republic was able to hold on to Madrid was, among others, the government had eventually found a major sponsor in the Soviet Union: in September, Stalin decided that a major assistance program was

[361] Coverdale 1975, 157-58. USSME F-18, b. 49. Viñas 2006.
[362] Wikimedia Commons 2009a.
[363] Coverdale 1977, 84–85.

necessary to prevent the establishment of a Fascist state in Spain.[364] By October, the first major shipments of weapons, tanks, and advisors landed in Cartagena.[365] By middle of the month, the first Soviet-bought planes and tanks entered in action. The Comintern also started recruiting a volunteer corps across Europe, the International Brigades, who joined the fight by November.[366]

Franco, who on October 1 was proclaimed the leader ("Caudillo") of the rebel factions in Burgos, sent ever-more pressing requests for assistance to his foreign patrons. He made the point that, with the growing flow of support into the Republican zone, the loyalists had culmed the rebels' initial advantage, hence more support was necessary to break the resistance around Madrid.[367] Mussolini's advisors agreed with the outlook suggested by Franco, arguing that "time had worked to the advantage of the government"[368] and that the "fall of Madrid might be delayed by a lot."[369] However, they were also very dissatisfied with the way the rebels conducted the war, which was, in their view, the cause of the current stalling of the offensive. In other words, the Italian sponsor detected that the problem of proxy ineffectiveness continued.

In November 1936, Roatta wrote three reports from the field, arguing that the Nationalists retained the military advantage, but they were losing it due to their inability to conquer the capital. On 8 November, he claimed that the "Nationalist forces are not ready to quickly overcome enemy resistance."[370] One week later, Roatta expanded on the difficulties of the rebels, claiming that the main issue was due to the lack of manpower: "The army is thinly

[364] Viñas 2006, 326–331.
[365] Faldella 1939, 117.
[366] See Whealey 1989, 55; Viñas 2006, 483.
[367] De Felice 1981, 374.
[368] Faldella 1939, 114.
[369] Ciano to De Ciutiis, DDI V, n. 305.
[370] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b.328, n. 572.

spread along a very extended front, and true reserve corps are missing."[371] The lack of reserves meant that they could not concentrate fire on a specific sector, which was necessary for a breakthrough. At the high-cadre level, Roatta mentioned the problem of poor leadership in military commmanders: "Franco's army shows significant deficiencies...They are better than the Republican forces, but the commanders are very unskilled."[372] The third report was even more damning, with Roatta hinting that a stronger Republican government would have already defeated the rebellion: "Had the enemy been more propense to offensive attacks, Franco would have paid it dearly."[373]

The reports by the MMIS were instrumental in persuading the Fascist leadership that things had to change. Mussolini was appalled by Franco's inability to conquer Madrid, which reinforced his initial mistrust of the rebellion as just another 19th-century-style military uprising with no elements of novelty that could be ascribed to a Fascist movement.[374] Despite the material advantage, the Duce grew unsure that the rebels could ultimately defeat the Republic.[375]

These doubts about the recipient's ineffectiveness as a proxy were complicated by operational and tactical disagreements between Franco and his Italian advisors. The Nationalist leader envisaged a slow campaign, consisting of piecemeal conquests followed by consolidation of control in the newly conquered area, consisting in purges of any left-wing resistance and those who had been associated with the Republic.[376] As rebel General Queipo de Llano put it, the

[371] USSME F-6, b. 327.
[372] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b.328. n. 502, 16/11/36.
[373] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b.328, n. 572, 22/11/36.
[374] Vaquero Peláez 2007, 35.
[375] Coverdale 1977, 148.
[376] Balcells 2017, 69–70.

conquest would follow a piecemeal fashion, in which each territory would be conquered "step by step, gradually", and the occupation would be followed by systematic epuration.[377] These tactics were reminiscent of "colonial warfare, in which Franco had gained most of his military experience."[378] Franco believed that his sponsors did not "understand the dynamics of a civil war" which required such a slow campaign.[379]

Although Roatta had in August agreed with this approach, by November the Italian vision of the conduct of the war was almost diametrically opposite: the initial decision to send support was based on the assumption that aid would lead to a quick and cheap victory. This was certainly informed by the experience of the First World War, and the development of a new strategic thinking throughout Interwar Europe, which was concerned with avoiding a bloody stalemate in the trenches at all costs and sought to defeat the enemy quickly and decisively.[380] It was also informed by the ideological dictates of Fascism, which included an aesthetic of rapid and overwhelming offensives, with the application of air power in the vein of Douhet's theories.[381] The Italian forces called this doctrine "Guerra celere", the Italian equivalent of the much more famous Blitzkrieg.[382] They had applied this doctrine in their conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-36 and expected that it would be successful in Spain as well. As journalist Luigi Barzini wrote in the official newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*: "Relentless, rapid warfare would make the national forces penetrate all over like blades in butter."[383]

[377] Alonso, Kramer, and Rodrigo 2019; Saz and Tusell 1981, 42.
[378] Coverdale 1977, 149.
[379] Ibid., 157.
[380] Carson 2018, 77; Kramer in Alonso, Kramer, and Rodrigo 2019, 26.
[381] Alonso, Kramer, and Rodrigo 2019, 59.
[382] Carson 2018, 77; Kramer in Alonso, Kramer, and Rodrigo 2019, 26.
[383] Quoted in De Ciutiis to Ciano, DDI V, n. 552, 09/12/36.

Given these strategic disagreements, Fascist Italy increased its pressure to influence Franco's war effort, as highlighted by Ciano's comment that Franco "must follow [the MMIS's] advice."[384] On November 18, Anfuso wrote in his report that "it would be necessary to re-educate Franco, and give him some capable general too."[385] Italy's desire to influence and control Franco was not limited to the strategic realm but extended to other aspects as well. Despite being ideologically close to Falange, Italy initially made no attempts to "Fascistize" the Nationalist faction by propping up Falange and was less proactive than Germany in influencing their common client.[386] As time passed, however, Fascist Italy's political pressure in Nationalist Spain also increased, as Mussolini attempted to affect the development of Franco's regime along Fascist tenets, in the form of a unified party, a social pact between classes, and carefully crafted propaganda.[387] This effort was obvious in the Balearics under Bonaccorsi, but soon extended to the rest of rebel-held Spain. Mussolini also recognized Franco's government, signed a political and economic treaty between Franco, and named an ambassador to Salamanca.[388] This was part of the effort to strengthen the foundations of a Spanish state that could win the war quickly.

Italian thinking was also influenced by material cost-benefit considerations. Any prolongation of the conflict would span the costs of support over a longer timeframe, thus increasing the total costs of the conflict for the sponsor. The sponsor's concern for quagmire, a situation in which the sponsor subsidizes the recipient, and the latter is disincentivized to conclude the war, was intensifying.[389] As Chief of Staff General Pariani argued, continuing material assistance

[384] USSME F-18, b. 49, 6/c; Rovighi and Stefani 1992, 44.
[385] Coverdale 1977, 149.
[386] Coverdale 1975, 119–120.
[387] Ibid., 194; Rodrigo 2017, 469.
[388] Cantalupo 1948.
[389] Schulhofer-Wohl 2020.

indefinitely would "dry up a lot of resources."[390] Moreover, a slow-paced campaign would not increase the chances of victory as the Republican side reorganized and received more assistance: "reinforcements to the Reds grow daily", official documents state.[391] Another source claims that the enemy's "organizational effort, which can be ascribed to Soviet elements, has intensified, leading to some offensive actions by the red militias."[392] According to this line of thought, it was just a matter of time before Roatta's predictions about the reversal of the momentum against Franco would materialize. In short, by the end of November 1936 Italian commanders and advisors believed that the recipient was both unwilling and unable to make significant battlefield gains.

The other decisive factor for the decision over the form of escalation is the perception of a closing window due to the high cost of delaying battlefield action. As previously suggested, over the fall high cadres of the Italian government, including Minister Ciano, came to realize that "the fall of Madrid might be delayed by a lot."[393] Reports and diplomatic correspondence over the month of November highlight a new theme: that the sponsor and recipient are running out of time to win a decisive battle. Filippo Anfuso, private secretary to Ciano, was seconded to Franco's side on a secret mission in November 1936 aimed at setting up official diplomatic relations between the rebels and Rome. While there, Anfuso studied the situation on the battlefield, and came to believe that the USSR was about to establish a permanent presence on Spanish territory. In a report dated 18 November, he commented on the situation in the

[390] USSME F-18, b. 5-12, n. 85579.
[391] DDI V, doc. 552.
[392] Magistrati to Ciano, DDI V, n. 531, 2/12/36.
[393] Ciano to Attolico, DDI V 305, 29/10/36.

Republican zone: "It is necessary to stop the process of Soviet invasion in the Red zone *in time*.[394] As Ciano then argued, "time starts working against us."[395]

The issue of time is repeated over and over in documents dated between late November and early December, such as in the following passages:

- "…all in all, time starts working against us";[396]
- "over the past weeks, the Soviet organizational effort has intensified significantly …time is working against us…";[397]
- "time is of the essence";[398]
- "reinforcements to the Reds grow daily…time is working in their favor."[399]

These excerpts highlight how, in light of Soviet support and the renewed morale of the Republican forces, a significant upset in favor of the Nationalists is seen as less and less likely. A time window to win the war swiftly was closing fast.

The two variables (perceptions of a closing window and poor proxy effectiveness) mutually reinforced each other. As the rebels lacked reserves, competent commanders, and skills, they were "unequipped to overcome this resistance", which was made worse by the fact that there was little time for training and force restructuring.[400] Roatta further noticed that "the bulk of the [rebel] troops regard the conquest of the capital as a point of arrival" rather than a key step in the swift conquest of the rest of Spain.[401] This was problematic for two reasons. First, Italy

[394] Anfuso to Ciano, DDI V, n. 438, 18/11/36 (emphasis added).
[395] Ciano to Magistrati, DDI V, n. 491, 27/11/36.
[396] Magistrati to Ciano, DDI V, n. 499, 28/11/36.
[397] Magistrati to Ciano, DDI V, n. 531, 2/12/36.
[398] Barzini quoted in De Ciutiis to Ciano, DDI V, n. 552, 09/12/36.
[399] Grandi to Ciano, DDI V, doc. 552, 09/12/36.
[400] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 375, 16/11/36.
[401] USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 375. 16/11/36.

believed that unless the loyalist territory was quickly defeated, Catalonia would become an independent Bolshevik republic and a vassal to Paris and Moscow: "the most extreme fringes of the French popular front could press for the recognition of the Catalan government by France";[402] "plans for a Catalan Soviet Socialist Republic [were] elaborated in the recent long talks of the Catalan leaders with this Russian consul general.[403] This development would defeat the purpose of Italy's intervention, which was to prevent the emergence a pro-French or pro-Soviet satellite in the Western Mediterranean.

Second, the bulk of support to the Republic arrived by sea: even if Madrid was conquered, the loyalists would continue to receive assistance from Moscow and could immobilize the frontline, turning the civil conflict into a long war of attrition. As the Chief of Cabinet in the foreign ministry, De Ciutiis, put it, "reinforcements in men and material by the reds are increasing daily… time works in favor of the Reds… the need for a military effort to overcome such a situation [increases]."[404] This sentence highlights the two problems that Italy was facing: on the one hand, the recipient's low level of proxy effectiveness vis-à-vis a powerful opponent; on the other hand, the awareness that time was running out as the opponent's strength, and thus the recipient's lack of effectiveness, was growing quickly. If the window closed, Italy would have faced much higher costs to make Franco win, due to the factors mentioned above. Therefore, the costs of delaying battlefield action were high.

While conflict evolution was the key factor driving the perception of a closing window, two international developments increased the pressure for decisive action to conclude the war with a decisive victory. First, Italy and Germany had joined the London-based Non-Intervention

[402] DDI V, doc. 394. 12/11/36.
[403] DDI V, doc. 478. 17/11/36.
[404] De Ciutiis to Ciano, DDI V, n. 552, 09/12/36.

Committee (NIC) back in August, which aimed to prevent the conflict from expanding to the rest of Europe by limiting foreign meddling in the war. However, since the beginning, Rome's ambassador to London, Dino Grandi, had worked to keep the NIC ineffective and unable to punish the Fascist powers for supporting the rebels.[405] For instance, when the Soviet representative provided evidence of Portuguese forces crossing into rebel-controlled areas of Spain, Grandi blocked the NIC on procedural grounds, arguing that "in the absence of the Portuguese delegation, the Soviet request [was] inadmissible."[406]

This stalling tactic had worked for a few months, frustrating the Soviet representative's attempts to denounce violations of the agreement.[407] However, on December 2 the NIC agreed to establish a control commission aimed at enforcing the arms embargo towards both belligerents.[408] Italy had to accept this formula in exchange for recognition of the Nationalists as belligerents. It was no longer clear whether the Fascist powers could continue obstructing the works of the Committee, and a continuation of assistance could put them in a dangerous position.[409] Action was needed before the control mechanism would become a reality. This development contributed to increasing the costs that Italy expected to face had it failed to quickly affect battlefield events in Franco's favor.

A second issue was that Italy was negotiating a general agreement with Britain on the preservation of the status quo in the Western Mediterranean. The Gentlemen's Agreement between Rome and London was signed on January 2, 1937.[410] In order to maintain this promise,

[405] DDI V, doc. 28, 46, 190, 197.
[406] Grandi to Ciano, DDI V, doc. 197, 10/10/36. Coverdale 1977, 90.
[407] Viñas 2006; Schwartz 1999.
[408] Coverdale 1975, 154; DDI V, doc. 369.
[409] Coverdale 1975, 153.
[410] De Felice 1981, 356.

any major intervention in Spain needed to happen *before* the signature, so that the status quo would be as favorable as possible to Italy.

Hence, between November and December 1936, the theoretical conditions predicting direct support escalation were present: first, a negative conflict evolution, led by the inability to conquer Madrid and the growth of Soviet support for the Republic, increased the demand for additional assistance. Second, the level of proxy effectiveness remained low due to the strategic and operational disagreements between Franco and his sponsor, and in the rebels' inability to obtain a decisive victory. Third, it became urgent to alter the evolution of the conflict before the costs increased dramatically, given the continued inflow of support to the loyalists and risk of a stalemate or even defeat for Franco. In such condition, training and advising on their own would not be helpful because it would take too long to reorganize the recipient. At the same time, additional materiel supplies by themselves would not compensate the lack of proxy effectiveness. For these reasons, by early December 1936 Fascist Italy opted for direct support to Franco.

The advisors at the MMIS openly advocated for a shift in assistance. The rebels were "unequipped to overcome this resistance", lacked the necessary reserves as well as skills, which implied the need for "direct support to the Nationalist land forces."[411] Roatta advocated acting directly to break the Republicans' morale and material assistance: "we must break down the Reds' resistance swiftly and decisively by depriving them of their source of morale. That element is Russian support."[412] Roatta argued, "we must break down Soviet support by breaking down the lines which make it possible, that is, sea transport and the Red ports."[413] As

[411] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b. 327, 16/11/36.
[412] Roatta report, USSME F-18, n. 572, 22/11/36.
[413] USSME F-6, b. 328.

the Soviet support was reaching Spain via Mediterranean ports, it was necessary to block that lifeline by sea. The rebels, however, did not have a navy; Italian forces had to do the job. The call, thus, was to move to direct intervention. The Chief of Staff, General Pariani, focused on land warfare instead. He sketched out two options for Mussolini and Ciano:

> "There are two ways to help Franco: either we just send materials and relatively few men... a cheaper system, which is better suited to conceal our help, but has the disadvantage of drying up a lot of resources; or we opt for a more direct intervention: by sending a fully equipped voluntary division [Grande Unità, GU] on the spot... a more burdensome solution economically, more demanding morally, but certainly more quickly decisive."[414]

This excerpt presents a binary choice between indirect and direct support, which is exactly what the theory suggests: the deployment of combat forces—be they naval, as Roatta suggests, or land forces as Pariani indicates—represents a significant burden, both "economically" and "morally", but unlike training and weapon supplies, it can simultaneously solve the two problems of proxy ineffectiveness and closing windows.

Mussolini decided to "take the question in his own hands" by upgrading the degree of Italian involvement in combat.[415] At a high-level meeting on December 6, which included Mussolini, Ciano, Canaris, and Göring, the Duce announced his decision to send a major combat force to tilt the outcome of the war decisively in favor of the Nationalists and bring the war to a close.[416] In a crucial passage, he argued:

> "In this moment—the Duce says—we must carry out a real "race to the sea" ["corsa al mare"]. It is my conviction that the solution to the Spanish situation can be found at the sea. That is, the day in which we will have blocked the Red ports in the Mediterranean, the Valencia Government will realize that the game is over."[417]

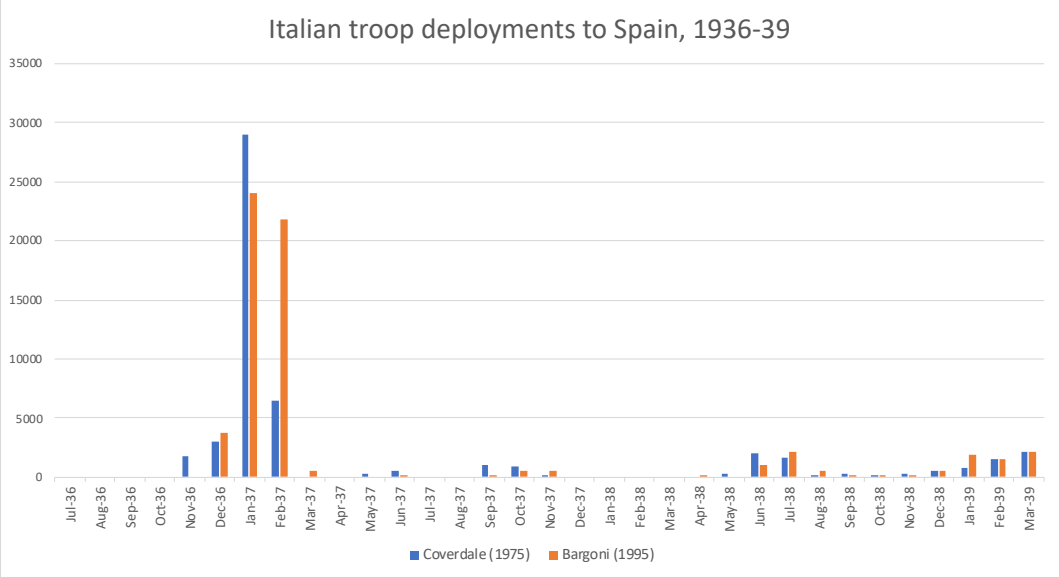
[414] Pariani to Ciano, USSME F-18, b. 5-12, n. 85579, 28/11/36.
[415] Saz and Tusell 1981, 25.
[416] DDI V, doc. 652; USSME F-17, b.1, Coverdale 1975, 161; De Felice 1981, 382.
[417] Minutes of meeting in Palazzo Venezia, DDI V, doc. 652, 6/12/36.

Mussolini argued in favor of a double course of action. On the one hand, additional forces should be put on land to conquer Madrid and pursue the enemy all the way to the Mediterranean coastline, as Pariani suggested. On the other hand, a blockade should be implemented on the coastline to prevent Soviet cargo ships from reaching the Republicans, which would have material and moral consequences for the enemy.

The expeditionary force would be made up of "volunteers" (hence the name CTV), who would be recruited by the newly established "Ufficio Spagna" within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and placed under General Roatta's command. The designation of the fighting force as volunteers could be used to plausibly deny being involved in the conflict in case Italy was placed under accusation by the Non-Intervention Committee. In fact, the recruits came from both army regulars and members of the Fascist militia. The growth of the CTV was significant. On November 15, the Italian contingent in Spain amounted to 31 Italian officers, 77 non-commissioned officers, and 238 troops.[418] In the first half of December, 3,000 Black Shirts, as the Fascist militia was known, disembarked in Cadiz.[419] By the end of December, the number of troops grew to 10,000 men.[420] By mid-February 1937, more than 48,000 Italian soldiers were present on Spanish soil.[421] Figure 5.6 displays the monthly deployments of Italian troops throughout the conflict. The graph confirms that the bulk of troop deployments occurred between January and February 1937.

[418] USSME F-18, b. 5-12, n. 85579.
[419] Faldella 1939, 184–185.
[420] Coverdale 1977, 170.
[421] Coverdale 1977, 163.

Figure 5.6. *Italian troop deployments to Spain, 1936-1939, as per two sources.* [422]



Meanwhile, Italian aerial and naval presence in Spain significantly expanded. The Aviazione Legionaria evolved from its original nucleus (the twelve SM 81) into a self-standing corps, deployed both in Mallorca and on the Iberian peninsula.[423] Between 1 December 1936 and 2 February 1937, Italy sent 21 bombers, 86 fighters, and 23 other aircraft, each with their respective crews.[424] The air force became central to the war effort: it was the "most Fascist of weapons" because of the regime's "fascination with aerial warfare as a clean means of transforming the enemy rearguard."[425] In coordination with Germany's more famous Condor Legion, the Aviazione Legionaria was to play a crucial role in recovering air superiority from the reinforced Republican forces.

[422] Coverdale 1977; Bargoni 1995. Retrieved from Campo Rizo 2009, 26.
[423] Pedrialli 1992; Rovighi and Stefani 1992, vol. 1.
[424] Coverdale 1977, 165.
[425] Rodrigo 2019, 88.

The Aviazione Legionaria and the CTV were placed within the organigram of the rebel Nationalist Army.[426] Italian forces would be commanded by Italian generals, but CTV operations would ultimately be decided at the rebel high command. Hence, ultimate authority rested within Franco and of his generals. Unlike the initial participation of Italian planes in combat in August 1936, this organization was not a result of on-the-ground developments but was decided in Rome. The day after the Palazzo Venezia reunion, Mussolini named Roatta head of the CTV, and ordered him to "liaise with Franco" with the purpose of "integrating the [volunteer] corps within the Nationalist army."[427] At the December 6, 1936, reunion, it was also decided that a joint German-Italian delegation would be established within Franco's headquarters.[428] Ultimately, however, such a delegation was never implemented, because Berlin preferred not to commit additional forces: although the Condor Legion was deployed in November 1936, Hitler refused to commit a significant ground troop force.[429]

At the same time, an Italian submarine patrol began off the Mediterranean coast of Spain, with the goal to intercept shipments of Soviet aid to Republican ports. Naval warfare became an essential element of the international dimension of the civil war.[430] For Fascist Italy, the naval dimension assumed particularly high relevance given (1) the necessity to disrupt Republican supply lines between the Soviet port of Odessa and the Spanish harbors of Alicante and Cartagena, and (2) Mussolini's strategic design of turning the Mediterranean into an "Italian lake", which required an active role for the Italian Navy.[431] Italian naval intervention took three forms: vessel transfers to the rebels' weak fleet; logistical support to the Nationalists'

[426] AGMAV, c.2604, l. 588.
[427] Mussolini to Roatta, USSME F-18, b. 1, 07/12/36. Rovighi and Stefani 1992, vol. 1, 146.
[428] Minutes of meeting in Palazzo Venezia, DDI V, doc. 652, 6/12/36.
[429] Proctor 1983; Whealey 1989.
[430] Alpert 1987; Alcofar Nassaes 1971; García Durán 1977.
[431] Campo Rizo 1997, 59; Alcofar Nassaes 1977.

operations at sea; and direct action against Republican ships and foreign vessels, mostly in the form of submarine warfare, starting on November 22, when the submarine Torricelli torpedoed and significantly damaged the Republican cruiser Cervantes.[432]

Scope conditions and the December escalation

As argued in Chapter 3, sponsors could select out of escalation for two reasons. First, the sponsor is not interested in escalating assistance if its interests in the recipient's success are too low. Second, the costs of providing direct support could be too high even when the two variables of poor proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action are met. Does Italy in December 1936 fit between these two thresholds?

First, after a negative conflict evolution, the sponsor may prefer not to escalate, and rather withdraw support or shift to a different actor who may be more reliable or effective. Were there alternative strategies for Fascist Italy other than expanding support to Franco? Archival reference suggest that the outcome of the Spanish Civil War was quite important to Mussolini's regime, and it had even grown in importance over time. On 18 November, Italy and Germany unilaterally recognized Franco's Burgos government as the sole legitimate representative of Spain.[433] The two powers had done so in expectation of the imminent fall of Madrid and end of the conflict, but then decided to anticipate it in order to galvanize the rebels' action: in fact, Mussolini ordered to "let General Franco know that the recognition…compels him to continue operations with maximum energy."[434] However, the capital resisted, and meanwhile concerns about Franco's ineffectiveness grew, as we saw. The recognition became a problem because,

[432] Campo Rizo 1997, 59; Coverdale 1977, 167.
[433] Cantalupo 1948; Coverdale 1975, 153; DDI V, doc. 435, 18/11/36.
[434] Mussolini to Roatta, DDI V, doc. 443, 19/11/36.

by withdrawing support after recognizing Franco's government, Italy would have lost face internationally.[435] Leaving Franco to fend for himself would have been costlier than increasing involvement.

Moreover, by fall there was no alternative actor to Franco within the Nationalist band. He had become the main leader of the movement and seemed to be, according to Italian informants, the only one able to hold together an uneasy alliance of generals, traditionalists and Falangists.[436] He was also the only military leader with direct contacts in Rome and Berlin, and the only one with sufficient strategic ability to win the civil war—if provided with appropriate support and advice. Already in August, Roatta and Canaris had agreed that Franco, would be the exclusive recipient of military aid.[437] As the leader of the rebels' strongest force, and backed by his Italian and German patrons, Franco began a dramatic rise to power, quickly overcoming General Emilio Mola as the leader of the rebellion.[438] Hence, the patrons themselves had limited their alternative options. In short, the lack of alternative commanders and the high interest in ensuring a victory of Franco's forces made escalation a less costly option than withdrawal in December 1936, pushing Italy to select into escalation.

The second argument, that the costs of escalation were too high, related to the concerns of an expansion of the war. Increasing support to the level of combat forces could risk dragging other countries in with their own forces and flame up an international conflict. Did that concern arise in Mussolini's mind in 1936?

[435] Coverdale 1977, 145.
[436] DDI V, doc. 35, 241.
[437] USSME F-18, b. 49; Rovighi and Stefani 1992.
[438] Coverdale 1975, 72.

After the expensive Ethiopian campaign, Italian armed forces were not ready to fight a European war.[439] Hence, the Italian objective was to influence the conflict while keeping it circumscribed to Spain. However, this was a common objective to all external parties, and something that Italy could exploit to carry out more decisive forms of intervention. As Carson (2018) shows, intervening states in Spain used covertness and collusion to contain the risk of international escalation.[440] Some states were more concerned about the fear of escalation than others: France and Britain, for instance, treated proxy warfare in Spain as an "open secret", which European great powers colluded to keep their actions under cover.[441] The NIC played a key role in preventing escalation. The NIC was first proposed by France to overcome the problem of internal opposition to supporting Madrid and to conciliate British demands for neutrality. However, its true goal was to keep the conflict limited to Spain and prevent spillovers that could upset the fragile peace on the European continent.[442] Its institutional setting, as Cason aptly puts it, facilitated "a kind of explicit collusion about the fiction of non-intervention."[443] The cautious behavior of French and British diplomacy during the years of appeasement stands in sharp contrast with the "irreflexive, impetuous, bullish character of policymaking, including foreign policymaking, of Hitler and Mussolini."[444] By signaling the desire to keep the conflict limited within the NIC meetings, the democracies may have led Mussolini to understand that more offensive actions, such as direct support to Franco, wouldn't go punished.

[439] See Cantalupo 1948; De Felice 1981. Nazi Germany had similar concerns: it feared "provoking French intervention on the side of the Spanish Loyalists [Republicans] and thereby starting a general European war— a war the Wehrmacht was not ready to fight in 1937 and 1938." See Corum 1995, 70; Alpert 2019a.
[440] Carson 2018, 101.
[441] Ibid., 48.
[442] Thomas 2001.
[443] Carson 2018, 103.
[444] Campo Rizo 2009, 21.

As for the main sponsor of the Republic, the Soviet Union, other concerns were at play. At the time, the USSR followed the Popular Front strategy, which had been inaugurated in 1934-35: the goal was to forge an alliance with the Western democracies—and push European Communist parties to support democratic governments, as they did in the 1936 Spanish and French elections—in order to stop the advance of Fascist forces.[445] Stalin's interest in Spain should be understood in light of this strategy: preventing Spain from becoming a right-wing dictatorship, Stalin thought, would make Moscow a reliable partner for London and Paris.[446] Sending the Red Army to Spain would be both logistically difficult and strategically unwise under this strategy, as it would have turned the democracies away from Moscow. Italy was aware of this: even though intelligence claimed that "Russia gives the largest support to the Reds,"[447] they were also aware that they were unlikely to send a full combat division.[448] This must have further reassured Mussolini that an intervention, which was necessary to deal with the two problems of proxy ineffectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action, wouldn't lead to a general European war.

Testing alternative explanations

To gauge the problem of equifinality and overdetermined explanation of the transition to direct support in late 1936-early 1937, in this section Support Escalation Theory is contrasted with three alternative accounts for the provision of direct support in November-December 1936: troops as reward for the recipient, pressure from Nazi Germany, and inter-allied outbidding for

[445] Beevor 2014, 342.
[446] Viñas 2006, 63.
[447] Roatta-Franco meeting, USSME F-6, b. 327, 16/10/36.
[448] Viñas 2006, 213.

influence over Franco.[449] Table 5.2 provides a summary of each alternative explanation, their prediction regarding the transition to direct support, the values that the relevant variables for each explanation took in late 1936, and whether the prediction is consistent with the predicted outcome.

Table 5.2. *Alternative theories for Italy's escalation to direct support in Nov.-Dec. 1936.*

Theory	**Prediction**	**Values of key variables**	**Fit with outcome**
Support escalation	Sponsor provides direct support when immediate battlefield action is required, but proxy effectiveness is low	Costs of delaying battlefield action: High Perceived proxy effectiveness: low	Good
Rewards and punishments	Sponsor provides direct support to reward loyal recipient	Recipient wants direct support: No Perceived recipient compliance: Low	Poor

[449] The focus is on the escalation to direct support rather than on escalation to indirect support (August to October) because of the theory's emphasis on the former.

Complex delegation	Sponsor provides direct support when pressured by ally or patron	Sponsor is unwilling to intervene independently: No Sponsor's decision depends on ally's pressure: No	Poor
Outbidding between sponsors	Sponsor provides direct support to increase influence over the recipient	Sponsor is unwilling to intervene independently: No Sponsor fears losing influence over recipient vis-à-vis ally: No	Poor

The first alternative explanation is related to rewards and punishments.[450] A sponsor could deal with the problem of agency shirk and divergent preferences by rewarding the recipient with more support when it behaves in accordance with the sponsor's wishes, and punishing it when it behaves erratically by withdrawing aid.[451] If this model were true, the sponsor would provide direct support—which represents an increase of assistance—as a reward for good performance or after shows of loyalty from the recipient. On the other hand, a disloyal act by the recipient would be punished by refusing escalation, or even with the reduction of assistance. For this explanation to be verified empirically, Fascist Italy would send a combat expedition to Spain to reward Franco for his loyal behavior. Mussolini would be more willing to provide his armed forces to support a loyal "vassal" as opposed to an opportunistic recipient.[452] To test it, we need

[450] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019.
[451] Findley and Teo 2006; Mitchell 2021.
[452] Abbott et al. 2021.

to consider whether two variables are verified: first, Franco should request direct support, because loyal recipients who do not want direct assistance would not be rewarded by getting it; and second, Rome should perceive a pattern of compliance by Franco to Italian commands and requests, which they deem worth rewarding.

As for the first variable, empirical evidence does not seem to support the argument that Franco requested direct support from Rome. In fact, in December 1936 Franco did *not* want troop support from Italy. Franco did not believe that more invasive assistance would facilitate victory. Rather, he was concerned that a quick occupation which made use of foreign troops would alienate portions of the population, as opposed to a slow advance using local troops, which facilitates consolidation and increases legitimacy.[453] Franco was already "worried about the probable accusation of having occupied Madrid with the descendants of the Moors of Spain", and therefore was incentivized to "increase foreign personnel on the line as little as possible."[454] Moreover, Franco highly valued his autonomy as an independent commander, featuring a "determination to stand up for his own interests."[455] He did not appreciate external influences on his decisions, and took actions against those who were challenging his orders, as his colleagues—and the MMIS—learned over time.[456] This could have easily led to tensions with the commanders of foreign troops, which further suggests that Franco did not want them.

In terms of the second variable, evidence suggests that Franco was not responding positively to the sponsor's requests. As the discussion above showed, there was fundamental strategic disagreement between Franco and Mussolini. Despite the ideological affinity between the

[453] Vaquero Peláez 2007, 33.
[454] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 502, 16/11/36.
[455] Balcells 2017, 66.
[456] Roatta report, USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 24-29, 13/09/36.

Fascist regime and the rebel cause—at least, in their shared aversion to Bolshevism and liberal democracy—the two sides envisaged a different campaign: Italy sought a quick and decisive offensive to quickly subdue the enemy and minimize the time and resource commitment by the sponsor; the Nationalists, instead, implemented a gradual campaign of conquest and cleansing of Republican opponents, which would necessarily require a longer time investment. The clearest evidence of strategic disagreements comes from Roatta's reports in November 1936, claiming that the rebels regarded Madrid as a point of arrival, rather than a step on the way towards quick occupation of the rest of the country.[457]

The MMIS kept advising Franco and his generals to accelerate the pace of operations, but the level of compliance with Italian advice was low. If Italy wanted to carry out a "race to the sea" to end the war, Mussolini said on December 6, it could not simply rely on supplying or training the Nationalists, because the latter were neither able nor willing to do it.[458] Based on these parameters, the reward and punishment explanation would predict a reduction of assistance in late autumn 1936, and surely not escalation to direct support. This prediction is inconsistent with decisions taken by Mussolini at the time. The decision to send the CTV was only communicated to Franco as a fait accompli: when Colonel Faldella informed him, on December 14, he replied: "¿Y quién se los ha pedido?", "Who asked you for these?"[459] Rather than a response to a request by the recipient, direct support "was a decision imposed by Mussolini, which Franco had to accept whether he liked it or not."[460]

[457] USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 375. 16/11/36.
[458] Minutes of meeting in Palazzo Venezia, DDI V, doc. 652, 6/12/36.
[459] Cantalupo 1948; Coverdale 1975, 162.
[460] Saz and Tussell 1981, 22.

The second alternative explanation highlights the role of allied pressure in pushing Fascist Italy to intervene, in line with complex delegation dynamics. Even when a would-be sponsor is unwilling to intervene directly, an ally could pressure them into doing so, for instance by providing side payments or future assurances of reciprocity. This dynamic follows a "complex delegation" logic: a process in which the delegation of authority is delegated to an agent who then further delegates this to another agent.[461] In other words, the intervener is in fact the middleman of another country.

In the Spanish Civil War, Nazi Germany, as an ally of Fascist Italy, may have played a role in pushing Rome to become involved in the conflict. Historical works highlight the role that the Spanish war had in building and strengthening the Rome-Berlin Axis, which had begun with the Ethiopian war in 1935.[462] It cannot be denied that Germany played a significant role in Rome's foreign policy decisions regarding Spain. Mussolini's decision to send the first batch of aid in July 1936 followed Hitler's first decision—Franco warned Mussolini that Italian support "could allow Rome to play a stronger role than Berlin in future Spanish politics."[463] Italy's decision to escalate support in late summer followed a visit by the Prince of Hesse on August 23, sent by Hitler to Mussolini to encourage closer coordination and an increase in cooperation over Spain.[464] And in November, Italy officially recognized Franco's government before the fall of Madrid because Berlin had decided to do the same. Historical analysis of German foreign policy documents further reveals that this was not just a happy coincidence: Germany actively used the Spanish events as a chance to intensify the Italian-German

[461] Karlén et al. 2021a, 12.
[462] The very phrase "Rome-Berlin Axis" was coined by Mussolini during a speech in Milan on November 1, just a few days after a colloquium between Ciano and Hitler aimed at strengthening Italian-German cooperation beyond Spain (De Felice 1981, 133; DDI V, doc. 316, 01/11/36).
[463] USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 462, 23/07/36.
[464] Michaelis 1971, 369–370; Whealey 1989, 44.

rapprochement.[465] High-ranking Nazi decision-makers argued that Spain was a chance to draw a wedge between Italy and Britain: the more committed Rome was in the war, the more it would realize that its strategic interests were incompatible with London's and closer to Berlin's.

This theory suggests that, perhaps, Italian intervention was not due to high costs of delayed battlefield action, and low proxy effectiveness, but was instead a consequence of German pressure. For this explanation to be true, however, two conditions must be verified: first, Italy (the sponsor) should be unwilling to intervene directly in November 1936; second, Italy's decision to send a combat force should change as a result of German pressure. Neither of the two seems to materialize. Documents suggest that, despite the ongoing coordination with Nazi Germany, Mussolini's decision to escalate to direct support was independent of German pressure. As opposed to the recognition of Franco's government, which seems a direct consequence of Berlin's decision, the escalation decision does not follow any action by the German government in late November 1936.[466] Germany had decided to send the Condor Legion more than a month in advance, without pressuring Italy into doing the same.[467] The factors that pushed Mussolini to create the CTV—that is, increase in Soviet support by sea, better Republican training, Franco's slow-paced campaign, and the rebels' lack of preparation for a quick offensive—were not pushed upon the Duce by German advisors, but were discussed in internal communication by Italian personnel; only later did they communicate it to their German counterparts.[468] Moreover, in the December 6 reunion, the Italians were pushing for direct intervention more than the Germans.[469] The German advisors who were present, Canaris and Goering, limited themselves to questioning whether Berlin could contribute a ground

[465] De Felice 1981, 366.
[466] DDI V, doc. 434, 17/11/36.
[467] DDI V, doc. 425, 434, 435.
[468] USSME F-18, b.5-12, n. 85579, 28/11/36.
[469] USSME F-18, b.1.

contingent. Consequently, it appears that Fascist Italy was willing to intervene independently, and that the decision for direct support did not depend on pressure from Nazi Germany.

A third alternative hypothesis is connected to the "out-bidding" process: states who support the same conflict party may want to outcompete each other by providing more assistance, and in the process obtain more influence over the recipient of support.[470] One sponsor could decide to send direct support to increase its influence over the recipient, to the disadvantage of other sponsors. Outbidding and intramural competition could be particularly significant in ideologically driven revisionist alliances, as "alliances with revisionist ideology are more aggressive than other types of security partnerships."[471] Because each party wants to prove their ideological purity and commitment, they are less prone to buck-passing and more incentivized to overcommitment. The warring party would benefit the most from intra-mural rivalry by obtaining more assistance from each alliance party.[472]

The Axis seems to fit the paradigm described: it is a prime example of ideologically driven alliance, with the clear objective of upsetting the European status quo. Despite the similarity of the two ideological movements—Italian Fascism and German National Socialism—Mussolini was concerned about Hitler's growing influence, and wanted to ensure that the Mediterranean remained an Italian-dominated sea.[473] As we just showed, at the start of the Spanish Civil War Italian documents do show concerns about German presence in Spain, which could have resulted in excessive pro-Berlin influence.[474] This situation may have pushed Italy

[470] Christensen 2011, 13.
[471] Schweller 1997, 927.
[472] Christensen 2011, 16–17.
[473] De Felice 1981, 467.
[474] USSME F-6, b. 327, n. 462, 23/07/36.

to send more assistance to Franco, with the goal to lure him into Rome's orbit. Can Nazi-Fascist competition also explain Mussolini's decision to send direct support?

Circumstantial evidence and available documents suggest that this was not the case. By late fall 1936, Nazi-Fascist competition for influence had dried up. In late October, Ciano visited Berlin to sign a protocol with Hitler in which the Mediterranean and Spain were recognized as an "area of special interest" to Fascist Italy, just like Central and Eastern Europe were for Nazi Germany.[475] Germany made it clear that Spain was in the Italian sphere of influence, and that Berlin was not going to interfere with that. If there were ever intra-allied competition, Italy had the upper hand by November: it was the main provider of aid to the Nationalists.[476] According to Whealey (1989), "as part of the Axis agreement, Hitler gave Mussolini priority in Spain."[477] Fascist ideological presence was bigger than the Nazi one, partly due to the presence of monarchists and pro-Fascist Falange within Franco's camp, and thanks to the work of Bonaccorsi.[478] There was therefore no need for further expansion of assistance to troop support to compete with Berlin. Moreover, Germany made it clear that it would not further escalate assistance. In December, Admiral Canaris wasn't sure that Germany could send military forces to Spain. In January Goering confirmed that "(we Germans) cannot send a full division" to Spain other than the Condor Legion.[479] This did not divert Italy from its path of escalation to direct support, further suggesting that other mechanisms were at play.

[475] October Protocol, DDI V, n. 273, 23/10/36.
[476] Coverdale 1977, 146.
[477] Whealey 1989, 76.
[478] Coverdale 1977, 130.
[479] Minutes of meeting at Palazzo Venezia, USSME F-6, b. 328, 14/01/37.

The consequences of direct intervention (January 1937-April 1939)

By the beginning of 1937, Italy was a belligerent in the Spanish civil war, even though its intervention was not sanctioned by the international community.[480] General Pariani, chief of staff of the army, instructed Roatta that Italian troops should have a direct impact on the battlefield, affecting the pace of Franco's offensives.[481] The CTV was envisaged as an assault force which could carry out rapid offensives called "Guerra celere", the Italian equivalent of the much more successful German blitzkrieg.[482] Second, Pariani instructed that the rebels' strategy had to focus on the lines of (a) Teruel-Valencia, to separate Catalonia from the rest; (b) Sigüenza-Guadalajara, to isolate Madrid; and (c) Malaga, to gain a base in the Mediterranean.[483] In fact, the Italians were able to partly implement this plan. The CTV won an early success by rapidly conquering Malaga on February 8.

However, the myth of Italian forces as invincible shock troops was shattered in March 1937, when the International Brigades defeated the CTV in the battle of Guadalajara, during the fourth offensive on Madrid. This surprising defeat has been blamed on Roatta's poor planning, the lack of coordination between Italian forces and the Nationalist offensive in Jarama, and bad weather, which impeded coordinated action of the aviation and ground forces which was essential for "guerra celere." The news of Guadalajara resonated throughout Europe as it was the first defeat of a Fascist power.[484] The defeat vindicated Franco's approach to the conflict

[480] For the reason why the Italian intervention was not punished, see Carson 2018, 100..
[481] USSME, F-18, b. 5.
[482] Alonso, Kramer, and Rodrigo 2019, 59; Coverdale 1975, 207; Saz and Tusell 1981, 42.
[483] ASME F-18, b. 5; Rovighi and Stefani 1992, doc. 35.
[484] Coverdale 1975, 256.

as a piecemeal war of "limpieza",[485] and ruined the CTV's reputation as an offensive spearhead.[486] The defeat only increased Mussolini's interest in ensuring a victory for Franco. His international reputation had suffered a significant blow. The archives of the Duce's personal office contain a large folder with excerpts from all the major international newspapers, describing the defeat as a major blunder by the Italian expeditionary corps.[487] The defeat was all the more burning for Mussolini as it came at the hand of the International Brigades, which included many Italians who had fled the country after he took power. It even caused some domestic unrest, with strikes taking place in Italy for the first time in years.[488]

To erase the shame of this event, and re-establish Fascist hegemony over the Western Mediterranean, Guadalajara had to be avenged by ensuring the triumph of Franco's forces with Italian support, whatever the cost. That is, while Italian support had previously been tied to a rapid conclusion of the war, now Mussolini threw his weight behind Franco indefinitely. The CTV went through a five-month restructuring period to make the corps more compatible and integrated within the Nationalist army.[489] The CTV command was reshuffled, with the removal of Roatta in favor of general Ettore Bastico; one third of the troop contingent was substituted with new recruits; several divisions were merged and inserted within the Nationalist army's ranks; and for several months, the CTV did not take part in frontline battles.[490] The Aviazione Legionaria, which partook in the infamous bombing of Guernica in April 1937, and the Navy instead remained active. The CTV re-entered in action near the summer, and remained in the

[485] It is claimed that Franco deliberately refrained from attacking in coordination with the CTV, to increase the chance of a defeat and to reestablish his hegemony vis-à-vis foreign forces. This claim is disputed in the historical literature Coverdale 1977, 256; De Felice 1981, 397; Rodrigo 2016..

[486] Wartime jokes within the rebel army gave the CTV initials new meanings, such as 'Cuando Te Vas' ("when you leave") or "Corren Tutto Veloce" ("retreating at full speed"). See Rodrigo 2019, 97.

[487] ACS, Segreteria Particolare del Duce-Carteggio Riservato, b. 72.

[488] De Felice 2019, 408.

[489] De Felice 2019, 408; ACS, SPD-CR, b. 72.

[490] Montanari 2007, vol. III.2.1: Il Periodo Fascista, 490; Rovighi and Stefani 1993, vol. 2.

Iberian Peninsula until the end of the war, contributing to the campaigns in the North (1937), Aragon (1937), the Ebro river (1938), and Catalonia (1939). However, when Mussolini requested that the CTV be deployed again as a spearhead, the Caudillo dismissed his demands, knowing that his patron had no credible alternatives but to keep his commitment to Spain until the final victory.[491] Moreover, Franco could dismiss the Italian attempts at Fascistizing Spain: on April 20, 1937, he issued the Decree of Unification, merging Falangist and traditionalist militias into one party—Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS. A façade version of Fascist militia, this organization's ultimate loyalty rested with the Caudillo: he retained the power to pivot its state ideology away from Fascism if and when it would be necessary—as he did at the end of WWII.

However, even if Mussolini's goal to quickly end the war was not achieved, this does not disprove Support Escalation Theory. In fact, the argument makes no claims about the appropriateness of escalation to direct support or its likelihood of success. It only suggests that sponsors feel compelled to send combat forces when they perceive high costs of delaying battlefield action and low proxy effectiveness. It could well be that these perceptions are misplaced or not corresponding to reality. It could also be that the sponsor wrongly regards its own forces are more effective than the recipient's. This latter point likely applies to Fascist Italy in 1936-37: Mussolini, based on the successful Ethiopian campaign, believed that Italian Legionnaires could quickly decide the outcome of the Spanish war. [492] The perceived closing window likely pushed him and his advisors to rely on past experience as heuristic, without pondering other factors such as the difference between the Abyssinian and the Spanish theater, the nature of the combatant forces, and the features of a civil war as opposed to an international

[491] Coverdale 1975, 335.
[492] Coverdale 1977, 175.

one—as Franco did not cease to repeat.[493] None of this is inconsistent with the argument: in early December 1936, Mussolini believed that the closing window required the direct action of Fascist forces, and acted accordingly. He was wrong, but he did not know that yet.

[493] Cantalupo 1948; Vaquero Peláez 2007.

The first invasion of Ukraine: Escalation of Russian involvement in the Donbas War

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, Russia carried out an unprovoked attack against Ukraine, marking the start of a full-scale interstate war which rages on at the time of writing. In the days before the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin laid the groundwork for the assault by recognizing the independence of the self-proclaimed People's Republics in Donetsk and Luhansk, the two separatist entities that had been fighting the Kyiv government since 2014, and by pledging to defend them against alleged—and unfounded—attacks by the central government.[494]

The events of 2022 represent the culmination of an eight-year-long proxy relationship between Russia and the separatist entities of eastern Ukraine. Since the uprising in 2014, which Russia abetted, the Donetsk People's Republic (Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika, or DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (Luhanskaya Narodnaya Respublika, or LNR) have depended on Moscow for military and economic assistance. According to estimates, the two republics cost Russia around 1 million euros a year in subsidies.[495]

However, in the first year of the Donbas rebellion, Russian assistance went even further. In the summer of 2014, regular Russian army forces crossed the border into Ukraine, carrying out a combined arms operation in support of separatists against the Ukrainian army. Russian forces

[494] Spatafora and Rauta 2022.
[495] von Twickel 2020, 58.

defeated the Ukrainian army at the battle of Ilovaisk, forcing Kyiv to sign the Minsk Agreement of 5 September 2014. Between 2015 and 2020, Ukraine and the separatists "signed more than 40 ceasefire agreements" [496] and the Russian armed forces "participate[d] actively in the fighting… even in moments of ceasefire."[497] Hence, in 2014 Russia was already an active belligerent in Ukraine. The focus of this chapter is on the Kremlin's decision to escalate assistance to the Donbas rebels from indirect to direct support during that year.

Logic of case selection

The case is appealing for two reasons. First, the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine has had a massive impact on European security and is at the root of the first major interstate conflict in the European continent since 1945, which makes it a valuable case to study. The conflict fought between the central government in Kyiv and pro-Russian separatist groups since 2014 represents the most violent war in Europe since the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Up until 24 February 2022, it recorded more than 35,000 casualties between civilians and combatants, including more than 14,000 deaths.[498] Almost half of the prewar population of 3.8 million left the separatist-controlled Donbas areas after over the course of the conflict.[499]

Second, the Donbas War represents a hard case for theory testing.[500] At first sight, the Russian role in Ukraine in 2014 blurs the line between direct and indirect support through the use of hybrid means: it started with the use of "little green men" (i.e., unmarked Russian soldiers) in Crimea, then moved to supporting rebellion in Donetsk and Luhansk, and turned again to troop

[496] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.
[497] Author's interview with Simon Schlegel 2023.
[498] International Crisis Group 2022; UNHCR 2017.
[499] Roth and Sauer 2022; von Twickel 2020, 58.
[500] Seawright and Gerring 2008, 294.

incursions in the summer. This pattern seems to suggest that (1) Russia started the war directly with troop intervention in Crimea, which would make it impossible to study the transition from indirect to direct support; and (2) it is difficult to set clear demarcation lines between indirect and direct forms of assistance in this specific war. This chapter will seek to rebut these arguments by showing that (1) the events surrounding the Crimea annexation have little to do with the phenomenon of external support in conflict, as they in fact involved little fighting; and (2) it is indeed possible to identify an initial period in which Russia supported separatist groups indirectly in the Donbas (Spring 2014) and a later point in which Russian forces intervened (August 2014).

Overview of chapter and results

Why did Russia send its regular armed forces to fight in the Donbas? This is puzzling if we consider that the Kremlin wanted to avoid a full-scale conflict in Ukraine, and that the Russian military strategy and doctrine of the time favored the use of proxy actors over direct intervention.[501] The theory of external support escalation allows to explain the events of mid-2014. The initial rebellion in the Donbas, emboldened by the secession of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014 and instigated by Russian agents and thugs, suffered significant battlefield defeats when Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko launched an offensive as part of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in July 2014, which threatened to cut off rebel-held areas from their Russian backers, making additional weapons transfers impossible. Seeing the impeding threat of a rebel collapse, which would have meant the defeat of Russia's proxy strategy in Ukraine, Putin opted for the only form of assistance that could ensure an immediate reversal in battlefield

[501] Felgengauėr et al. 2019; Iszmayilov 2021; Allison 2014; DeBenedictis 2021.

developments before it was too late. A combination of poor proxy effectiveness and a closing window can therefore explain the shift to direct support in August 2014.

The aim of this chapter is to probe the validity of the theory on the case of the Donbas War.[502] Table 6.1 summarizes the values that the main variables of interest take for the periods under consideration. According to the theoretical framework, escalation would follow a change in war conditions, and in particular a negative conflict evolution for the recipient. Escalation to direct support would only take place when the costs of delaying battlefield action are high, but the recipient is perceived as too ineffective as a proxy to carry out such action.

[502] Calling the Donbas conflict a civil war is contested in the literature. The political science literature would refer to this as a civil war because a proportion of the population initially under the sovereignty of one government rebelled to that government's authority. See Balcells and Kalyvas 2014; Cederman and Vogt 2017; Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer 2003. However, scholars of the post-Soviet world tend to refer to this as an interstate conflict or, more nuancedly, a "delegated interstate war" because Russia is regarded as the main actor behind the Donbas uprisings (Hauter 2019, 90). However, this is not a unanimous position even amongst area studies scholars. Arel and Driscoll, scholars of Ukrainian politics, argue that "the dynamics of the armed conflict in Donbas were initially consistent with those of a civil war in the social science meaning of the term – not in how Russia used the term in its state propaganda – and that considering the Eastern Donbas conflict as a civil war had analytical utility in the pre-2022 war period." (Arel and Driscoll 2022, 2.). Moreover, the term "the Ukrainian civil war" is in itself politically loaded as it is seen as giving legitimacy to Russian actions to protect Russian-speakers in the region, a statement which could ultimately be used to justify the invasion of 2022. To avoid this controversy, this chapter will refer to this conflict as the Donbas War as the emerging literature does. See Hauter 2019; Hauter and Wilson 2021; Arel and Driscoll 2022.

Table 6.1. *Escalation to direct support: Russia in the Donbas War.*

		Values of key variables		Outcome
Period	**Negative conflict evolution?**	**Perceived degree of proxy effectiveness**	**Costs of delaying battlefield action**	**Direct support?**
April-May 2014	**Yes**: Ukraine sets up Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO)	**High:** quick occupation of territory by separatists; presence of Russian citizens among rebels; apparent support for rebellion in DNR/LNR	**High:** first significant challenge to the rebellion in Donbas	**No**
August 2014	**Yes**: Reorganization of Ukrainian government, new ATO offensive	**Low:** separatists show weakness vs. the regular Ukrainian army; poor use of weapons; leadership replacement	**High:** quick loss of territory; Ukrainian forces close to sealing border with Russia	**Yes**

The chapter will also discuss alternative explanations to Support Escalation Theory. Three alternative arguments are discussed: first, if the escalation was a decision by a local theatre commander rather than an order from Putin and his aides. Second, whether Russia provided direct support to reward separatist leaders' loyalty rather than to make up for the latter's low effectiveness. Third, to what extent domestic electoral incentives determined the decision. The chapter will also consider the counter-argument that Russian troops were involved from the onset of the conflict, making the August 2014 not a change from indirect to direct support but just a simple increase in numbers of Russian troops already involved.

Studying the Russian intervention in the Donbas presents significant challenges in data collection. First, the conflict is very recent and still ongoing, given that the separatists are fighting alongside Russia against Ukraine at the time of writing.[503] This poses significant obstacles to the collection of primary evidence, either via archival work (documents are classified) or via fieldwork (in a country at war, travel to which is significantly restricted). Second, as the unit of analysis is the Russian Federation's leadership, evidence would need to be collected in Moscow by interviewing subjects who were involved in or well-informed of the decision-making process in the Kremlin in 2014. This appears impossible due to the restrictions on travel to Russia, the hostility of Russian actors to Western researchers in the current geopolitical environment, and the high sensitivity of the topic.

[503] In October 2022, President Putin unilaterally annexed the LNR and DNR into the Russian Federation after carrying out two illegal and unrecognized referenda in the two republics as well as in two other oblasts (regions) under Russian occupation (Zaporizhya and Kherson). Hence, separatists are now fighting as part of the Russian Federation.

Therefore, this chapter relies on evidence from reliable journalistic sources and the growing secondary literature on the topic, as well as background interviews with experts to corroborate the evidence. The available evidence is necessarily less rich and accurate than the one obtained from primary evidence such as archives. Nevertheless, it is still sufficient to make a plausible argument about the Kremlin's decision-making in the context of the Donbas War, and its decision to escalate from indirect to direct support. The existing evidence also allows to discuss selection variables such as the level of interests in the conflict and the risks of international escalation of the conflict, which must have fed into Russian decision-makers' calculus.

Testing the escalation theory on the Russian intervention in the Donbas

The origins of the Donbas War: onset and Russia's role

The immediate origins of the war in Donbas can be found in the Maidan revolution of 2013-2014 and in the subsequent instigation of rebellion and separatism by Russia in Ukraine's southeastern regions.[504] The seizure of Crimea by Russia was also an important factor, but it will be skipped for now, and discussed in a later section of the chapter.

Protests in Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan Nazalezhnosti) began in November 2013, after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. Yanukovych, leader of the Russia-leaning Party of Regions (POR), signed instead an agreement with Putin to increase

[504] For detailed analysis on the origin of the conflict and the historical context, see Judah 2015; Kuzio 2017; Menon and Rumer 2018; Pleshakov 2017; Sakwa 2022; Toal 2019; Walker 2018; Zygar′ 2017. See also the author's interviews to Simon Schlegel and Oleg Ignatov. For an overview of the Maidan protests, see Smith 2022; Bachmann and Lyubashenko 2014..

economic ties between Ukraine and Russia.[505] The demonstrations lasted for months, and became increasingly violent after episodes of violence between protests and the Ukrainian special police forces, the Berkut.[506] This culminated in the killing of more than 100 protesters on 20 February.[507] The day after, Yanukovych and the opposition signed an agreement, in the presence of EU and Russian representatives, in which the President agreed to restore the constitution of 2004, form a new coalition government, hold early elections, and not institute a state of emergency.[508] However, that very night, Yanukovych fled Kyiv. After two days, the parliament voted to impeach Yanukovych due to his absence from duty at a time of national crisis, and removed him from office.

While the events that led to the ousting of Yanukovych advanced in Kyiv, political protests started to take place in Ukraine's southeastern regions, inhabited by significant proportions of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians.[509] The political change heavily impressed the people in the Donbas, and built on longer-term grievances against the Kyiv government. The Donbas had a strong sense of regional pride, shaped by its political history as the industrial heartland of Soviet Ukraine, as highlighted in the following interview excerpt:

> "The right definition of the Donbas is that of 'old industrial region.' Like Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle upon Tyne… For 70 years the official Soviet propaganda developed this image of industrial workers as the excellent, the best social group in a

[505] Freedman 2014a, 20; Author's interview with Nigel Gould-Davies 2023.
[506] Wood et al. 2016, xii.
[507] Ibid.; Katchanovski 2016; Risch 2022.
[508] Freedman 2019, 77. Notably, the Russian representative did not sign the agreement, unlike the EU counterparts: this would allow Moscow to place blame on the West when the situation precipitated into violence in the following weeks (Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.).
[509] There is a difference between ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians who speak Russian. According to a 2001 census, the Donbas regions hosted a sizeable minority of ethnic Russians and a majority of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Ethnic Ukrainians formed 58% of the population of Luhansk Oblast and 56.9% of Donetsk Oblast. ethnic Russians form the largest minority, accounting for 39% and 38.2% of the two oblasts respectively. According to the same census, Russian is the main language of 74.9% of residents in Donetsk Oblast and 68.8% in Luhansk Oblast. See State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001b. In Crimea, on the other hand, ethnic Russians were a majority, representing more than 60% of the population according to a 2001 census, the last before the Russian occupation. See State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001a.

> socialist society. So, the locals [in the Donbas] felt extremely important and they internalized this idea that their region is the most important in Ukraine and maybe in the Soviet Union, after Moscow and Leningrad… They always exploited the idea that Donbas is very special, that the people there are hardworking while other parts of Ukraine are rural, lazy, and backwards."[510]

The political needle of the region veered more towards Moscow than towards Brussels.[511] The two oblasts were inhabited mostly by Russian-speaking Ukrainians with sizeable Russian minorities.[512] Between 1997 and 2004, the pro-Russia POR became the dominant party in Eastern Ukraine by channeling social discontent to regionalist protests, demanding more autonomy from Kyiv. Yanukovych himself came from Donetsk, and Ukraine's southeastern region constituted his political homeland.[513] Moreover, from an economic standpoint, the coal-mining region of Donbas—in serious decline since the collapse of the USSR—was heavily dependent on trade with Russia and on subsidies from the central government, both of which were threatened by the increase in trade with the EU and the upcoming liberalization as part of EU Association Agreement.[514] Hence, pre-existing ethno-political and economic factors interacted with the news of violence coming out of Kyiv as well as with the removal of Yanukovych to generate the environment for protests.

[510] Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.
[511] In a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in November 2013, 39.7% of all Ukrainians polled said that they would vote "yes" to the agreement, while 35.1% would vote "no." In the eastern regions of Ukraine that included Donetsk and Luhansk, only 18.4% said they would vote "yes," while 55.2% would vote "no." By contrast, when asked how they would vote in a referendum on whether or not Ukraine should join the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, a total of 40.8% of all Ukrainians polled said they would vote "yes," while only 33.1% would vote "no." In the southeastern regions, 64.5% would vote "yes," while only 10.9% would vote "no". See Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2013.
[512] See footnote 4.
[513] Matsuzato 2017, 175. In the 2012 general elections, the last ones before the Maidan uprisings, the POR obtained 65.09% of the votes in Donetsk Oblast and 57.06% of votes in Luhansk Oblast.
[514] Zhukov 2016, 1.

The first mass anti-Maidan, pro-Russian protests in Donetsk city took place on 1 March 2014. It was initially a POR-led rally, but it was "hijacked by the more radical activist Pavel Gubarev", who attempted to have himself named "people's governor," but failed to replicate the successful takeover of the Crimean parliament of 27 February.[515] Similar protests happened in Luhansk the day after. However, the conditions were not sufficient to generate a spontaneous armed uprising. Moreover, there were no widespread calls for secession. Separatist sentiment was not diffused at that time either. In fact, one of the last polls taken in the region after the first episodes of violence but before it became inaccessible shows limited support for pro-Russian separatism:

> "18.1% of Donetsk and 24.2% of Luhansk support the recent armed seizures of administrative buildings in the Donbas region, while surrounding provinces overwhelmingly disapprove of the current situation. 72% of Donetsk and 58.3% of Luhansk residents disapprove of the current actions. Roughly 25% in the Donbas region said they would attend secessionist rallies in favor of joining Russia."[516]

By and large, people in Eastern Ukraine wanted to keep the country as a unitary state rather than see it fragmented. As one of the interviewees put it, anti-Kyiv resentment in the Donbas "was not separatist or secessionist, because the main goal of local elites was to take power in Kyiv… Actually, when talking about the competition between political elites in Ukraine, it's less about East against West, but rather about competition between two industrial conglomerates in eastern Ukraine… between Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk."[517] The only ones who were interested in secession were marginal actors from both the left-most and the right-most fringes of the political spectrum, who however did not have significant backing. However, in the aftermaths of Maidan, with the POR in disarray after the departure of Yanukovych,

[515] von Twickel 2020, 59.
[516] Babiak 2014; Freedman 2014a, 37.
[517] Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.

"these fringe characters seized their opportunity to take over power in cities."[518] In doing so, they joined forces with Russia.

We must therefore take Russia into the equation, and discuss Russian interests in Ukraine. In 2014, Russia was seeking to create a Eurasian Customs Union, later renamed the Eurasian Economic Union.[519] In that context, the European Union prosed a significant threat: "the EU, more than Russia, offered to post-communist countries the possibility of a transformational economic effect."[520] The Eurasian Economic Union would have been stillborn without Ukraine's participation, and Ukraine could not join both the EU and Eurasian Union due to incompatibility of standards and rules.[521]

But the economic story was also perceived through geopolitical lenses. According to the narrative perpetrated by Putin's regime, the collapse of the Soviet Union represented "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."[522] Putin placed a role for himself in attempting to restore Russia's hegemony over the post-Soviet world, starting with the Eurasian Economic Union that could provide some compensation for the loss of the Soviet Union.[523] In that context, the threat posed by the EU was even stronger than that presented by NATO, which dominates Russia's narrative in the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Economic liberalization and closer ties to the West tended to engender political protests for a more democratic government, as had happened with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine itself in 2004, the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005.[524] Putin was "deeply

[518] Ibid.
[519] Freedman 2014a; Zhukov 2016.
[520] Freedman 2014b, 17.
[521] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023; Freedman 2019, 67.
[522] Bigg 2005.
[523] Freedman 2014a, 10.
[524] Mitchell 2012.

troubled by the possibility of these colour revolutions being imitated in Russia."[525] Hence, Ukraine's choice to sign the Association Agreement with the EU was seen in Moscow as part of a zero-sum, geopolitical context between East and West.[526]

Russia actively pushed Yanukovych away from signing the Association Agreement using a mixture of carrots—an alternative agreement within the Eurasian Union, cheaper gas prices and an immediately available loan—and sticks—threats of land grabbing and possibly personal blackmail.[527] When the Maidan protests started, Russia played both an advisory role to Yanukovych and a more covert subversive role.

Russia portrayed the change in government in February as a coup d'état. Moscow's position was that "the US and the EU had connived in the illegal overthrow of Yanukovych, which was led by fascistic elements."[528] The detail of what happened in Kiev from 20 to 24 February does not support these allegations, but this did not matter as Putin's regime felt directly threatened: "a new government with a Western orientation represented a serious defeat, possibly fatal to [Putin's] long-term ambitions."[529] This fed into a broader narrative, developed by the Kremlin since the Kosovo War of 1999, that the EU and NATO were encroaching into Russia's sphere

[525] Freedman 2014b, 16.

[526] Interestingly, the representation of Ukrainian domestic politics as a geopolitical context only originated in the 2004 elections:

> "Ukrainian 'political technologists' (campaign managers) presented the election as a geopolitical competition, but they did so for electoral purposes. They turned a domestic political issue into a geopolitical issue (about the divisions of Ukraine, its place in the East or the West, and Europe versus Russia as the main contending patrons of Ukraine) … After this campaign, Russo-Ukrainian relations changed completely: elites from both sides came to look at their relations through geopolitical lenses." (Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.)

[527] Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski suggested that Putin made these threats, based on evidence of the organized corruption of Yanukovich's government. The strategy was also repeated with Moldova, and was only partially successful: Moldova still signed up the Association Agreement with the EU in Vilnius, whereas Ukraine did not. Judah 2014.

[528] Freedman 2014a, 20; Trenin 2014.

[529] Freedman 2014a, 20.

of influence, engaging in subversion and regime change—a narrative that Putin himself presented to NATO's leaders in 2007.[530]

Having failed in its attempt to stop the Maidan process, the Kremlin moved to delegitimize the new Ukrainian government and to create a competing executive. Yanukovych fled to Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city and the biggest Russian-speaking city, where Russian and Ukrainian "political technologists" (that is, bureaucrats and campaign managers) organized a congress of the deputies and politicians from Southeastern Ukraine, mostly members of Yanukovych's own POR. The goal of this meeting was to unite the opposition to Maidan and to establish a rival government to the pro-Western one that was established in Kyiv after Yanukovych's flight.[531] This alternative government could be used to counter the former's legitimacy, using it as leverage in a prospective reconciliation government. At the meeting, however, Yanukovych did not get the support from his own party cadres. The POR scolded the former President for his actions during the Maidan protests, and its leaders were not ready to mount a challenge against the central government and create a constitutional crisis.[532] Yanukovych then fled to Russia via Crimea.

As the attempt to challenge the new Kyiv government with an alternative executive that could claim legitimacy over the entirety of Ukraine failed, Russia moved to a different strategy: foment rebellion and separatism in the southeastern regions. This was first set in motion in the Crimean Peninsula (as the chapter will discuss more in detail later).

[530] Putin 2007.
[531] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.
[532] Arel and Driscoll 2022, 126–127; Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.

After Putin obtained "the consolation prize of Crimea" (which certainly was a good consolation, as his domestic approval skyrocketed), a paradox emerged: he could have lost "the larger prize of the rest of Ukraine."[533] Crimea, being a peninsula with a very thin land connection to the mainland and a different ethnic composition from that of other oblasts, was physically and symbolically separate from the rest of Ukraine. The rest of the country, led by the post-Maidan government, could continue in its process of integration with Western institutions. The occupation of Crimea, in other words, did not solve Putin's fundamental problems. It was necessary to continue fomenting separatism in southeastern Ukraine to keep Kyiv from continuing its approach to Brussels.

It was under these conditions that, between late March and early April, Russian agents moved to cities around southeastern Ukraine, such as Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Donetsk and Luhansk. The playbook was similar to the one that had been staged masterfully in Crimea: Russian agitators would infiltrate protests, or initiate them, and persuade demonstrators to take over institutional buildings. There is ample evidence of Russian involvement at these early stages prior to fighting—which could be characterized as external support already, but rests outside of the scope of this dissertation as it did not take place in the context of armed conflict yet. Kremlin advisors Vladislav Surkov and Sergei Glazyev personally directed efforts to coordinate and organize protests at the beginning of March 2014, turning them into a pro-Russian separatist movement.[534] In 2016, leaked conversations from the spring of 2014 showed how Surkov was in direct contact with Russian agents in various Ukrainian cities, instructing them to take over city halls and regional parliaments.[535] Statements from participants of the time also confirm the presence of foreigners. According to Ukrainian oligarch Serhiy Taruta,

[533] Freedman 2014a, 22.
[534] Risch 2022, 26.
[535] DFRLab 2016; UA Position 2016; Koshkina 2014.

who bribed separatists to withdraw from Donetsk town hall, "as soon as that agreement was clear, 'green men' came to Donetsk from Sloviansk and changed the mind of the Donetsk rebels."[536] In another anecdote, some protesters were seen burning the scarfs of local football team Shakhtar Donetsk, prompting witnesses to conclude: "Locals would never do this." [537]

Hence, Russian actors were certainly involved at the onset of protests in the Donbas. This is not to say that local elements were not actively involved or that there were no pre-existing grievances, as discussed above.[538] In fact, the local elites in the Donbas played a key role, as they were more willing to generate chaos and challenge the Kyiv government through violent means than their counterparts in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa. In these three cities, elites decided not to seek armed confrontation with Kyiv, and the post-Maidan government was able to send politicians to de-escalate the situation and rein in the violent protests.[539] In Donetsk and Luhansk, coal-mining regions which "for two decades experienced economic depression, and were full of many chronically unemployed people with little to lose and a lot to gain", fringe actors with separatist, pro-Russian tendencies were able to emerge.[540] As Risch (2022) puts it, "[i]n a place where the already fragile economy was threatened with the loss of

[536] Bukkvoll 2016, 18.
[537] Smith 2022, 324.
[538] Katchanovski 2016.
[539] Arel and Driscoll 2022; Author's interview with Simon Schlegel 2023.
[540] An interview source reveals how these fringe actors took power:

> "For instance, take Igor Bezler, the leader of insurgents in the big city of Horlivka, in Donetsk agglomeration. He became quite famous in summer 2014. But before he was no name at all. I met some locals from Horlivka and I asked them the same question: did you know Bezler before? They said no. What was his occupation? He was director of a cemetery in the city. Yet, in 2014, he came to the local Police Department in his native city and he declared that he was a colonel from the Russian FSB, and starting from that moment, police had to follow his orders. The police officers at the time were absolutely lost and disappointed after what happened in Kyiv and then in Crimea. They did not resist. And so such ambitious adventures like Bezler got their chance to make a career. Bezler proclaimed himself a mayor of the city with 400,000 inhabitants. And of course, other adventurers were looking for social advancement. 300 or 400 volunteers joined Bezler" (Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.)

Russian markets and suppliers, and where the Party of Regions had let them down, who could the people of the Donbas turn to? At least for some, they could turn to Russia."[541]

This allowed Russian agents to work with local actors, thereby excluding a role for direct intervention by Russian troops, unlike in Crimea. Russia's role was also essential in the escalation to armed confrontation. Given the relatively underwhelming support for separatism, as shown in polls, "Moscow switched to a 'Plan B' scenario after its initial tactic to subvert and/or overthrow local Ukrainian authorities through local unarmed protests failed to work." [542] In April 2014, Russian agents acted with indigenous separatists to seize administrative buildings and other facilities in the Donbas.[543] Perhaps the most important Russian agent in the Donbas was Igor Girkin, known by the call name "Strelkov" ("the shooter"). Strelkov was a former Russian military intelligence colonel who had taken part in the Transnistrian insurgency in the 1990s as well as in the occupation of Crimea in February-March 2014. According to interview sources, Girkin "moved to Donbas because he expected to get a position in the administration of Crimea, but he got nothing."[544]

Strelkov seized control over the town of Sloviansk on 12 April, leading a commando of 50 to 60 volunteers from Crimea. In occupying the town, Girkin also captured significant amounts of arms and ammunition, which proved "decisive for turning the protests into an armed

[541] Risch 2022, 28. According to Sikorski, Polish intelligence became aware of Russian calculations on "what provinces would be profitable to grab": Zaporizhia, Dnepropetrovsk and Odessa (Judah 2014.). This further reflects the economic unviability of the Donbas, which paradoxically made the region a good place for pro-Russian separatism to take hold.
[542] von Twickel 2020, 61.
[543] Käihkö 2021a.
[544] Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.

struggle."[545] The day after, these occupying forces opened fire on Ukrainian paratroopers and security services (SBU) officers, leaving "one officer dead and two more injured."[546]

The occupation of Sloviansk was the spark that provoked an armed response from Ukraine. The Ukrainian state's show of weakness in Crimea (watching helplessly as the region broke away and joined Russia) meant that for separatists "everything was possible, just everything."[547] After seeing the success in Crimea, Putin apparently was hoping the same would happen in other oblasts of Ukraine.[548] However, when separatists seized Sloviansk, Ukraine was determined not to let the region slip away like Crimea. On 13 April 2014, the Ukraine Security Council decided to launch an Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) to resist pro-Russian separatists in the East. The ATO commenced on 15 April.[549] Instead of another silent separation and annexation, the Donbas question turned into armed confrontation between pro-Russian proxy forces and the Ukrainian army.

Russian support in the first phase of the war (April-June 2014): escalation within the boundaries of indirect support

Instead of a repetition of the events in Crimea, with "people's governors" asking "mother Russia" to welcome the territories into the arms the Russian Federation while Kyiv watched helplessly, Putin found himself supporting the separatist insurgency he had fomented in the fight against an unexpected reaction by the Ukrainian state. In the weeks following the start of

[545] Käihkö 2021a, 39; von Twickel 2020, 60; Katchanovski 2016, 473.
[546] von Twickel 2020, 61.
[547] Girkin 2017; Käihkö 2021a, 36.
[548] Wood et al. 2016, 17.
[549] Office of the President of Ukraine 2014; Käihkö 2021a, 39.

the ATO, the conflict steadily escalated, as Ukrainian government troops advanced while the separatists tried to establish themselves in the Donbas. This represents, in the words of Support Escalation Theory, a negative conflict evolution.

What kind of assistance did Putin provide in light of the Ukrainian response and the beginning of open fighting? Recalling Support Escalation Theory, the two variables determining the form of escalation are: (1) the sponsor's perceived costs of delaying battlefield action; and (2) the sponsor's perception of proxy effectiveness.

The first variable measures the sponsor's perceived costs of delaying battlefield action and forgoing a closing window of opportunity. The beginning of the ATO could jeopardize Russia's proxy strategy. At first, the Ukrainian army was in disarray, so several paramilitary units, which had been formed during or in the aftermaths of Euromaidan, stepped up in an attempt to contain the "separatist plague" in the Donbas.[550] Right Sector forces attacked a separatist checkpoint in Sloviansk on 20 April 2014. In May, the special police battalion Azov, organized by the neo-Nazi Social-National Assembly with help of the Radical Party, was involved in an attack in Mariupol on 9 May 2014. Around the same time, the special police battalion Dnipro carried out a similar deadly assault in Krasnoarmiisk.[551] This series of attacks represented the first, significant challenge to the rebellion in Donbas.

The Ukrainian state, too, was starting to show resolve to end the rebellion. Despite Kyiv's "evident (and admitted) loss of control over the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk", separatist attempts were crushed in other regions of Ukraine, some peacefully, others more violently.[552]

[550] Käihkö 2021a, 40; Mikheieva 2022.
[551] Katchanovski 2016, 48.
[552] Freedman 2014a, 23.

In Kharkiv, the seizure of the city's administrative buildings ended in failure as local elites joined forces with special police units to isolate separatist leaders, who surrendered without fighting.[553] In Odesa, violent clashes between police and pro-Maidan demonstration on the one hand, and pro-Russian demonstrators on the other resulted in more than 43 deaths on the pro-separatist side, and the city remained under Ukrainian control.[554]

These events illustrate the desire by the government of Ukraine to stop the separatist insurgency, which pointed at the possibility that the initial gains made by the separatists in early spring could quickly be reversed. While we lack smoking gun evidence, the events likely created a window of vulnerability in the Kremlin, influencing the calculus of support: the initial provision of assistance (in the form of agitators and political advisers) was insufficient. Additional support needed to be provided, and quickly, before the ATO could reclaim the territories lost to separatists.

However, the second variable (proxy effectiveness), limited Putin's and his advisors' concerns about affecting the battlefield directly. Despite the unexpected reaction by the Ukrainian state, the Kremlin-backed separatist forces appeared quite capable of holding their embryonal territories. First, the recipient expressed quite a high degree of combat effectiveness. On 17 April, soldiers from the 25th Airborne Brigade attempted to capture Kramatorsk, but were surrounded by local separatists and surrendered their equipment.[555] Following the occupation of Sloviansk, Russian agents continued acting with indigenous separatists to seize

[553] Arel and Driscoll 2022; Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.
[554] Smith 2022, 350.
[555] Käihkö 2021a, 40.

administrative buildings and other facilities in Donetsk and Luhansk, while also encouraging subversive actions and protests in other major cities in Donbas such as Mariupol.[556]

Commanders such as Girkin were instrumental in uniting the separatists, who initially were operating as separate entities, into a more coherent command structure within the LNR and DNR. Rebels not only captured police and SBU stations, but increasingly used arms and ammunition brought across the border. One example is the rebels' use of RPG-26 rocket-propelled-grenades in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.[557] The use of RPGs enabled the downing of a Ukrainian Mi-8 helicopter and an An-2 plane at the Kramatorsk airport.[558] Separatists also proved able to exploit the blurring line between civilians and combatants, and to leverage the confusion that still reigned among Ukrainian forces concerning the nature of the insurgency: "They sent old women to meet Ukrainian military detachments, so Ukrainian troops never opened fire … up to 200 Ukrainian soldiers and officers were killed [through this strategy]."[559]

From the viewpoint of loyalty and willingness to follow Russia's goals, the separatists too seemed effective. First, the number of Russian citizens leading local bands facilitated interaction between recipient and sponsor. For instance, the fighting in Kramatorsk was led by GRU officer Sergei Dubinsky (call name "Khmury"), who was later linked to downing of civilian flight Malaysia Airlines MH-17 in July.[560] Russian citizens in positions of power were more likely to steer the separatist territories in the direction preferred by Moscow. On 11 May 2014, the self-proclaimed separatist leaders organized referenda in Donetsk and Luhansk, again following the Crimea playbook. It was claimed that 2,252,867 had voted in favour of self-rule,

[556] BBC 2014b.
[557] Remarks by Ukrainian Military Analyst Dmytro Tymchuck 2014; von Twickel 2020, 61.
[558] BBC 2014c.
[559] Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.
[560] von Twickel 2020, 62.

with 256,040 against, on a turnout of nearly 75%. A BBC report at the time noted that "the 89% 'yes' vote was in line with what had apparently been suggested in an intercepted call with the organisers and a Russian politician, but out of line with recent opinion polling in the region."[561] Following the results, Alexander Borodai, a Moscow-based political consultant, proclaimed the Donetsk People's Republic (or DNR) on 16 May 2022. According to the official of an international organization who worked with pro-Russian separatists, Borodai stated:

> "I am from Moscow. My first deputy was from Moscow. The power ministries were controlled by Muscovites, and defense minister Igor Strelkov (Igor Girkin) was also from Moscow. It was a little too blatant from a propaganda perspective."[562]

Local separatist strongman Valery Bolotov and Russian political consultant Marat Bashirov followed suit in proclaiming the Luhansk People's Republic (or LNR).[563] Hence, both combat performance and loyalty of the rebel groups to Moscow could be characterized as relatively high. This makes it less likely that Moscow could have concerns about proxy effectiveness.

While the separatist forces showed some strength, weaknesses appeared on the Ukrainian side. The ATO immediately got off to a bad start. After the loss of key cities and major equipment to rebels in April 2014, Ukrainian security forces focused on controlling big cities. Only volunteer battalions such as the Right Sector and the Azov Battalion carried out some offensive operations in the Donbas.[564] this passive approach continued throughout the summer. Kyiv did nothing to stop the separatist referenda on 11 May: "The separatists effectively arranged, conducted, and monitored the voting that gave legitimacy to their own political project."[565] As

[561] BBC 2014d; Katchanovski 2016. The referendum question in Donetsk read: "Do you support the creation of the Donetsk People's Republic?" This was ambiguous as there was no clarity as to whether this was a "republic" within Ukraine, just like the "Autonomous Republic of Crimea" had been for years, an independent territory, or a land to be annexed to Russia. See Smith 2022, 347.
[562] Author's Interview with Anonymous Official 2023.
[563] von Twickel 2020, 62.
[564] Arel and Driscoll 2022; Käihkö 2021b; Katchanovski 2016.
[565] Käihkö 2021a, 41.

a result, despite the high costs of delaying battlefield action, Russia's proxies appeared effective enough to muster their own forces and to hold off a weak Ukrainian army.

Given the values of the two variables (high costs of delaying battlefield action and high proxy effectiveness), Russia had no incentive to provide direct support to the separatists. On the other hand, they suggest that the sponsor would escalate to a different form of indirect support. Indeed, between April and July 2014, Russia limited itself to increasing indirect support in the form of weapons. The OSCE Monitoring Mission to Ukraine started reporting more and more instances of weapons crossing the border in their daily briefings: "mid-May to mid-June is also the time when most of the weaponry from Russia started coming in, as the OSCE noted a corresponding increase in the number and types of weapons used in the war."[566] The initial supplies were limited to guns and mortars, but then, when Ukraine began airborne operations such as the seizure of the Donetsk airport, Russia supplied insurgents with Igla man-portable air-defense systems, the Buk self-propelled, medium-range surface-to-air missile systems, and the Grad multiple rocket launching systems. These were very effective: "some Ukrainian helicopters were shot down with many casualties, including a military transport jet with Ukrainian paratroopers which was shut down in Lugansk Airport with 50 or 60 soldiers killed."[567]

[566] Author's Interview with Anonymous Official 2023. For an example, see the following report from 15 June 2014: "In Sukhodilsk (non-government controlled, 38km south-east of Luhansk), about 10km west of the border, between 01:01 and 02:42 on the morning of 14 June, an SMM long-range UAV spotted several military trucks travelling back and forth for two and a half hour between the main railway station, from which the tracks extend westwards towards Molodohvardiisk (non-government-controlled, 35km south-east of Luhansk) and eastwards to the border with the Russian Federation south-east of Izvaryne (non-government-controlled, 52km south-east of Luhansk), and a warehouse south-west of the station" (OSCE 2014).
[567] Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.

In the same period, Russia facilitated the flow of volunteer groups to separatist-held regions in Ukraine:

> "At the same time, some Russians also entered the scene. The first was Girkin, who came in early April to Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. The second were the so-called Don Cossacks from Rostov… This happened in early May. The next group of Russians was mainly from the North Caucasus, including Chechens and Ossetians, and also Abkhazians. These had experience of guerrilla warfare against Georgia."[568]

However, speaking of direct Russian troop intervention at this stage is exaggerated. Katchanovski suggests that "much of the evidence regarding direct Russian military intervention during this initial period was misrepresented or even fabricated."[569] Other sources contemporary to the events argue that Moscow did not send large numbers of troops – like in Crimea – to achieve its goals, but instead "deployed a limited number of agents in order to incite, support and protect local elites and paramilitaries."[570] While the presence of GRU officers, intelligence operatives and combat advisors appears indisputable, during the so-called "Spring Offensive" there were no Russian regular forces with a direct combat role: instead, Russia supported proxy forces in overtaking Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, "depriving Kyiv of nearly one-third of its territory."[571] It is true that 40,000 Russian troops were amassed near the Russia-Ukraine frontline, on occasion "engaging in exercises to demonstrate that they were ready to cross the border" as NATO satellite images revealed.[572] However, this does not go against the theoretical expectation. Those forces served as a deterrent and a demonstration of force, but they were not used in the months of April to June 2014 precisely because the battlefield outlook did not require their deployment.

[568] Ibid.
[569] Katchanovski 2016, 479–480.
[570] Galeotti 2014.
[571] Fox 2022, 6.
[572] Thompson 2014; Wood et al. 2016, xii; Freedman 2014a.

The ATO summer offensive and escalation to direct support (July-August 2014)

Later in 2014, a new series of events caused a new negative conflict evolution for the separatists. First, the post-Maidan process culminated in the election of a new President. The Ukrainian presidential election of 25 May 2014 was won by businessman and former minister Petro Poroshenko, who received 54.7% of votes. The issue of the insurgency in the east was central to the election: voting took place in the wake of a separatist attack on 22 May 2014, which resulted in the death of 16 Ukrainian army soldiers near Volnovakha.[573] In his victory speech, Poroshenko vowed to continue the military operations by the Ukrainian government forces to end the armed insurgency, claiming: "The anti-terrorist operation cannot and should not last two or three months. It should and will last hours."[574] With Poroshenko's election, the post-Maidan transition in Kyiv was over, and the Ukrainian army could focus fully on the ATO. On 26 May, the day after the election, government forces took the rebel-occupied Donetsk airport using aircraft and helicopters. Ill-prepared separatist fighters suffered many casualties.[575]

After a month of preparation, the ATO began a new offensive on 1 July 2014. This can be seen in separatist accounts of the time as well: according to Girkin/Strelkov, who by then had been appointed the DNR's minister of defense, in late May the Ukrainian army "found the commander-in-chief, and they began to carry out his orders. In late April or early May they did not fight against us… from that moment, with international recognition, we began to suffer defeat and tolerate it to this day. [576] According to Strelkov, Russia's biggest mistake in the conflict consisted in recognizing Poroshenko as the legitimate representative of Ukraine, rather

[573] Katchanovski 2016, 48.
[574] Luhn and Walker 2014.
[575] Freedman 2014b, 16.
[576] The Insider and Bellingcat 2017.

than challenging the validity of the process and consequently on the ATO's legitimacy.[577] This was an early sign of a latent friction between separatist leaders and the Kremlin.

The Ukrainian army resumed its operations by attacking the strategically and symbolically relevant Sloviansk, which had been Girkin's headquarters since April. Rather than entering the city and engaging in street fighting, as they had done before with catastrophic results, Ukrainian forces resorted to indiscriminate shelling of the rebel-held area.[578] Girkin, after complaining about the lack of ammunition to counter the advance and despairing over the "lack of local support for separatism," fled the city on 5 July.[579] Ukrainian forces repossessed several other cities during the first week of July 2014, including Artemivsk, Kramatorsk, and Mariupol, and got closer to taking back control the Luhansk airport.[580]

How did the renewed ATO offensive change the Russian calculus of support? Once again, an analysis of the two theoretical variables allows to make analytical sense of the situation: the level of proxy effectiveness and the costs of delaying battlefield action. Let us start with the latter. At the time, the Kremlin likely developed the impression that the ATO was on the verge of overwhelming the separatists.

A visual comparison will facilitate an understanding of the predicament the separatists (and Russia) were in. Figure 6.3 shows the situation on the ground in late May 2014, when the rebels had overrun the majority of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.[581] The separatist-held territory (delimited by the red line) comprised the two main cities, Donetsk and Luhansk, but stretched

[577] Matsuzato 2017, 193; Matveeva 2018; Käihkö 2021a, 42; The Insider and Bellingcat 2017.
[578] Hladka and Shevchenko 2017, 115; Matsuzato 2017, 185; Käihkö 2021a, 43–44.
[579] Chalupa 2014; Käihkö 2021a, 42; The Insider and Bellingcat 2017; Girkin 2017.
[580] Fox 2022, 6.
[581] Euromaidan Press 2014.

as far as Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the north-west, Bilovodsk in the north-east, and Mariupol in the Azov Sea. The contested territory in red and white stripes indicates that the area under separatist control could potentially be even larger. Rebels controlled two portions of the Russia-Ukraine border, around Krasna Talivka in the north and Lysyche in the south: this allowed an easy and steady flow of Russian weapons, advisors and commanders into separatist territories, which allowed them to train, equip and lead the LNR and DNR forces.

Figure 6.3. *Map by the Information Analysis Center of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council showing the pattern of territorial control in the Donbas on 20 May 2014.*[582] *Separatist-held territory in red, delimited by a red line. Contested territory in red and white stripes. Areas under Ukrainian government control in blue and yellow.*



[582] Ibid. The map also indicates locations where the so-called referenda on independence were held, as well as checkpoints held by the separatists. I was unable to find the same map in English.

The map in Figure 6.4, depicting the situation on 11 July 2014, stands in stark contrast with Figure 6.3. The rebels had lost control of almost the entirety of Luhansk oblast, as well as the whole southern coast. The two red arrows indicate the bulk of the Ukrainian offensive at the time, pushing down from Sloviansk and pointing directly to Donetsk city. What was more striking was the pace at which these changes were taking place: the vast majority of territory was lost just in a matter of two weeks in July.[583] Furthermore, a closer look at Figure 6.4 reveals a new, worrying trend for the rebels and their backers: the Ukrainians army was advancing through the border between separatist-held territory and Russia. The southern border of Donetsk was already reconquered, all the way to Chervonopartizansk. A similar penetration was occurring in the north, near Stanytsia Luhanska. Experts close to the Kremlin at the time highlight the logic behind this maneuver:

> "Their tactic aimed to restore control over the border between Russia and Ukraine: if they closed the border, they would stop the flow of arms and volunteers to separatist territories. So, they would isolate the separatists and the conflict would be over." [584]

The high speed at which the separatists were losing territory was very visible to those operating on the ground, as testified by an anonymous official who was in the Donbas at the time of the events:

> "I remember that the Ukrainians were pushing from the north to the South, because we were often caught in the middle of the artillery duels. And they were also pushing from into Donetsk Oblast from West to east, in order to meet the other advancing axis on the connection between Donetsk and Luhansk. You could see that happening quite rapidly, as the Ukrainians made quite good progress in many areas. In 2-3 weeks they almost took back Donetsk… I think the Ukrainians almost managed to come down to the connection road think the city was between Luhansk and Donetsk. I remember once, when we were on that road, we saw a Ukrainian tank turning its barrel towards our direction. Of course, we then quickly turned back. It was physically visible that the

[583] Fox 2022; Freedman 2014a; Sutyagin 2015.
[584] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.

> Ukrainians were pushing very hard. And they made progress, with the little they had at the time."[585]

Hence, the impression in the Kremlin was likely resembling that of a closing window: given the pace of the Ukrainian offensive, it would not be long before the separatists ran out of territory or corridors for resupply. As Strelkov put it, "Donetsk and Luhansk cannot stand against the Ukrainian army alone."[586] This made immediate action to reverse the situation on battlefield a necessity: the costs of delay would have been too high, resulting in the potential end of Putin's design over Ukraine. According to one interviewee, "Putin understood that unless something was done quickly and swiftly, the separatist republics would be defeated."[587]

[585] Author's Interview with Anonymous Official 2023.
[586] Malyarenko in Cordell and Wolff 2016, 357.
[587] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.

Figure 6.4. *Map by the Information Analysis Center of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council showing the pattern of territorial control in the Donbas, as of 11 July 2014.*[588] *Separatist-held territory is delimited by a grey line. Contested territory in red and white stripes. Areas under Ukrainian government control in blue and yellow.*



To quickly close the capability gap, Russia could have provided additional weapons to the rebels, as it did before. However, this strategy was predicated on the belief that the recipient would be willing and able to pursue Russia's objectives, or in other words, on a high degree of proxy effectiveness. And the evidence we have does not suggest that this was the case. As previously mentioned, Russia first tried an escalation of support in the form of surface-to-air

[588] Euromaidan Press 2014. The map also indicates the direction of the ATO's attacks on 11 July, location of major battles, destroyed checkpoints, and separatist losses (red soldiers).

missile supplies after the battle for Donetsk Airport on 26 May.[589] Surface-to-air missiles made the skies more dangerous for Ukrainian military aircraft, but they proved insufficient to stop the ATO offensive. Deployment of these systems also caused an international scandal when a Russian BUK system launched form separatist territory shot down the civilian Malaysia Airlines flight MH-17 on 17 July, causing the deaths of all 298 passengers and crew.[590] This suggests that the separatist problems were deeper than a simple lack of appropriate equipment. As one interviewee put it:

> "This indicates the level of ineffectiveness held by insurgents: they thought that it was another Ukrainian military jet. They had no idea that the air space above Ukraine was used by international airlines. Because those people were extremely poor, they never took flights, they even had no idea that there are flights from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur passing through Donbas airspace."[591]

The following excerpts summarizes the reasons why separatist forces "struggled to cope" in the summer of 2014:

> "They lacked coherence, combining local agitators, militants who had learnt their trade in Chechnya and Georgia, and some Russian special forces. Coordination was often poor, and political leadership at times eccentric. Their methods alienated local people, and they used the sophisticated equipment with which they were provided recklessly. With Ukrainian forces becoming better organised, and prepared to deploy firepower more ruthlessly, they gave ground."[592]

Part of these issues emerged from poor human capital: the people that had been coopted into the LNR/DNR armies were uneducated groups with little to no military experience, who had failed in civilian life and were seeking new ways of improving their social status: as a study of pro-Russian volunteers puts it, "We are in fact speaking of people who are dissatisfied due to lack of professional fulfilment. A group like this could, and has, become the resource for

[589] Freedman 2014b, 16.
[590] Ibid., 48; von Twickel 2020, 60; Smith 2022, 351; Author's interview with Nigel Gould-Davies 2023.
[591] Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.
[592] Freedman 2014b, 15–16.

organizing internal conflict in Ukraine."[593] An interviewed official also described "local Ukrainian rebel formation members" as people who "often were improperly equipped and behaved unprofessionally."[594] In contrast, Ukrainian combatants "demonstrate[d] successful educational and professional strategies, availability of military and combat experience (from service in Soviet and Ukrainian armies, internal troops, law enforcement bodies, etc.)."[595] When the more professional Ukrainian army received appropriate instructions from its commanders—itself a consequence of Poroshenko's victory and the reorganization of command—this difference in human capital came to have direct battlefield impacts.

The Kremlin also had concerns with the DNR and LNR leadership. The lack of popular backing meant that the local leadership had trouble whipping up support: in fact, separatist leaders had "little credibility and were not taken seriously internationally or even locally."[596] This impacted their ability to recruit new combatants, requiring them to rely on foreign volunteers. According to an Armenian volunteer fighting for the separatists, "only some 20% of the separatist militia were Ukrainian" and the locals who did take part in fighting were "inexperienced and knew close-to-nothing in terms of how to deal with weaponry."[597]

Despite being very close to Russia, and often Russian citizens, these leaders appeared to have maximalist goals, seeking full and immediate independence. On the other hand, Russia's goal was not to seek independence for the separatists, but to exploit the threat of separatism to exert control over Ukrainian politics, thereby blocking any future Ukrainian attempts to join Western

[593] Mikheieva 2022, 78.
[594] Author's Interview with Anonymous Official 2023.
[595] Mikheieva 2022, 79.
[596] Freedman 2019, 110.
[597] Gasparian 2014.

institutions.[598] As one interviewee noted, "Russia did not recognize [the LNR and DNR] as independent state until February 21, 2022. … [Putin's] ambitions were to use control over the politics of the Donbas as a cat's paw into not only regional issues, but national politics as well, and effectively to exert a veto over Ukrainian politics, both domestic and foreign."[599] This conflicted with the overzealous attempts by separatist leaders to seek full independence.

Moreover, while being unable to use the equipment they had already received, these leaders kept pressing Moscow for more support. Borodai, the DNR's self-proclaimed Prime Minister, "threatened Russia with massive flows of civilian refugees if more support was not provided."[600] And separatist leaders had private interests that interfered with the consolidation of then rebellion: "The problem for Moscow was that leaders were all businessmen-criminals from different factions who were pursuing their own private gains, which reduced the efficiency of the operation and caused embarrassment."[601]

The Kremlin decided not to put up with this degree of insubordination, adventurism and collusion any longer. Hence, at the same time as the losses on the battlefield were taking place, significant leadership changes occurred in Donetsk and Luhansk.[602] Borodai resigned on 7 August, making room for Alexander Zakharchenko, "a local businessman turned activist", who would lead the DNR until his assassination in 2018.[603] Strelkov too resigned on August 12, whereas Bolotov "disappeared" from Luhansk on August 14, being replaced by Igor

[598] Bowen 2019.
[599] Author's interview with Nigel Gould-Davies 2023.
[600] Coyle 2017, 75; Käihkö 2021a, 43.
[601] Author's interview with Simon Schlegel 2023.
[602] It was in the context of leadership change that the Wagner PMC started operating in Ukraine. Wagner personnel is believed to be responsible for the assassination of LNR Minister of Defense, Aleksandr Bednov; the killing of Aleksei Mozgovoi, the leader of the Prizrak Brigade; the disarmament of the Odesa mechanized brigade; and of wide-scale repressions against Russian Don Cossacks who had previously served in Luhansk Oblast but had grown more independent of the Kremlin. See Sukhankin 2022, 198; Kramer 2014.
[603] von Twickel 2020, 63.

Plotnitsky.[604] These new leaders were meant to provide a "Ukrainian face" to the separatist movement, increasing its legitimacy internally and internationally. While the replacement took place, however, the chain of command was disrupted, which reduced the separatist armed forces' effectiveness even further.

Hence, the situation in July-August 2014 reflected the dilemma that leads sponsor to escalate to direct support. On the one hand, pro-Russian separatists displayed very poor effectiveness, having lost more than half of their territory, and it looked likely that they would be pushed out of Donetsk and Luhansk. On the other, it seemed that the defeat of the rebellion was imminent, unless a sudden and decisive change in battlefield fortunes was applied. The theoretical expectation, given the values of the variables, is that the sponsor escalates to direct support. And indeed, as Fox (2022) puts it, "Ukrainian success lit the match for the direct and overt Russian military involvement."[605]

As evidence on meetings within the Kremlin is classified, we can only speculate about Putin's decision-making. But experts agree that, between late July and early August 2014, "a decision seems to have been taken in Moscow to get a grip on the situation."[606] The Kremlin realized that the separatists could not survive the Ukrainian offensive, and that "the Ukrainian military forces [would] defeat them in few weeks. So a decision [was] made in Moscow to send the regular army."[607] And we can see the evidence on the ground: up to July 2014, conventional Russian land force involvement was absent. Then, regular armed forces made an appearance en masse in Ukraine. First, Russian rocket forces started firing from bases inside Russia across

[604] Freedman 2014b, 17; von Twickel 2020, 63; Käihkö 2021a, 40; Katchanovski 2016.
[605] Fox 2022, 8.
[606] Freedman 2014b, 16.
[607] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023; Author's interview with Alexandr Osipian 2023.

the border, aiming at Ukrainian forces attempting to encircle separatists by separating them from Russia and the people's republics from each other, Russian artillery began pounding them from across the border.[608] For instance, U.S. intelligence claimed that on 21 July 2014 Russian forces fired across the border at Ukrainian military forces near Hryhorivka, Donetsk oblast, and provided satellite images showing a row of vehicles described as "self-propelled artillery only found in Russian military units, on the Russian side of the border, oriented in the direction of a Ukrainian military unit within Ukraine," as well as the Ukrainian position hit by shells.[609] A similar strike at Zelenopillya, Luhansk, wiped out an entire brigade.[610]

Then, in the middle of August, when "the prospect of rebel defeat had become realistic," regular Russian army units began crossing into Ukraine.[611] To disguise their true intensions, Russian sources that the crossing forces were merely a "humanitarian convoy to deliver assistance to the areas under siege."[612] The new DNR prime minister, Alexander Zakharchenko, reported instead that the convoy consisted of "1,200" rebel fighters from the separatist regions, who "had trained in Russia for four months, had crossed into Ukraine and were ready to fight, supported by 30 tanks and 120 armored vehicles."[613]

Available evidence overwhelmingly supports the argument that these were Russian forces sent to fight. From 11 August onwards, the Ukrainian army reported killing Russian soldiers "practically on a daily basis and in large groups."[614] A RUSI report argues that "Russian troops

[608] Käihkö 2021a, 43; Fox 2022, 8; Freedman 2014b.
[609] Kelley 2014; DeYoung 2014.
[610] Fox 2022.
[611] Sutyagin 2015, 1.
[612] Freedman 2014b, 18.
[613] Olearchyk and Weaver 2014.
[614] Mitrokhin 2021, 133.

in Ukraine numbered between 3,500 and 6,000–6,500 by the end of August 2014."[615] The regular Russian troops used in this large-scale incursion (comprising teams generated by six units) consisted of the following Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs):

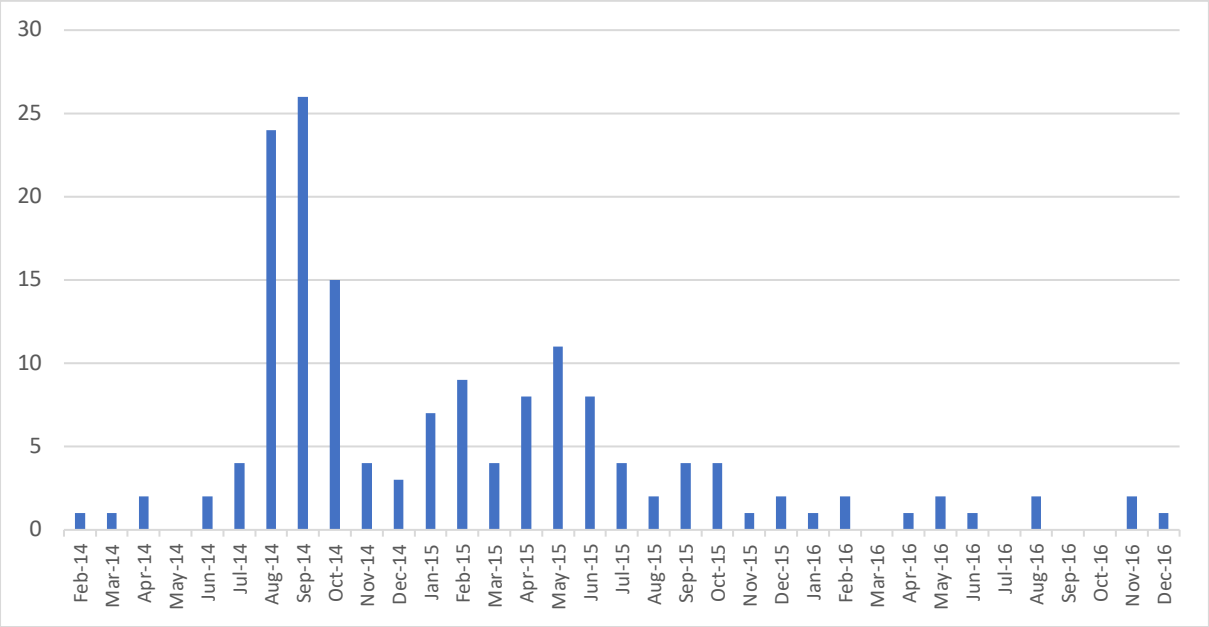
- 17th Motor-Rifle Brigade
- 18th Guards Motor-Rifle Brigade
- 21st Motor-Rifle Brigade
- 33rd (Mountain) Motor-Rifle Brigade
- 247th Guards Air-Assault Regiment (7th Guards Air-Assault Division)
- 104th Guards Air-Assault Regiment (76th Guards Air-Assault Division)
- 331st Guards Airborne Regiment (98th Guards Airborne Division)
- 137th Guards Airborne Regiment (106th Guards Airborne Division)
- 31st Guards Air-Assault Brigade
- 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade[616]

According to NATO sources, the number of Russian troops present in Ukraine was smaller, closer to 1,000, but it was backed by "15,000 forces close to the border."[617] Furthermore, "units from as far as Vladivostok and the Kuril Islands have been identified participating in the Ukraine operation."[618] Hence, this was anything but a minor operation. Figure 6.5 shows the number of confirmed Russian Armed Forces units present in Ukraine per month, identified through and social media posts by deployed soldiers, units captured by Ukrainian Armed Forces, and open-source investigation. It displays the sharp increase in the number of Russian

[615] Sutyagin 2015, 4.
[616] Sutyagin 2015, 2.
[617] Croft 2014; Freedman 2014b.
[618] Sutyagin 2015, 8.

troops in the summer.[619] The small number of observations in the first months of 2014 refers to Russian forces in Crimea, and the observations from April refer to Girkin's group – an isolated event. The timeline provides additional evidence of the substantial deployment of Russian troops to engage directly in combat in Ukraine.

***Figure 6.5**. Number of identified Russian Armed Forces units in Ukraine, 2014-2016.*[620]



The direct intervention by Russian forces had almost immediate effects on the battlefield. Russian armored reinforcements stiffened the LNR's defense of Luhansk airport, ensuring control of the infrastructure until September. They were also able to secure the border all the way to the Sea of Azov. Yet, the decisive clash between Ukrainian and Russian forces took place in Ilovaisk, east of Donetsk. Russian forces pouring in from the international border joined forces with DNR troops, sieging Ukraine's Donbas Battalion in the town. When the

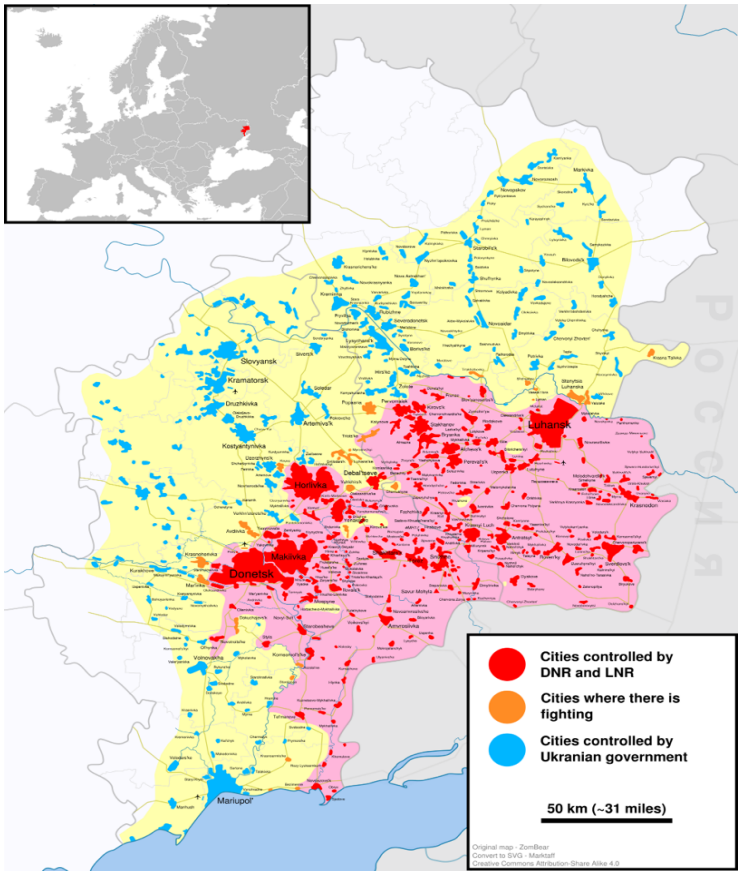
[619] Moreover, under "Tasks which this unit was performing in Ukraine", the database reports "direct participation in the combat" for all units observed in August 2014.
[620] Open Source Intelligence 2021.

latter attempted to withdraw across two safety corridors on 29 August, they were attacked and exterminated. The siege resulted in 366 Ukrainian soldiers killed in combat, 429 wounded, and 300 soldiers captured.[621] As Freedman reports, in Ilovaisk "65% of Ukraine's military equipment had been lost, while the armour left in storage was described by Poroshenko as being as good as 'tins cans.'"[622]

Faced with these enormous losses and an opponent with much higher combat effectiveness than the separatists, the Ukrainian government decided to ask for a ceasefire before the situation grew even worse. The ceasefire was signed in the form of the Minsk Protocol (known as Minsk I) on 5 September 2014.[623] By the time the Minsk ceasefire was signed, separatist-held territory had increased all the way back to the Sea of Azov thanks to Russian intervention, as Figure 6.6 shows. But had it not had such a significant impact, the Russian direct intervention would still have been consistent with the theoretical expectations: it took place in the wake of a negative conflict evolution, under the expectation that the costs of delaying battlefield action were high (potentially compromising the Kremlin's strategy), and when the recipient appeared ineffective as a proxy. Under these conditions, Putin could only resort to his own armed forces.

[621] Fox 2022, 10.
[622] Freedman 2014b, 17.
[623] Wood et al. 2016, xiv.

Figure 6.6. *Territorial control in September 2014, at the time of the signing of the Minsk I Protocol. Areas under separatist control in red, areas under Ukrainian government control in yellow.*[624]



Scope conditions and the escalation of 2014

As suggested in the theoretical chapter, the sponsor may select out of escalation if its interests are too low, or if the costs of providing direct support are too high even when the two variables of poor proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action are met. If Russia

[624] Wikimedia Commons 2021.

escalated despite high costs or low interests, that would be inconsistent with the theory, and its applicability to the case would be questioned.

First, after a negative conflict evolution, the sponsor may prefer not to escalate if its interests in the recipient were low. The sponsor would rather withdraw support or shift to a different actor who may be more reliable or effective. In 2014, there were no alternative actors other than separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk that Russia could turn to, other than the Russian armed forces themselves. Even the leadership transition did not alleviate the problems that separatists were facing in the battlefield, but rather complicated them. An alternative strategy would have been to withdraw from the Donbas and allow the rebellion to be defeated by the ATO. However, from the available evidence, we understand that this was not an option. The political relationship between Ukraine and Russia was regarded as essential to Putin's plan to restore Russia's hegemony over the post-Soviet world, as well as to the durability of his authoritarian regime in Russia itself.[625] Russian actions since 2013 indicate how important Ukraine was to Russia. Hence, it is likely that in the summer of 2014 the Kremlin deemed the collapse of the insurgency in the Donbas as the end of Russia's influence over Ukraine: "Putin could not let them fail."[626] The rebellion had to be kept alive to pursue Russia's project.

Second, sponsors could refrain from escalation if increasing support to the level of combat forces significantly increases the risk of dragging other countries in the war with their own forces and flame up a new international conflict. Hence, we need to consider likelihood of reaction by the Ukrainian government's backers in 2014—essentially, NATO and EU member states—and how worried the Kremlin was about this reaction. As the events surrounding the

[625] Freedman 2014a, 10; Mitchell 2012; Bachmann and Lyubashenko 2014.
[626] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.

annexation of Crimea showed, the West was very keen on avoiding a direct confrontation against Russia. Although the European Union and the United States announced sanctions against Russian individuals from as early as March 2014, they did not threaten military escalation, and actively persuaded Ukraine to avoid taking up arms.[627] In fact, it was a joint U.S. and German intelligence briefing that persuaded Kyiv that attempting to take back Crimea would be tantamount to a declaration of war.[628]

In the Donbas too, Ukraine's Western backers showed significant restraint. Despite expanding sanctions, they also stopped short of providing Ukraine with military assistance at the time.[629] Not even after the downing of Malaysia Airlines MH-17 flight, which was quickly attributed to pro-Russian separatists, did NATO and EU countries decide to become more actively involved, other than by expanding the list of individuals targeted by sanctions. For the United States, confronting Russia over a war in eastern Ukraine was not a political priority. As for the EU, its dependency on Russian fossil fuels was a significant leverage that prevented harsher measures. Furthermore, Putin believed that he could cause inaction by threatening attacks against NATO and EU countries. "If I wanted", Putin is reported to have told Poroshenko in 2014 "in two days I could have Russian troops not only in Kiev, but also in Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw, and Bucharest."[630] At the time, Russia's military power was believed to be much stronger than that of other European countries, who instead had been undercutting their defense spending for decades, making their governments extremely war-averse. All these factors likely persuaded Putin that an escalation of support to direct intervention would carry relatively low costs.

[627] European Council 2023; U.S. Department of State 2023.
[628] Coyle 2017, 52; Käihkö 2021a, 36.
[629] Daalder et al. 2015; Gollom 2022.
[630] Huggler 2014.

The relationship between the war in Donbas and the Crimea annexation

A further objection could be made to the applicability of escalation theory to the chapter: that the events of summer 2014 did not represent an escalation from indirect to direct support, as Russian forces intervened for the first time in Crimea in February-March 2014. As mentioned above, the events in the Donbas were inspired by the sudden turn of events in Crimea, which in a matter of weeks made the autonomous region a part of the Russian Federation.

Crimea, the region with the largest ethnic Russian population in Ukraine, and home to the Russian fleet base of Sevastopol, witnessed its first anti-Maidan protests on 23 January 2014.[631] This was not rare as multiple protests were taking place against the Maidan movement in cities across Southeastern Ukraine, including in Odesa, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Dnepropetrovsk. However, the situation in Crimea quickly degenerated after the ousting of Yanukovych. On 27 February, protesters seized the Crimean parliament in Simferopol. The seized parliament then named Sergei Aksyonov, a pro-Russian politician with strong links to international criminal groups, Prime Minister of Crimea.[632] According to existing accounts, the MPs who had been invited by Aksyonov to enter the building passed the motion in the presence of the gunmen armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles and rocket launchers.[633]

Aksyonov immediately appealed to President Putin for the protection of Crimea against the Kyiv government. On 6 March, the Crimean parliament asked Putin to take Crimea into Russia, and announced an upcoming referendum to decide whether Crimea should be "joined" to

[631] Wood et al. 2016, xii.
[632] Associated Press 2014; Haddon and Agence France Presse 2014.
[633] Wood et al. 2016, xiii; Interfax Ukraine 2014.

Russia.[634] The referendum, carried out on 16 March without any international oversight or monitoring, unsurprisingly resulted in an outstanding success for separation from Ukraine. The official result from the authorities of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea described "a 96.77% vote for integration of the region into the Russian Federation, with an 83.1% turnout."[635] On 18 March, Putin signed a decree annexing Crimea to the Russian Federation.

The events described above were orchestrated directly from the Kremlin. The seizure of the Crimean parliament on 27 February was carried out by soldiers without insignia, the so-called "little green men." These were recognized as Russian soldiers, already present in the peninsula thanks to their bases in Sevastopol.[636] Over the following days, little green men appeared all around Crimea, seizing military barracks from Ukrainian soldiers and establishing roadblocks and checkpoints all around the oblast. Initially, Putin denied the presence of Russian soldiers in Crimea or the presence of any plans to occupy the peninsula. On 4 March, Putin was asked: "how do you see the future of Crimea? Do you consider the possibility of it joining Russia?" He replied, "no, we do not."[637] However, on 1 March, Russia's upper house of parliament had approved Putin's request for Russian forces to be used in Ukraine "until the normalization of the political situation in the country."[638] Only later did Putin acknowledge that "our soldiers, of course, stood behind the self-defence forces of Crimea."[639] It is quite likely that the operation had been conceived as a contingency plan in the event of a crisis. According to Polish intelligence, Putin's offer to Yanukovych in December 2014 was "combined with a threat to seize Crimea" had the Ukrainian President decided to sign the Association Agreement with the

[634] RIA 2014.
[635] Morello, Englund, and Griff 2014.
[636] Nikolsky 2015, 128; DeBenedictis 2021, 1–2; Bukkvoll 2016, 15; Freedman 2014b, 15; Waal, von Twickel, and Emerson 2020.
[637] The Kremlin 2014.
[638] BBC 2014a.
[639] Sonne 2014.

EU.[640] However, Putin later claimed he had made the decision on the night of the 22 February, after Yanukovych had fled Kyiv as well as after the failed Kharkiv meeting.[641]

Hence, the annexation was accomplished thanks to Russian soldiers infiltrating into Crimea, establishing roadblocks, and occupying the regional parliament. In other words, Russia carried out a direct military intervention into Ukraine. This would render the study of escalation of support carried out above moot, as the direct intervention of Russian forces had already taken place in February-March 2014, not in the following summer.

This argument, however, relies on the flawed assumption that the Crimea annexation was the result of a war. This assumption can be refuted. First, the annexation of Crimea took place without virtually any fighting, and therefore can hardly be defined as an armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia-backed forces. On the one hand, Russian soldiers occupied crucial buildings and checkpoints almost overnight. The Crimean Parliament was occupied by disarming security guards, but without needing to resort to homicidal violence.[642] The entire operation relied more on non-military than on the military domains, emphasizing propaganda and disinformation (about the events in Maidan), the weaponization of prima facie legitimate political and legal activities (the parliament's vote to secede, taken place in an occupied parliament, and the referendum), and sudden, covert action (soldiers without insignia establishing checkpoints at strategic locations overnight).

This was perfectly consistent with the doctrine of new generation warfare that the Russian Armed Forces had adopted, which emphasizes the non-military aspects of the campaign, and

[640] Judah 2014.
[641] DeBenedictis 2021, 162.
[642] Ibid., 140.

therefore minimizes the importance of regular formations in favor of irregular ones. In the words of the Chief of Staff, General Valeri Gerasimov:

> "Frontal clashes of major military formations … are gradually receding into the past… [Modern warfare is t]he widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures…supplemented by military means of a hidden nature, including the implementation of information warfare and special operations forces."[643]

Ukrainian soldiers, on the other hand, were not given clear orders to react to the sudden moves by Russian forces. The rapidity of the operation caught them by surprise, while the disarray in Kyiv, where the new government was still in a transition phase, deprived the Ukrainian Army of their political command: as one interviewee put it, "it all happened so quickly. The Crimean occupation is over within a few days, so it was very hard for Ukraine to respond."[644] As Ukraine's interim president Oleksandr Turchynov later admitted, "our country had neither the government system, nor the defense system back then."[645] Supported by American and German assessments, a Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council meeting on the 28 February concluded that "any attempt to oppose Russia would be taken as an escalation and a declaration of war, which Kyiv was bound to lose."[646] As a result, the annexation of Crimea does not even reach the threshold of 25 battle-related deaths per calendar year, which is required for the inclusion of a conflict into the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset.[647]

Hence, we should not regard Crimea as an armed conflict between Ukraine and either Russia or Russian-backed separatists. It is more akin to a coup d'état, "an illegal attempt to replace a state's governmental leadership through its military's use or threat of violence," although of

[643] Gerasimov 2013; DeBenedictis 2021, 28; Goble 2014.
[644] Author's interview with Nigel Gould-Davies 2023.
[645] Käihkö 2021a, 35.
[646] Coyle 2017, 52; Käihkö 2021a, 36.
[647] Pettersson et al. 2021.

course this was a coup limited to a regional government.[648] This stands in stark contrast with the war in Donbas, which resulted in tens of thousands of casualties between 2014 and 2022. As explained in previous paragraphs, whereas the Ukrainian government chose not to react to the fait accompli of the annexation of Crimea, it did react to the occupation of building and cities in the Donbas by starting the ATO. Crimea and Donbas are therefore two separate, albeit extremely interconnected, episodes: although separatists and their Russian backers were inspired by the quick and bloodless annexation of Crimea to replicate the same in the Donbas.[649] The two can therefore be regarded as separate episodes.

Testing alternative explanations for escalation

To gauge the problem of equifinality and overdetermined explanation, in this section the theory of escalation is contrasted with three alternative accounts for the provision of direct support in August 2014: troops as reward for the recipient, independent decisions by local commanders, and domestic political developments in te sponsor state. Table 6.2 provides a summary of each alternative theory, their prediction regarding escalation to direct support, the values that the relevant variables for each explanation take around summer 2014, and whether the prediction is consistent with the outcome variable.

[648] Savage and Caverley 2017, 543; Huntington 2006; Luttwak 2016.
[649] Girkin 2017; Käihkö 2021a, 36.

Table 6.2. *Alternative explanations for the Russian intervention in summer 2014.*

Theory	**Prediction**	**Values of key variables**	**Fit with outcome**
Support escalation	Sponsor provides direct support when immediate battlefield action is required, but proxy effectiveness is low	Costs of delaying battlefield action: High Perceived proxy effectiveness: low	Good
Rewards and punishments	Sponsor provides direct support to reward loyal recipient	Recipient wants direct support: Maybe Perceived recipient compliance: Low	Poor
Independent decision by sponsor's bureaucracy	Escalation was decided by specialized bureaucracies (specifically the army) independently of central government	Commanders tend to operate independently: No Size of operation is small enough that central political authority need not be consulted: No	Poor

Domestic political concerns in sponsor state	Sponsor's leadership escalates foreign support to strengthen domestic consensus	Domestic support for leadership prior to escalation: High Upcoming election or domestic political contest: No	Poor

The first alternative explanation is related to rewards and punishments.[650] A sponsor could deal with the problem of agency shirk and divergent preferences by rewarding the recipient with more support when it behaves in accordance with the sponsor's wishes, and punishing it when it behaves erratically by withdrawing aid.[651] If this model were true, the sponsor would provide direct support—which represents an increase of assistance—as a reward for good performance or after shows of loyalty from the recipient. On the other hand, a disloyal act by the recipient would be punished by refusing escalation, or even with the reduction of assistance. For this explanation to be verified empirically, Russia would send combat forces to the Donbas to reward the separatists for their loyal behavior. Putin would be more willing to provide his armed forces to support a loyal "vassal" as opposed to an opportunistic recipient.[652] For this explanation to hold, we need to consider two variables: first, the separatists should have requested direct support, because loyal recipients who do not want direct assistance would not be rewarded by getting it; and second, Russia needed to perceive a pattern of compliance by the separatists to the Kremlin's commands and requests, which they deem worth rewarding.

[650] Berman, Lake, and Macdonald 2019.
[651] Findley and Teo 2006; Mitchell 2021.
[652] Abbott et al. 2021.

As available evidence suggests, these two conditions were unlikely to hold true in the summer of 2014. The article highlighted the tensions between pro-Russian separatists and the Kremlin. Given the tensions between the first generations of separatist leaders and the Kremlin. The sudden wave of resignation and disappearances of maximalist figures prone to in-fighting such as Borodai and Bolotov indicate that Putin opted for a change in leadership between July and August 2014, putting in place new figures such as Zakharchenko and Plotnistsky who were more moderate and reliable for Moscow.[653] The transition took place right before the battle of Ilovaisk began, and thus roughly at the same time as the decision to intervene in Ukraine with Russian armed forces. It follows that there was no loyalty to reward at the time, given the dissatisfaction with previous separatist commanders. Furthermore, the new leadership did not have time to request direct support, as they were put in charge precisely when Russian tanks were already rolling into Ukraine. Hence, the fit between the reward and punishment explanation and the situation on the ground is relatively poor.

The second alternative explanation highlights the role of the sponsor's bureaucracies, and in particular, independent decisions by local commanders, in bringing about the intervention. Given the imperative to maintain plausible deniability of the operation in the Donbas, which would allow to continue disrupting the political stability of Ukraine without admitting Russia's involvement, it is surprising that direct support was provided. Moreover, the Russian doctrine of new generation warfare emphasized covert action and political warfare, sidelining the importance of armed forces.[654] This may lead the reader to wonder whether the decision to intervene was in fact decided by an independent-minded commander in situ in reaction to the situation on the battlefield, rather than being a direct command from Moscow.

[653] Freedman 2014b, 17; von Twickel 2020, 63; Käihkö 2021a, 40; Katchanovski 2016.
[654] Gerasimov 2013.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that an independent decision was unlikely to be taken. First, the hierarchical and centralized nature of the Russian Armed Forces actively discourages independent decision-making by local commanders, especially in a crisis of such relevance as the one in Ukraine. According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "[t]he Russian command-and-control system is heavily reliant on its officers and vertical command structure."[655] This is consistent with the coup-proofing model of organization dictatorial regimes often adopt for their armed forces.[656] Despite Putin's reform of the Russian military, local commanders did not receive more autonomy.[657] In such a hierarchical military culture, it is extremely unlikely that a Russian commander charged with supplying the separatists in the Donbas would have independently decided to intervene.[658]

Second, the size of the operation makes it more likely that the escalation was decided at the highest level. According to estimates by the U.S. Army, "the overall figure of Russian troops operating in eastern Ukraine reached approximately 9,000 by the last week of February 2015."[659] Furthermore, according to RUSI, military units from all over Russia, even "as far as Vladivostok and the Kuril Islands have been identified participating in the Ukraine operation."[660] It is very unlikely that Russia would mobilize such a force in response to an unauthorized decision by a commander. And third, the Donbas war did not encourage commanders to take risky gambles in order to obtain a promotion. According to McDermot, "Arguably, this was never the 'type' of conflict that would prove popular among the Russian

[655] Shamiev 2021.
[656] Talmadge 2015.
[657] Baev 2011; Felgengauėr et al. 2019.
[658] What is more, according to interviewees, Russian soldiers were legally proscribed from partaking in foreign wars. See Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.
[659] Sutyagin 2015, 5; Reuters 2015.
[660] Sutyagin 2015, 5.

officer corps. It has not yielded opportunities for career advancement…Of course, this is rooted in the policy of 'plausible deniability.'"[661] The secrecy requirements involved in the operation, therefore, were a strain on the political leadership as well as on the officers. This set of arguments suggests that the decision to escalate support was not due to independent commanders.

A third alternative explanation related to the sponsor's domestic environment as driver for Russia's decision to provide direct support to the separatists. Leaders habitually take electoral considerations into account when making decisions about the use of military force. Elections and domestic support are also relevant in non-democracies. Non-democratic leaders exploit external conflicts as opportunities to generate "rally round the flag" effects, that is, internal national cohesion against a common enemy—which in turn tends to increase domestic support for the government.[662] In Putin's Russia, the relationship between domestic consensus and foreign adventurism appears to be quite relevant. In August 1999, as the newly appointed prime minister, Putin had an approval rating of just 31%. Less than a year later, Putin's approval had risen to 84% after a series of apartment bombings, which he blamed on Chechen terrorists, and to which Russia responded with the Second Chechen War.[663] After the successful 2012 elections, which brought Putin back to power, his ratings were falling again. According to independent polling by the Levada Centre, "only 29% of Russians expressed a willingness to vote for Putin's reelection."[664] This suggests that Putin could have opted for the Donbas escalation as a way to strengthen domestic support for his regime.

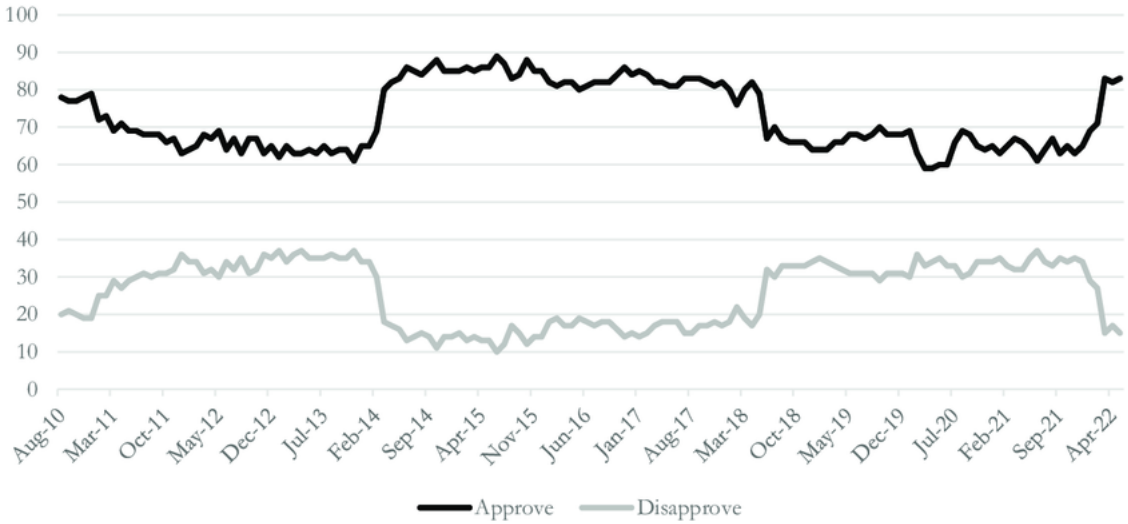
[661] McDermott 2019, 357.
[662] Asal, Conrad, and White 2014; Kobayashi and Katagiri 2018; San-Akca 2014; San-Akca 2016.
[663] Burakovsky 2022.
[664] Ibid.

To gauge the plausibility of the explanation, we need to consider two variables: first, whether domestic support for Putin remained low in the summer of 2014, just prior to the election; and second, whether there was a significant political contest in the horizon that could have encouraged Putin to create a "rally round the flag" effect.

As for the first variable, while Putin did not enjoy very favorable ratings in January 2014, the situation had been reversed by March of the same year. The events in Maidan and the Crimea annexation played a significant role in the change in popularity patterns. In a poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center in March, Putin's popularity level in Russia "reached 71.6 percent. That's a 9.7 percent increase since mid-February."[665] According to polling by the independent Levada Centre from the same month, Putin enjoyed "a 72 percent approval rating, up 7 points from January and a recent record."[666] As Figure 6.7 shows, the increase in support remained high over the rest of 2014, oscillating between 80 and 87%. This bodes well for the argument that the Crimea annexation was carried out with domestic politics in mind. But it is not consistent with the claim that the same reason was at play in the Donbas over the summer: as domestic support for the regime was high, there was no need to engage in a risky and costly escalation to marginally increase an already strong rally round the flag effect. We do not have evidence of a potential fall in support over the months of June and July, which could have justified the need for a new escalation of force abroad.

[665] Levada Centre 2014a.
[666] Burakovsky 2022; Levada Centre 2014a; Levada Centre 2014b.

Figure 6.7. *Vladimir Putin's approval ratings in Russia, 2010-2022.*[667]



As for the second variable, it is unclear which electoral event Putin would target in the spring of 2014 that could justify a major use of force abroad. Presidential elections were not scheduled until 2018. The only contests in summer 2014 were local elections in some Russian oblasts, which were not significant for the regime's hold on power. This further questions the plausibility that Putin would send foreign troops overtly to the Donbas for domestic political reasons—unless the dynamics of conflict evolution, and the worsening position of the separatists, are brought back into the picture.

The consequences of direct intervention beyond 2014

By October 2014, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine had claimed "3,682 lives and 8,871 wounded."[668] The Minsk I ceasefire did not accomplish much: all parties had incentives to resume fighting. Separatist leaders continued seeking full separation from Kyiv: Plotnitsky observed that "sooner or later, we will become part of the Russian Federation", whereas

[667] Rogstad 2022, 14.
[668] Freedman 2019, 121; UNOCHA 2014.

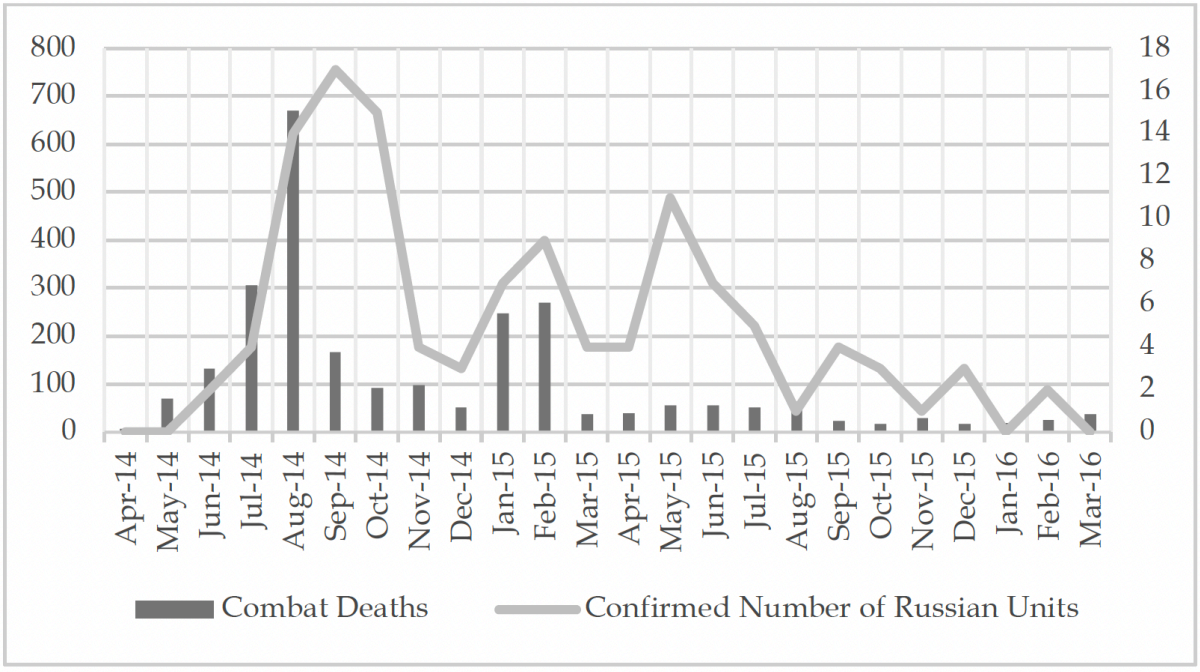
Zakharchenko claimed that the signing of the agreement (including by Russia) was an act of betrayal.[669] For their part, Ukraine and Russia had different interpretations of the Minsk agreement, especially when it came to the reintegration of the LNR and DNR into a new Ukrainian state:

> "For Ukraine, [the agreement] entailed provision of autonomy to Donbas, but the breakaway republics would return under Kyiv's authority. Russia had another interpretation: it wanted to legitimize the separatist governments and integrate them into Ukraine as a way of keeping the country permanently divided, politically unfeasible, and susceptible to Russian wishes. When Russia held elections in LNR and DNR, it became clear that it wanted to legitimize them, which was unacceptable to Ukraine."[670]

Moreover, despite the establishment of a contact line, some highly contested areas remained, particularly over the control of Donetsk Airport and of the port city of Mariupol, the only way for the separatist republics to access the sea. This series of issues quickly precipitated a new wave of intense confrontations. The battle for Donetsk Airport was dubbed "Little Stalingrad" for the fierce fighting that took place, reducing the infrastructure to ruins, and Mariupol was subject to indiscriminate bombing.[671] The Russian forces continued fighting in the conflict alongside the LNR and DNR, inflicting a second major defeat on the Ukrainian army at Debaltseve in January-February 2015.[672] As Figure 6.8 shows, the periods of highest activity by Russian forces—as indicated by the number of units observed in combat per month—correspond to the highest casualties suffered by the Ukrainian army. After Debaltseve, Ukraine and Russia signed a new agreement, called Minsk II, this time under the auspices of France, Germany, and the OSCE. This agreement was worse than Minsk I for Kyiv, and represented a diplomatic success for Moscow.

[669] Freedman 2019, 119–120.
[670] Author's interview with Oleg Ignatov 2023.
[671] Fox 2022; Author's interview with Simon Schlegel 2023.
[672] Felgengauėr et al. 2019, 361.

Figure 6.8. *Number of identified Russian Armed Forces units in Ukraine (right) and Ukrainian casualty counts (left) per month, 2014-2016.*[673]



The data in Figure 6.8 and the evolution of the war suggest that the Russian direct intervention was a successful move: it prevented the collapse of the separatist rebellion, inflicted severe losses on the Ukrainian army, and generated a stalemate that would heavily complicate, if not make impossible, Ukrainian accession to Western institutions such as the EU and NATO.[674] It appears that Putin's calculus, emerging out of the fear of increasing costs for delaying a battlefield intervention and the understanding of the poor effectiveness of separatist proxies, had allowed Russia to accomplish its geopolitical goals. Putin won extensive praise from Western officials for his "dexterous and comprehensive" strategic and tactical choices.[675]

[673] Hosaka 2021, 106.
[674] Freedman 2019, 116–117.
[675] Jones 2014.

However, it could be questioned whether Russia actually emerged victorious. The war in Donbas only strengthened Ukrainian unity and opposition to Russia: positive feeling towards Russia declined among Ukrainians from 88 percent in 2013 to 30 percent in 2015, and many Ukrainians would not agree to renouncing integration with the EU for the sake of peace with Russia.[676] Meanwhile, Russia was stuck with propping up the economically unviable and militarily weak LNR and DNR, and had no clear strategy to bring the war to an end.[677] These considerations may have fed into Moscow's new strategic plan for the much costlier invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[678]

However, the outcome of the Russian direct intervention has no bearing on the applicability of Support Escalation Theory to this case. It doesn't matter whether Russia was able to accomplish its goals by intervening directly or if it failed, just like it did not matter, in 1936, whether Mussolini was able to bring the Spanish Civil War to a quick end by escalating his support to Franco. What matters is that Russian decisionmakers believed that, given the change in circumstances brought about by Ukraine's successful ATO, indirect support in the form of weapons and training was insufficient for the separatists, paving the way for the escalation to direct support.

[676] Freedman 2019, 110.
[677] Waal, von Twickel, and Emerson 2020; Coyle 2017.
[678] Potočňák and Mares 2022.

Testing external validity:

Support Escalation in Spain, Angola, Vietnam, and Libya

Introduction

The previous two chapters tested the mechanisms behind Support Escalation Theory in two very different cases: Fascist Italy's role in support of Franco during the Spanish Civil War, and Russia's intervention in support of separatists in the Donbas War. The theory was tested through process tracing, using primary and secondary sources to evaluate the validity of the mechanism and contrast it against empirical implications of alternative explanations. This chapter has two objectives: (1) to gauge the generalizability of the theory beyond the two main case studies, in different historical contexts and across various forms of escalation to direct support, and (2) to further probe the robustness of Support Escalation Theory against alternative explanations. Due to the scope of the chapter and to variation in the availability of sources, each case relies primarily on secondary evidence.

The cases of direct support escalation that this chapter considers are the following: Nazi Germany's support to Franco in the Spanish Civil War (1936); Cuba's support to the MPLA in Angola (1975); the United States' support to South Vietnam in the Vietnam War (1965); and Turkey's support to the GNA in the Second Libyan Civil War (2019).

Condors in the skies: Nazi Germany's support escalation in the air domain during the Spanish Civil War

In Chapter 5, this dissertation tested Support Escalation Theory on the case of Fascist Italy's intervention in support of Franco.[679] However, Fascist Italy was not the only actor who provided significant support to warring parties in Spain. The other major intervener on the side of the Spanish rebels was Nazi Germany. Like Italy, German action was first limited to airlifts. Hitler's initial decision to help Franco was taken abruptly, and he did not believe that the war would last long. In the fall of 1936, however, the increase of Soviet support made it possible for the Republicans to counter the rebellion, and in particular to contest Franco's control of the skies. Seeing the negative shift in power towards the Republicans, and mistrusting the ability of Franco's pilots to appropriately recover command of the skies, Hitler was persuaded in late October 1936 to send a full air division, the Condor Legion to provide direct support to Franco. While the intervention did not amount to a troop contingent like the one provided by Italy, it can still be argued that the provision of the Condor Legion reflects the expectations of Support Escalation Theory.

Origins of German involvement and parallels to the Italian case

Nazi Germany's initial involvement in the Spanish Civil War resembles in many ways that of Fascist Italy, as a result of a sudden decision of the country's leader, and took a similar form. Germany had increased ties in Spain during the 1930s. Spain purchased "120.3 million gold pesetas (14.8 million gold dollars) worth of goods in Germany in 1935", and "the most

[679] For background and details on the Spanish Civil War, see Chapter 5.

important foreigners living in Spain were the Germans, because they formed the largest group of employed aliens."[680] Politically, many of the Germans in Spain were organized in the Nazi party's foreign branch, the Auslandsorganisation, or AO.[681] The relevance of German expatriates in Spain and their ideological affinity to some sectors of the Spanish right—such as Falange, las JONS and monarchists—made it possible for them to become aware of the plot to overturn the Republic. In fact, there were close connections between some German personalities and Spanish officers who were leading the preparations for the coup d'état.[682]

Yet, like Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany did not have a direct role in planning and executing the coup, and its leadership was equally surprised as the one in Rome by the requests that came a few days after 18 July 1936 from General Franco to airlift rebel troops across the Gibraltar Straits.[683] While initially reluctant to send any aid to Spain, seeing the rebel cause as lost, Hitler agreed to provide assistance during the night between 25 and 26 July. According to historical accounts, Hitler made the decision over night, agreeing to send infantry weapons and transport planes. The day after, Chief of the Luftwaffe Hermann Göring ordered the creation of a special staff, the Sonderstab Wilberg (or "Special Staff W"), borrowing officers from army, navy, and air, to administer the military aid sent to Franco.[684] The timeline and dynamic of Germany's initial support to Franco resembles remarkably the one followed by Fascist Italy: Mussolini too decided abruptly to supply the rebellion, a few days after the initial rejections. However, there is no documentary evidence of their coordination on Spanish policy before August.[685]

[680] Whealey 1989, 18.
[681] Viñas 1974b, 18.
[682] Proctor 1983, 4–5; Viñas 1974b, 15–18.
[683] For additional details, see Chapter 5.
[684] Proctor 1983, 18; Whealey 1989, 22.
[685] Whealey 1989, 30.

At this stage, the form of assistance was limited to indirect support, and any German personnel operating the planes to transport rebel troops across the Strait was prohibited from engaging in combat. To handle the transfer of equipment and provide a form of deniability vis-à-vis the increasing international calls for non-intervention, a private Spanish-German company was established, called Hispano-Marroquí de Transportes (HISMA).[686] The airlift lasted throughout the month of August, and the weapons deliveries from Germany and Italy allowed the Nationalist troops to make significant territorial gains and to start advancing towards Madrid.

However, as Chapter 5 shows in detail, the quick victory that Hitler and Mussolini expected failed to materialize. Furthermore, the German personnel who were delivering the planes to Nationalist pilots were encountering significant deficiencies in the latter's skills, which resulted in equipment losses: "Since the Spanish did not have any experience in flying the German planes, one aircraft crashed and another was blown to pieces over the front the first day."[687] As a result, German pilots were repeatedly committed to an air defense role, even though they were supposed to play only a logistical role. This translates, in the theoretical chapter's terms, into a perception of poor proxy effectiveness. At the same time, sources reviewed for this section provide no indication of a perceived closing window, such as fear of an imminent collapse of the Nationalist forces. This is, once again, consistent with the evolution of Italian support to the rebels.

Hence, on 27 August, Hitler made a new commitment to support Franco. Just like the Italian Military Mission to Spain was established in those days, Hitler ordered the creation of a German advisory mission to the Nationalist cause. The officer who was put in charge of the

[686] Proctor 1983, 21.
[687] Ibid., 29.

mission was Lieutenant Colonel Walter Warlimont. War Minister Werner von Blomberg informed Warlimont of his mission on the very day, 27 August:

> "Von Blomberg advised [Warlimont] that he was being sent to Spain to be placed in charge of all German involvement…and at the same time would be the German military advisor to General Franco. First, however, he would accompany Admiral Canaris to meet with General Roatta to work out German/Italian cooperation."[688]

This excerpt indicates the character of the change in German support: it was meant to primarily train and advise Spanish personnel while also providing political advice to the rebel leadership. The German mission was also supposed to coordinate closely with the Italian mission, as indicated in detail in Chapter 5. Both Roatta and Canaris noted that open involvement in the Spanish conflict was prohibited. It should be noted here, however, that this was agreed to just the day before Hitler made the decision, on 28 August, to lift the prohibition for German personnel to become actively engaged in combat.[689] Despite this permission to take up what effectively was a direct support role, the emphasis of the German support escalation remained on training, advising and weapons deliveries, that is, indirect assistance. As Proctor argues, "direct commitment of German military personnel was limited and haphazard."[690] In any case, it was obvious that the German assistance to the Nationalist cause in Spain had escalated far beyond the modest commitment that Hitler had made thirty days before.

The decision for direct support – primarily from the air

In the two months following the establishment of Warlimont's mission, the pressure mounted again for a new escalation of assistance, which would result in a shift to direct support. Proxy

[688] Ibid., 35.
[689] Ibid., 27; Whealey 1989, 23. Recall that this was also the practice of Italian pilots, as shown in Chapter 5.
[690] Proctor 1983, 251.

ineffectiveness remained a key concern, especially in the air capability domain. When Warlimont arrived in Spain, he found "the aerial capability of the Nationalists as augmented by Germany and Italy very limited and the enemy decidedly superior both numerically and technically."[691] The bulk of the Spanish air force had not defected, and despite the large amounts of He-51 fighter deliveries from Germany, the Nationalist pilots needed time to acquire the necessary skills to handle the planes. As this dissertation argues, indirect support such as training is appropriate to solve issues of proxy effectiveness, but it is time consuming. This would not be a problem for the sponsor unless the costs of delaying battlefield action are perceived as high. However, during the month of October, such a perception started materializing.

The main reason is to be found in the growth of Soviet assistance to the Republic. As the battle for Madrid commenced in October, "the entire Nationalist force attempting to converge upon Madrid numbered some 20,000 men, but only 4,500 of these could be committed for the first assault…[while] foreign troops were arriving to fight in the ranks of the Madrid forces."[692] The reference is to the International Brigades which were being organized by the Comintern. Moreover, as of September, it became official Soviet policy to send military aid to the Republican government.[693] To the Germans "[n]ot only was the amount of military equipment being delivered to the Madrid government a matter of concern, but also the superior quality of armor and aircraft along with the trained military personnel to operate them."[694] By the end of October, Soviet aircraft including Katiuska SB-2 bombers attacked Nationalist bases. This increase in perceived air superiority for the opponent indicated not only a reduced degree of

[691] Ibid., 43–44.
[692] Ibid., 51.
[693] Whealey 1989, 40–41.
[694] Proctor 1983, 51.

proxy effectiveness for the recipient, but also a fear of immediate loss of command of the skies to the Popular Front.

Unfortunately, unlike in the Italian case, we do not have archival evidence to study the discussions in Berlin that preceded the next phase of support escalation. As historians note, "[M]ost of the German documents pertaining to the German military force in Spanish conflict have been lost or destroyed."[695] Therefore, we cannot confirm whether the perceptions of proxy effectiveness and of a closing window were present in the minds of the Nazi leadership. But we do know that Hitler, like Mussolini, wanted a short war.[696] The increase in Soviet assistance would put the conquest of Madrid—and the German desire for a quick victory—out of reach. Moreover, the increasing amount of Soviet assistance could be perceived as the beginning of a lasting Soviet presence in the Spanish peninsula, something that was more likely to materialize the longer their intervention remained unchecked. Therefore, time was of the essence. According to one of the few documents that remain to us:

> "[t]he entire Russian commitment [is] a threat on the part of Russia to European peace, and thereby it [is] necessary to bring about, on the part of Germany, a victory by Franco in the German interest."[697]

Under these circumstances, a new form of assistance was needed. It was necessary to solve the persistent problem of proxy ineffectiveness, while also countering the immediate threat posed by the increased Soviet support to the Republic. This combination of factors (poor proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action) created the conditions for escalation to direct support. Indeed, this is what Hitler decided between 30 and 31 October 1936. However, Germany did not roll out a ground intervention like Italy would do one month later. Instead, it

[695] Ibid., 8.
[696] Alpert 2019b, 34; Viñas 1974b, 1–5; Whealey 1989, 1–12.
[697] Freiburg Archive, MF, RL 2v, 3187, 433. Quoted in Proctor 1983, 52.

focused on the area that was, in Germany's eyes, the most critical: air superiority. As mentioned above, Warlimont's reports indicated that air capabilities were the most deficient. Furthermore, the appearance of Soviet planes on the battlefield had a major impact and needed to be countered in the same realm. Therefore, Nazi Germany set up an entire air division to alter the fortunes of the Spanish Civil War. The Condor Legion, with an initial strength of 3,786 men, 37 officers and 92 all-new planes, was dispatched to Spain in early November 1936.[698] General Hugo von Sperrle, a veteran of the WWI, was made commander of the Legion.

To be sure, the German escalation to direct support did involve other domains. For instance, the Germans sent two submarines to Spanish waters as part of Operation Ursula, a plan to attack Republican vessels carrying weapons and materiel from Soviet ports to loyalist ports in the Mediterranean.[699] Germany also dispatched a tank force which was to become known as Drohne, but its role was primarily to train Spanish combat and maintenance crews. However, although German tank personnel were not to become engaged in battle, at times the latter was the case.[700] But Nazi Germany never aimed for the creation of a ground force to be sent to Spain. First, Warlimont pushed against troop deployments. Unlike the Italian high command, he concurred with his counterparts in Franco's entourage that "the successful conclusion of the war for the Nationalists would in the end have to come from support within Spain" and that foreign troops would be counterproductive to this effort.[701] Second, von Blomberg and the commander in chief of the Wehrmacht, Colonel General Werner von Fritsch, were particularly opposed to increasing German participation in the war because it would worsen Germany's relations with Britain and France.[702] Fears of international escalation are some of the factors

[698] Whealey 1989, 23.
[699] Ibid., 73.
[700] Proctor 1983, 45.
[701] Ibid., 49.
[702] Whealey 1989, 78.

that can limit the decision to provide direct support according to the theory. Air support, however, did not have a similar effect on relations, partly because British intelligence was aware of—and arguably more concerned about—Soviet aircraft operating for the Republican side.

Outbidding with Italy?

This short overview shows many similarities between the factors that led Italy to dispatch a troop contingent to Spain in winter of 1936-37 and those that pushed Nazi Germany to set up the Condor Legion. Both actors opted for direct support when the proxy seemed ineffective and a window was closing, requiring immediate battlefield impact before it was too late. The fact that the two actors provided two different types of direct support and at different times (Mussolini agreed to send the Corpo Truppe Volontarie more than a month after Hitler gave the green light to Condor Legion) further highlights that their foreign policies, while parallel, remained independent, and that their decision-making on external support happened separately. Chapter 5 provides more details on the independence of Italian decision-making from Germany's influence.

In particular, by late fall 1936, Nazi-Fascist competition for influence had dried up. In late October, Ciano visited Berlin to sign a protocol with Hitler in which the Mediterranean and Spain were recognized as an "area of special interest" to Fascist Italy, just like Central and Eastern Europe were for Nazi Germany.[703] Germany made it clear that Spain was in the Italian sphere of influence, and that Berlin was not going to interfere with that.[704] According to

[703] October Protocol, DDI V, n. 273, 23/10/36.
[704] Coverdale 1977, 146.

Whealey (1989), "as part of the Axis agreement [in October], Hitler gave Mussolini priority in Spain."[705] Fascist ideological presence was bigger than the Nazi one, partly due to the presence of monarchists and pro-Fascist Falange within Franco's camp.[706] Moreover, Germany made it clear that it would not further escalate assistance. In light of the lack of interest by Germany for ideological purity in Spain, there seems to be no correlation between the provision of the Condor Legion and competition between National Socialism and Fascism.

The Condor Legion started operating in a very short time after its inception. While the division was still in its formative stage, three bomber squadrons of K/88, under the command of Major Fuchs, put their aircraft in commission at Salamanca on 15 November, for the first direct participation of any of the units of the Legion in the Spanish conflict.[707] This was a necessity in light of the time pressures that had required direct intervention. It also partly counters the claim that Germany entered the Spanish Civil War to train men and test equipment. While the war did eventually provide such an opportunity, it was not the case at the start. Although some people were talking of a second world war emerging in 1937 and 1938, "Tryout in Spain" did not become a major theme in historiography and propaganda until after the outbreak of Anglo-German war in September 1939.[708] Over time, the Condor Legion became famous for indiscriminate bombing campaigns, including that of the Basque village of Guernica on 26 April 1937. Its role in the skies has been described as decisive in demoralizing and eventually defeating the Republican resistance.[709]

[705] Whealey 1989, 76.
[706] Coverdale 1977, 130.
[707] Proctor 1983, 55.
[708] Whealey 1989, 25.
[709] Viñas 2013.

Assessment

Table 7.1 provides an overview of this short case study. The available evidence supports the key argument of the dissertation: the sponsor's perception of poor proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action determine a transition from indirect to direct support. This is valid even though the form of assistance that Nazi Germany provided in 1936 was limited mostly to air support—unlike Fascist Italy in the same period. While the fit with the "ideal type" of direct support is only partial, the function of the Condor Legion was effectively the same (quickly offset Franco's weaknesses against a perceivably superior Republican opponent). Moreover, the case provides further support to the claim made in Chapter 5 that Mussolini and Hitler, while aligning their foreign policies, did not use direct intervention to outbid each other in Spain.

Table 7.1. *Overview: Nazi Germany in Spain.*

Case	**Fit with direct support ideal type**	**Fit with Support Escalation Theory**	**Alternative explanations evaluated and fit**
Spanish Civil War **Year: 1936** **Sponsor: Nazi Germany** **Recipient: Franco**	Partial (direct air support, but no troop contingent)	Good	Outbidding between allied sponsors – poor

Cuba in Angola: direct support escalation during the Cold War

Regarded as a peripheral colony in Southern Africa and largely external to geopolitical dynamics for most of the 20th century, in 1975 Angola suddenly became the epicenter of Cold War confrontation. Following the sudden collapse of the Portuguese empire, the lack of unity between liberation movements ushered in a bloody civil war with a massive degree of external involvement in Angola from both adjacent countries and distant superpowers. Both the United States and the Soviet Union provided large amounts of weapons, funding, and instructors to their preferred sides. The impact of the conflict was so substantial that, according to historian Odd Arne Westad, it led to the collapse of détente between Washington and Moscow.[710] The Angolan Civil War consisted of a series of conflict episodes, beginning in 1974 and lasting until the fall of the Berlin Wall, with a peace agreement paving the way for national elections in 1992.[711] The focus of this overview is on the first of these conflict episodes, lasting roughly until 1976, because that period saw the first wave of external support to Angola's warring factions, including forms of direct support, allowing to test Support Escalation Theory against alternative explanations.

In 1974, the Carnation Revolution abruptly terminated Caetano's regime in Portugal. It also led to the sudden collapse of the Portuguese colonial empire, which Lisbon had previously clinged on to. At the time of the revolution, the Angolan liberation movement was not united but divided across ethnic and societal cleavages. The once-mainstream nationalist organization, the Frente Nacional de Libertaçâo de Angola (National Front for the Liberation of Angola, or FNLA), led by Holden Roberto, saw its monopoly contested by the urban-based and Socialist-leaning Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, or MPLA), whose leader was Agostinho Neto. Moreover, a splinter faction of the

[710] Westad 2005, 241.
[711] Conflict continued further in the form of a low-intensity insurgency until the death of the main rebel leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002.

FNLA reorganized itself in the Southwest of the country under the leadership of Jonas Savimbi: the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (National Unit for the Total Independence of Angola, UNITA).

To unite the factions ahead of independence—which was planned for November 1975—and ensure a peaceful transition, the Portuguese authority negotiated the Alvor Agreements on 15 January 1975 and formed a national unity government. However, neither the three factions nor their backers aimed to hold up the accords: by the spring, the transitional government had collapsed, as the FNLA and MPLA jostled for the control of the capital, Luanda, and UNITA mounted an insurgency in the remote parts of the country.[712]

The sudden collapse of Portuguese authority prior to full independence and the lack of unity within the movement paved the way for external intervention in the civil war. The United States and the Soviet Union became quickly interested in Angola: Washington, still ailing from the debacle in Vietnam, sought to prevent additional Soviet expansionism in the region without engaging in new overt military adventures, while Moscow wanted to maintain its policy of cautious expansionism, ensuring that newly independent countries would not enter the American or Chinese orbit.[713] These two actors were therefore involved in Angola: the USSR supported the MPLA with advisors and a training program, while the United States provided covert assistance to FNLA and UNITA starting in the summer of 1975, and then, after the FNLA dropped out of the struggle, to UNITA only.[714]

[712] Westad 2005, 218.
[713] Gleijeses 2002, 306; Westad 1996, 21.
[714] Gleijeses 2002, 258.

Although the focus of most scholarship is on the support the two superpowers provided to the Angolan warring factions, other states became significantly involved in Angola in the first episode of the civil war (1975-76). Zaire, South Africa, and Cuba resorted, at some point, to direct support for their preferred faction.[715] Mobutu's Zaire intervened alongside the FNLA while also seeking to annex the MPLA-held, oil-rich enclave of Cabinda. Moreover, Zaire also acted as an intermediary for the United States, passing funding, weapons, and logistics from Washington to the FNLA and to UNITA.[716] South Africa, worried about the establishment of a regime sympathetic to the Namibian independence struggle who could provide safe haven to the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO), provided technical assistance at first and a special operation force later in support of UNITA.[717] Cuba, a long-term sympathizer of Africa's revolutionary movements, sent a military advisory mission first and then a major troop contingent across the Ocean in November 1975, providing key support to the MPLA, allowing the latter to establish the People's Republic of Angola.[718] Although most of these countries withdrew their troops by the spring of 1976, their involvement in Angola did not end there: between 1977 and 1988, Cuban and South African forces continued escalating and de-escalating their presence in Angola. Eventually, the two powers and their proxies clashed at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988, the largest battle in the African continent since WWII.

The presence of these non-superpower interveners who provided direct support is particularly helpful for the dissertation. The chapter can explore the extent to which the dynamics of support escalation described by the theory and analyzed in depth in the other two case study chapters apply to conflicts during the Cold War. Moreover, this case provides an opportunity to study

[715] Anderson 2019; Duursma and Tamm 2021.
[716] Karlén and Rauta 2023, 125.
[717] Preez 1989; Spies 1989; Stiff 1999.
[718] George 2005; Gleijeses 2002; Gleijeses 2013; Polack 2013; Westad 2005.

the extent to which these interveners provided direct support independently as opposed to them acting under the direction of the two superpowers. Hence, the case provides additional tests of the theory against alternative explanations.

Therefore, the focus of this section will be on one of the non-superpower interveners, Cuba, focusing on Havana's decision to provide direct support to the MPLA faction in the fall of 1975. The other actor who carried out a significant intervention, South Africa, would also be a useful case. However, most of the records of South African history are not available in English or remain unclassified.[719] On the other hand, Cuba's intervention is the subject of studies that had direct access to Cuban and Angolan archives.[720]

The origin and first forms of Cuban support for the MPLA

Cuba's military effort to Angola is truly remarkable. The Cuban military contingent remained in the country for years (although it shrank considerably at certain points), amounting, at the peak of their intervention, to more than 50,000 soldiers. The mission's role was so significant and felt within Cuba that it was called "the Second Revolutionary War."[721] At the time, the idea of a Cuban intervention across the Atlantic came as a complete surprise to Washington:

> "When these officials thought of Communist subversion in Africa, they pictured Moscow and Beijing, not Havana. They could not imagine that a weak, poor Caribbean island whose only link to Africa was the blood of hundreds of thousands of slaves shipped across the Atlantic to toil in Cuban plantations could play a role on that faraway continent."[722]

[719] Preez 1989; Spies 1989.
[720] In particular, Gleijeses 2002; Gleijeses 2006; Westad 1996.
[721] George 2005, 82; Gleijeses 2006, 98.
[722] Gleijeses 2002, 7.

Many scholars have interpreted Cuban intervention as the mere arm of a Soviet-led strategy aimed at supporting Communist movements and pushing back against the United States in Southern Africa.[723] Even Henry Kissinger believed the Cubans to be Soviet proxies, although in his memoires he seems to have reconsidered:

> "At the time, we thought [Castro] was operating as a Soviet surrogate. We could not imagine that he would act so provocatively so far from home unless he was pressured by Moscow to repay the Soviet Union for its military and economic support. Evidence now available suggests that the opposite was the case."[724]

While the USSR policy vis-à-vis the region certainly subsumed to the logic of superpower competition and Moscow used actors such as Cuba as conduits for aid in Africa and beyond, this interpretation fails nonetheless to account for Cuba's independent decisions regarding foreign support in the Angolan conflict. In particular, the pattern of support change between the summer and fall of 1975 shows that Cuba retained agency in its decisions to aid the MPLA and did not merely carry out Moscow's orders. As the most important studies of Cuban and Soviet archives regarding the conflict show, Fidel Castro acted independently from Brezhnev, and often against Soviet warnings regarding the deployment of foreign troops.[725] The decision to shift from indirect support to the MPLA to the dispatch of a combat force, in fact, stems in reaction to the MPLA's worsening conflict outlook and perceived ineffectiveness vis-à-vis rival factions FNLA and UNITA, following the predictions of Support Escalation Theory. This section will also present arguments against another alternative explanation, i.e. the recipient's independent request for direct support, showing that the decision was Castro's own and not merely a reaction to the MPLA's requests.

[723] Dunér 1981; Westad 1996, 21; Anderson 2019; Duursma and Tamm 2021; Tamm and Duursma 2022.
[724] Kissinger 1999, 816.
[725] The two studies are Westad 1996 and Gleijeses 2002.

Cuban support for the MPLA emerged out of long-term contacts between the two sides as well as from ideological commitments. Havana had first engaged with Africa in the 1960s, engaging in an aggressive a foreign policy to export revolution and obtain allies.[726] Che Guevara led a mission across the continent to assist anti-colonial movements in Algeria, Zaire, and Guinea. Until 1966, MPLA cadres received Cuban training in Brazzaville, and Cuba also sent instructors to support MPLA actions in the oil-rich Cabinda enclave. The ideological similarity between the MPLA's socialist program and Cuban revolutionary internationalism turned the two parties into close allies despite the geographical distance. Due to these past contacts and affinity, it was natural for Agostinho Neto, the leader of MPLA, to resort to Castro for additional support in December 1974, as rival factions started fighting in preparation for independence.

In 1974, Cuba agreed to re-engage in Angola, but its revolutionary zeal had been reduced since the death of Che Guevara. Castro aligned Cuban foreign policy with the Soviet one, accepting the necessity of maintaining détente. It was necessary not to appear over-aggressive in Southern Africa to avoid escalating tensions with Washington. There were also internal problems, including an electoral contest, which limited the amount of assistance that Castro was willing to provide. Moreover, at the time, the MPLA received most of its training and supplies from Moscow, so Neto did not press Havana to obtain additional requests. The leader of the MPLA was also unwilling to show over-reliance on foreign support, thinking that the movement could manage the transition to independence: "Pride, self-confidence, and the illusion that war could be postponed made the MPLA think that it did not have to beg."[727] For these reasons, despite the resumption of Cuban support to the MPLA, the amount of assistance was initially limited.

[726] Dunér 1987; Gleijeses 1996.
[727] Gleijeses 2002, 250.

The evolution of the Angolan civil war soon altered Cuba's calculations. As hostilities between the three factions resumed and the Alvor Agreement collapsed, the MPLA appeared to be in the best position to become the legitimate government of the country, as it had control of the capital, Luanda, and important allies in the Portuguese administration which would hand over sovereignty on 11 November 1975, the scheduled day of independence. However, the other two factions eroded the MPLA's advantage by the summer. The FNLA, based in Northern Angola and supported directly by the Congolese, but also indirectly by the United States (on 18 July, President Ford approved covert aid) and even from China, launched an operation to capture Luanda.[728] Meanwhile, a second front opened in the south of the country. South Africa, concerned that an MPLA victory would create a safe haven for armed groups fighting for the independence of Namibia (SWAPO), started to support UNITA with weapons and instructors.

As the conflict assumed a bleak outlook, Cuba updated its beliefs about the MPLA's chances of success: to put it in the words of the theoretical framework, the recipient of support was not sufficiently effective to withstand the advance of the other groups. Hence, having ignored a second request for additional aid by Neto in April, when the battlefield situation was not bleak, in June Castro's advisors advised him to set up the Military Missions of Cuba in Angola (MMCA). The FNLA's victory in the town of Caixito on 24 July 1975 hastened the preparations: by September, a 480-men mission was sent to Luanda to train MPLA forces. At the same time, the capital remained in the MPLA's hands, and no direct threats to it appear from the documents. Consequently, the second variable that the theory requires to predict escalation to direct support (high costs of delaying battlefield action) was not present at the time. The plan was to "create and staff four training centers (Centros de Instrucción

[728] George 2005, 60; Gleijeses 2002, 258.

Revolucionaria, or CIRs), which would train some 5,300 Angolans in three to six months."[729] Note that, by referring to such a long timeline, the plan did not assume that the battlefield situation needed to be immediately reversed. On 11 October the CIA National Intelligence Daily specified that "a few Cuban technical advisers have been operating with the Popular Movement [MPLA] inside Angola for some time."[730] There was no mention of Cuban troops, since they were not there.

The training supplied by Cuban—and Soviet—advisors helped reorganize the FAPLA, the MPLA's armed wing. This calculation appeared to bear fruit: FAPLA units pushed back the FLNA's advance towards Luanda. Despite Mobutu's direct support to the FNLA and the U.S. covert operation being under way, the MPLA was winning as independence day approached. The MPLA "appeared to be heading for a military walkover."[731] The MPLA was winning "not because of Cuban aid (no Cubans were yet fighting in Angola) or because of superior weapons (the rival coalition had a slight edge, thanks to U.S. and South African largesse)," but because, as the CIA station chief in Luanda wrote, MPLA forces "were more effective, better educated, better trained and better motivated" than those of the FNLA and UNITA.[732] This was, at least in part, due to the successful training provided by Cuba and the USSR. Even in the early stages of the South African advance (see below), the MMCA's chief Díaz Argüelles believed that "the MPLA still has the advantage… The enemy, ill prepared and dispirited, including the Zairean army units . . . is giving us breathing space to train the [MPLA] battalions."[733]

[729] Gleijeses 2002, 256.
[730] Ibid., 270–71.
[731] Legum and Hodges 1976, 15.
[732] Robert Hultslander (CIA station chief, Luanda, 1975), faxed communication to Piero Gleijeses, 22 December 1998, quoted in Gleijeses 2006, 100.
[733] Quoted in Gleijeses 2002, 303.

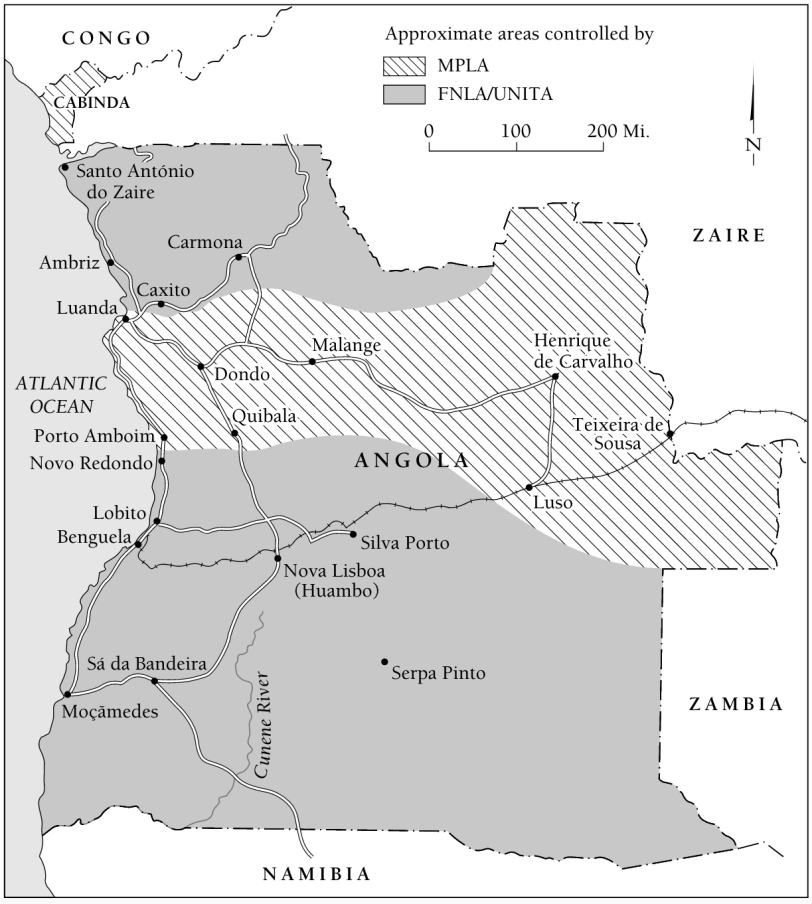
The decision to dispatch troops across the Atlantic

Cuba's calculations were to change again, however, as the challenge from the South mounted in the fall of 1975. South Africa, which was fighting its own counter-insurgency in Namibia against SWAPO and the ANC, saw with concern how a movement that was sympathetic to both groups was gaining the upper hand. Between September and October, South African President Vorster approved Operation Savannah, which aimed to eliminate the FAPLA from, respectively, "the border area, the southwestern region, and, finally, the central region. Phase 4 provided for the capture of Luanda, the ultimate military objective".[734] A 1000-men strong Zulu Task Force crossed the border in October, partnered with UNITA, and advanced towards Luanda at the rate of forty miles per day.

Task Force Zulu defeated FAPLA units at Sá da Bandeira and Catengue between late October and early November 1975. Operation Savannah coincided with a new offensive by the FNLA in the north, towards the towns of Caixito and Quifangondo (at Luanda's gates), and with Mobutu's new attempt to seize the Cabinda enclave. As Figure 7.1 shows, the MPLA was under pressure from both the North and the South.

[734] Ibid., 301.

Figure 7.1. *Territorial control in Angola in November 1975.*[735]



The next stage of support escalation closely follows the expectations of the theory. First, the recipient of support was ineffective vis-à-vis the new military challenge. The result of the battle of Catengue was particularly alarming to Havana since Cuban instructors happened to be present and could gauge the strength of Zulu Force.[736] Despite the training mission, the MPLA's combat effectiveness and resource stock was insufficient to face these simultaneous assaults. FAPLA units were strong enough to defeat UNITA, but were no match for Zulu Force. Additionally, simply beefing up the MMCA would have been insufficient as time was pressing. According to Jorge Risquet, Castro's advisor on African affairs, it was paramount that the

[735] Gleijeses 2006, 313.

[736] As South African Commander Jan Breytenbach claimed, "We were facing the best organized and heaviest FAPLA opposition to date." This is evidence of Cuban training. However, the South Africans enjoyed a fire advantage which forced FAPLA and Cubans to withdraw. See Spies 1989, 65–67.

MPLA retained control of Luanda by Independence Day, to present itself as the legitimate government of Angola.

Second, the sponsor perceived an imminently closing window, which required drastic measures to avoid disaster. On 2 November, Zulu Force defeated the FAPLA at Catengue. On 3 November, Díaz Argüelles, the MMCA's head, requested immediate and massive reinforcements from Havana. Unless the MPLA was able to mount an effective defense immediately, the South Africans would seize the city. Risquet succinctly summarizes the Cubans' dilemma: "We had to choose: either withdraw the instructors and abandon Angola, or send in the Special Forces."[737]

Castro decided to send Cuban Special Forces and artillery regiments, launching Operation Carlota. The decision was made on 4 November, hurriedly and under pressure, which further reinforces the theoretical assumption that direct support escalation takes place when time is running out:.[738] A 652-man battalion of the elite Special Forces of the Ministry of the Interior was immediately flown to Luanda, and an artillery regiment followed by sea. It was just the beginning of Cuba's significant direct support effort.

From November 1975 to April 1976, 36,000 Cuban soldiers were sent to Angola.[739] The Cuban contingent fought alongside the FAPLA, with immediate results. First, a combined FAPLA-Cuban force defeated the FNLA and its Zairian backers at Quifangondo, ending the northern menace on Luanda. This allowed Neto, the MPLA's leader, to declare Angola's independence on 11 November 1975 and to be sworn in as the country's first President. In the South, Cuban

[737] Gleijeses 2002, 305.
[738] George 2005, 77.
[739] Gleijeses 2006, 98.

Special Forces clashed with the Zulu Force at Novo Redondo, Porto Amboim, and Ebo. These battles changed the conflict, stopping the South African advance and ushering in a long war. By March 1976, South African forces withdrew from Angola after receiving security guarantees from Neto, which also led Cuba to withdraw part of its contingent. In the North, the FNLA lost all foreign support and collapsed, leaving UNITA as the only rebel group in Angola to rival Neto's government. The first episode of external involvement in the Angolan Civil War came to a close.[740]

Havana's choice, Moscow's request or Luanda's plea?

After finding prima-facie support for Support Escalation Theory in the case, it is now time to quickly check alternative explanations. The most prominent counterargument that has been made in the context of the Cuban support to Angola is that Havana was acting on Moscow's orders (as per the "complex delegation" hypothesis).[741] The foreign policy proximity between the two countries in that period is undeniable, making this hypothesis more plausible. However, the decision to engage in direct support was Cuba's own, and not forced upon it by the Soviet Union. Documents of the period show unwillingness and caution on Brezhnev's part when Castro first mentioned the potential need for direct intervention. At the time, the USSR was involved in strategic arms limitation talks with the US (which would lead to SALT II), and were not willing to jeopardize the international climate with moves that could be perceived as aggressive. Moreover, Soviet leaders worried that "the dispatch of Cuban troops would hurt détente and offend most African countries, and they were not convinced that the situation in Angola warranted it."[742] While the USSR did provide significant support to the MPLA at the

[740] Gleijeses 2002, 328–346.
[741] Dunér 1981; Westad 1996, 21; Anderson 2019; Duursma and Tamm 2021; Tamm and Duursma 2022.
[742] Gleijeses 2002, 261; Westad 1996, 25.

time, including a training program in Moscow, it refused to consider troop contingents or to allow Cuba to do so.[743]

Despite Soviet opposition, Cuba did send troops in November 1975. Moscow was unaware of Castro's decision until after it was made, as both Soviet and Cuban officials claim. As the former Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatolii Dobrynin, states in his memoirs, the Cubans sent their troops to Angola "on their own initiative and without consulting us."[744] Another Soviet official confirms that "Castro acted without prior consultation with Moscow."[745] On his part, Castro has said: "That was a decision of ours…The only thing that came from the Soviet Union was worries. They conveyed them to us in 1975, but it was an absolutely free and sovereign decision by our country."[746] According to Gleijeses, "[T]here was very little time—the South Africans were closing in on Luanda… Consulting the Soviets would run the risk of a negative or dilatory answer... At the same time, the very closeness of the relationship may have led Castro to be confident that, confronted with the fait accompli, Moscow would support him."[747] In fact, after seeing the first successes of Cuban troops, the USSR welcomed the decision and started providing airlifts for Cuban forces to Angola. Nevertheless, the initial decision was made by Cuba in the absence of—or even against—Soviet instructions, countering the complex delegation argument.

A second alternative explanation concerns the independent role of the recipient: according to this argument, the Cuban escalation to direct support would not be the result of requests and

[743] Westad 1996, 236.
[744] Dobrynin 2001, 362.
[745] Pavlov 1996, 102.
[746] Castro's remarks at the Havana Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, Jan. 11, 1992. Quoted in Gleijeses 2002, 307.
[747] Ibid.

pressures from the MPLA. The MPLA leadership wanted Cuban troops to intervene in the fall of 1975. However, they never actually asked Cuba for direct support at the time. As the situation worsened in the battlefield and Zulu was closing in on Benguela, the MPLA's political bureau met in an emergency session in which Neto announced the need to ask Cuba for troops.[748] However, the person charged with informing Cuba never actually conveyed the request. Gleijeses's account explains how this happened:

> "Onambwe, however, categorically denied that he had flown to Havana to deliver a request for Cuban troops. He told me he had not gone to Cuba until mid-December, and then only as a member of the MPLA delegation led by Lúcio Lara to the First Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Xiyetu, chief of staff of the FAPLA, and two members of the MPLA's political bureau in 1975—Lara and Ludy Kissassunda—adamantly confirmed Onambwe's account. The MPLA's political bureau, they explained, never formally requested Cuban troops. The leaders of the MPLA and of the FAPLA informally discussed the need for Cuban reinforcements with the Cuban military mission (MMCA)."[749]

Hence, the MPLA never did request troops to Cuba. When the delegation flew to Havana, in December, Castro's decision on Operation Carlota was already more than a month old, and Cuban forces had already pushed the FNLA and UNITA away from Luanda. Hence, evidence suggests that the decision was not pressed upon the sponsor from the recipient.

Assessment

Table 7.2 provides an overview of this section's main findings, focusing on Cuba's decision to provide direct support in November 1975. The evidence evaluated here strongly support the theoretical argument: it was the MPLA's poor proxy effectiveness against the combined attack from UNITA and FNLA—and their backers—combined with the high costs of delaying

[748] Wolfers and Bergerol 1983, 30.
[749] Gleijeses 2002, 305.

battlefield action—in the form of the potential fall of Luanda—that persuaded Castro and his entourage to intervene directly. Furthermore, the evidence is not consistent with the complex delegation argument: Cuba did not act as Moscow's proxy, as some accounts during the Cold War claim, but the intervention was the result of independent decision-making. A second alternative explanation—that Cuba acted on request of the MPLA—does not hold up to scrutiny.

Table 7.2. *Overview: Cuba in Angola.*

Case	**Fit with direct support ideal type**	**Fit with Support Escalation Theory**	**Alternative explanations evaluated and fit**
Angolan Civil War **Year: 1975** **Sponsor: Cuba** **Recipient: MPLA**	Good (significant troop contingent)	Good	Complex delegation – poor Independent request of the recipient – poor

The Americanization of the Vietnam War: Does Support Escalation Theory play a role?

The process whereby the United States became directly involved in the Vietnam War, eventually committing to more than 500,000 ground troops in Washington's largest counterinsurgency operation of the 20th century, has been well researched. A large body of scholarship has analyzed the U.S. decision to escalate its involvement in Indochina during the

1960s, both in history[750] and in political science.[751] Most of these works point to the American decision to escalate commitment as part of a compellence strategy aimed at persuading the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), or North Vietnam, and their Soviet patrons, that they could not win the war against the South. Hence, it was primarily an interstate bargaining strategy that guided Washington's decision-making.[752] Moreover, this literature explains the timing of the "Americanization" of the war in terms of Lyndon B. Johnson's electoral concerns: the President only allowed the introduction of U.S. troops to fight in Vietnam after he secured electoral victory in November 1964.

Given these two well-established explanations—international bargaining with North Vietnam and its Soviet patrons, and the importance of LBJ's electoral concerns—and the strong empirical backing for them, Support Escalation Theory appears unlikely to have strong explanatory power for the Vietnam War. Yet, this short overview attempts to make a case for its applicability for two reasons. First, although domestic constraints and international bargaining dynamics play an important role, they cannot be dissociated from the American perceptions of the increasing weakness of their South Vietnamese client, the worsening conflict outlook, or the sense of urgency that developed within the LBJ administration. In other words, the dynamics of the confrontation between the South Vietnamese army (ARVN), the Viet Cong, and their North Vietnamese patrons cannot be excluded from the equation. Second, although Johnson did postpone the decision to plan for the dispatch of troops after the 1964 election, this was only implemented in 1965 because of worsening conflict dynamics, responding to perceptions of a closing window and proxy ineffectiveness. Hence, the case for direct support escalation can still be made.

[750] Herring 1979; Logevall 2005; Logevall 2010; Kahin 1986; Kaiser 2000.
[751] Gelb and Betts 1979; Khong 1992; Ladwig 2017.
[752] Schelling 1966; Reed et al. 2008.

U.S. support to South Vietnam until 1963: containment through an advisory role

The American involvement in Indochina began in the 1950s, mostly as a result of France's failure to defeat the Viet Minh independence movement. Initially opposed to the re-establishment of the French colonial empire, the Truman administration gradually grew worried of Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh as "Stalin's paw."[753] As the French negotiated their way out of Indochina following the defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the Geneva conference partitioned Vietnam into two states, the U.S. assumed an increasingly central role in the defense of the non-Communist South: if Vietnam were allowed to fall, President Eisenhower argued in April 1954, other countries would inevitably and perhaps swiftly follow suit. The domino theory unveiled by Eisenhower was at the root of U.S. interests in propping up South Vietnam as a bulwark against communism when, between 1954 and 1957, the National Liberation Front (which would then become the Viet Cong) started mounting an insurgency campaign in South Vietnam.

However, the situation did not appear dramatic and in need for a direct American military role: between 1954 and 1957, the anti-Communist government led by Ngo Dinh Diem succeeded in preventing large-scale organized unrest in the countryside—indicating a minimum degree of proxy effectiveness. The recent experience of the American involvement in the Korean war and the climate of high tensions with the Soviet Union discouraged the Eisenhower administration from taking more drastic action such as direct intervention.[754] Propping up

[753] Logevall 2010, 288.
[754] Logevall 2005, 10.

Diem through political clout, including by supporting the latter's elimination of political rivals,[755] was therefore the preferred position by the American administration. Hence, the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAGV) was set up, tasked with advising the Diem government.

As the Kennedy administration assumed power in 1961, the outlook in Vietnam was looking increasingly bleak. In September 1960, North Vietnam's southern headquarters, gave an order to the Vietcong for a full scale coordinated uprising in South Vietnam against the government: within a few months, one third of South Vietnam's population was "living in areas of communist control."[756] The MAAGV gradually realized that countering the insurgency mounted by the Viet Cong was beyond Saigon's capabilities. Government forces were losing control of the countryside, and engagements with the Viet Cong at times resulted in spectacular defeats such as the one at Ap Bac in January 1963, when "a small band of Viet Cong won a battle against a much larger and better-equipped South Vietnamese force, many of whose officers seemed reluctant even to engage in combat."[757]

The U.S. believed that the main reason for the Viet Cong's increasing strength came from a significant outpouring of men from North Vietnam, assisted by China and the Soviet Union, across Laos and Cambodia.[758] Hence, Washington interpreted the events through the Cold War lenses of communist infiltration. While North Vietnamese support was certainly nonnegligible, the truth was that population control policies implemented by the Vietnamese government such

[755] Khong 1992, 83.
[756] Hastings 2019, 106–107.
[757] Sheehan 1989, 201–202.
[758] Logevall 2010, 289.

as the strategic hamlet program codenamed "Operation Sunshine" failed to isolate the insurgents and made the population even more adverse to the government.[759]

In Saigon, the Diem government was facing increasingly strong opposition from non-Communist sectors of Vietnamese society such as Buddhists. Massive protests were met with repression, led by Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, which further alienated the government and increased support for the Viet Cong. American attempts to persuade Diem to change his stance vis-à-vis non-Communist opposition met with stiff resistance: the South Vietnamese leader believed that American support would continue indefinitely, regardless of his policies.[760] He was not entirely wrong: unlike in Laos, where Kennedy agreed to a Communist-led national unity government, American foreign policy was not prepared to accept a political settlement until North Vietnam stopped supporting the Viet Cong, and refused to convene national elections due to the likelihood of a sweeping victory for Ho Chi Minh.[761]

Consequently, Diem believed he could allow himself to stand up to his patron. This defying behavior signaled preference misalignment between sponsor and recipient; together with the lack of operational capacity, as revealed by Saigon's inability to enact a counter-insurgency campaign as the loss of territorial control and repeated defeats. Washington's perception of proxy effectiveness was re-evaluated. The Kennedy administration came to the conclusion that "Diem's political incompetence was probably the biggest source of the problem" of South Vietnam's instability.[762] This called for an overhaul of American involvement in Vietnam.

[759] Karnow 1997, 274.
[760] Elias 2020; Ladwig 2017.
[761] Logevall 2005, 75.
[762] Kaiser 2000, 131.

Over time, the U.S. interests in Vietnam remained high. Hence, despite some opposition within the National Security Council, withdrawal of support for South Vietnam was out of the question. However, Kennedy's policy remained centered around the idea of providing advisory and logistical support while "minimizing the likelihood of U.S. involvement."[763] He believed that Diem's forces had to ultimately defeat the guerrillas on their own. He was against the deployment of American combat troops, although he understood its immediate and direct effect on battlefield dynamics in line with the theory of escalation. In fact, he observed that:

> "[T]o introduce U.S. forces in large numbers there today, while it might have an initially favorable military impact, would almost certainly lead to adverse political and, in the long run, adverse military consequences."[764]

This statement indicates that the U.S. President was concerned about the costs of direct military support, which would not justify its short-term gains. This is consistent with the argument that direct support would only be provided when both proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action are perceived.

Rather than increasing support to Diem, the U.S. agreed to support a military coup against him, which took place on 2 November 1963. As the theoretical chapter argues, a sponsor who is dissatisfied with a recipient's perceived level of proxy effectiveness can shift assistance to alternative recipients rather than escalating support. The prospect of the coup generated, de facto, an alternative recipient for the U.S., in the form of the ARVN generals who were plotting against Diem. Through the famous Cable 243, the U.S. State Department communicated to Ambassador to Saigon Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. instructions to support the coup, and the CIA informed the conspirators that the United States would not oppose such a move nor punish the

[763] Ibid., 140.
[764] Vietnam Task Force 1969, 1–2.

generals by cutting off aid.[765] Hence, the U.S. support for the coup corresponds, de facto, to the choice of an alternative recipient, which further explains why no escalation of assistance was provided in 1963.

Steps towards Americanization

JFK's own assassination and the inauguration of President Lindon B. Johnson (LBJ), just twenty days after Diem's death, ushered in a new phase of escalation. The coup did not solve Saigon's domestic turmoil and gave rise instead to a new season of violence, repression, and coups – with the junta that had assassinated Diem being ousted from power in January 1964.[766] This indicated that, even with advice from U.S. forces to the new government, the degree of proxy effectiveness remained low. The experience of the anti-Diem coup persuaded Washington that there were no viable alternatives within the South Vietnamese political landscape which could better lead the Saigon government and run the counterinsurgency against the Viet Cong.

Moreover, the situation military situation did not improve, as the Saigon government's effective control of the countryside slipped out of hand. In 1964, the Viet Cong began a new offensive campaign. The North Vietnamese government supplied the Viet Cong forces and with AK-47 rifles and other supplies, and formed new military units such as the 9th Division.[767] From a strength of "approximately 5,000" at the start of 1959, the Viet Cong's ranks grew to

[765] Karnow 1997, 326.
[766] Ibid., 340.
[767] Hastings 2019, 223.

"about 100,000 at the end of 1964."[768] These numbers indicate a clearly worsening situation for the ARVN, threatening the South Vietnamese government's hold on power.

It is under those circumstances that the United States took additional steps towards direct involvement. After the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964—when two alleged attacks on destroyers USS Turner Joy and Maddox that were patrolling the area, which according to declassified documents were likely provoked and exaggerated by U.S. forces themselves—Congressed authorized the Johnson administration to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."[769] President Johnson used this mandate to remove any limits on American involvement, authorizing his subordinates to draft a plan "to make clear [to Hanoi] that…we will escalate the conflict to whatever level is required to insure their defeat."[770]

The plans for escalation were, however, put off until the November 1964 elections. Once Johnson secured a sweeping electoral victory, the Chiefs of Staff immediately drafted a series of options for Vietnam. Among the different plans, they recommended one of increasing pressure on North Vietnam, beginning with air attacks on a list of targets, which would gradually escalate to include, potentially, nuclear strikes.[771] LBJ approved the plan on 7 December 1964.

The paragraphs above seem to be inconsistent with Support Escalation Theory. First, the delay in the decision to approve plans for American direct involvement in Vietnam were delayed

[768] Kahin 1986, 185; Kaiser 2000; Hastings 2019.
[769] Moise 1996, 78; Hastings 2019, 221.
[770] Kaiser 2000, 292.
[771] Ibid., 372.

until after the 1964 election, whereas the theory would indicate that direct support would be provided as soon as a closing window was detected, to avoid the high costs of delaying battlefield action. Second, the plans drafted by the Chiefs of Staff reflects a logic of coercive bargaining in interstate conflicts, rather than a logic of counter-insurgency. The target was not the Viet Cong, but North Vietnam. Yuen Foong Khong describes the mindset of the LBJ administration as being guided by a "logic of analogies": officials justified the need to coerce North Vietnam and not give up by referring to appeasement towards Nazi Germany in the 1930s and to the lack of American resoluteness ahead of the Korean War, which failed to prevent aggression.[772] These analogies fit well within the framework of the domino theory. Hence, it appears that electoral concerns and international bargaining logics drove the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam, rather than the logic of support escalation.

Yet, despite the validity of these competing explanations, Support Escalation Theory can still explain why direct support was provided as the measure of last resort to support the South Vietnamese government. Although the decision for escalation was taken shortly after the 1964 elections, it was not implemented until some additional events that took place between winter and spring 1965, which once again highlighted the perception of a closing window. In December 1964, ARVN forces suffered heavy losses at the Battle of Binh Gia as the Viet Cong displayed new tactical prowess: rather than its classic hit-and-run guerrilla tactics, at Binh Gia the Viet Cong defeated a strong ARVN force in a conventional battle and remained in the field for four days. Hence, the battle was seen as a watershed moment, highlighting that the Viet Cong represented a conventional military threat.[773]

[772] Khong 1992.
[773] Kahin 1986, 58.

On 6 January, a memo from Assistant National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to President Johnson, known as the "Fork in the Road" memo, described a dangerous downwards spiral in Vietnam: pacification efforts in the countryside where failing, and the number of Viet Cong attacks was increasing, posing a direct threat to Saigon.[774] The Battle of Binh Gia was indicated as evidence of this imminent threat. Moreover, the Brinks Hotel Bombing on Christmas eve of 1964 showed that Americans were now the target of attacks.

In the "Fork in the Road" memo, Bundy and McNamara presented a choice to Johnson: either bring in the full force of the U.S. military or negotiate with the enemy. If the escalation of American involvement in fighting was not immediately put in motion, South Vietnam would soon collapse. In February, Johnson agreed to implement Phase I of the plan, known as Operation Rolling Thunder, to strike North Vietnamese installations, which began on 2 March 1965. With Rolling Thunder, the United States abandoned its proxy strategy and became a belligerent in the Vietnam War, although the target was North Vietnam rather than the Viet Cong insurgency.[775] However, this was followed by the first American commitment to the fighting against the insurgency. On 8 March 1965, 3,500 U.S. Marines landed in Da Nang, with their first combat assignment—to reinforce the base under Viet Cong attack.[776] The American military footprint in South Vietnam, however, was still relatively small.

Then, by May-June 1965, as the bombing campaign over North Vietnam was under way, a major Viet Cong offensive over the central highlands put the survival of the Saigon government

[774] Kaiser 2000, 387.
[775] Herring 1979.
[776] Hastings 2019, 246–247.

in jeopardy once again.[777] According to General Westmoreland, head of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), "The Viet Cong were destroying [ARVN] battalions faster than they could be reconstituted."[778] It was no longer possible, he claimed, to keep the bombing campaign separated from ground operations against the insurgency. Moreover, and critically, Westmoreland argued for the end of an American role as merely supporting the ARVN, and pushed to take up the bulk of the fighting: "I am convinced that U.S. troops with their energy, mobility, and firepower can successfully take the fight to the NLF (Viet Cong)."[779] Westmoreland's reasoning aligns closely with Support Escalation Theory: the opponent's advances required immediate action on the battlefield; however, he recipient's armed forces could not be entrusted with the fighting, whereas the sponsor's forces could.

Accordingly, Westmoreland requested the deployment of 100,000 U.S. ground troops. A dramatic series of meetings on 21-23 July 1965 shows the extent to which many in Johnson's National Security Council believed that, in the absence of U.S. troop involvement, Saigon would soon collapse.[780] In some key passages from those meetings, McNamara conveyed the sense of urgency and proxy ineffectiveness that required direct U.S. troop involvement:

> "VC [i.e., the Viet Cong] has greatly expanded its control of the country, populous areas are now isolated, both the VC and ARVN have been suffering heavy casualties. Unless the US steps in with additional forces, the VC will push the GVN into small enclaves and [it will] become increasingly ineffective. VC now controls 25% of the population."[781]

CIA Director Raborn added to the sense of urgency, estimating that "the VC controlled about 25 percent of the population during the day and about 50 percent at night" and that "by 1965's

[777] Kahin 1986, 306.
[778] Khong 1992, 180.
[779] Vietnam Task Force 1969, Vol. IV, 7.
[780] Kahin 1986, 370–378.
[781] Ibid., 371.

end, we expect NVN (North Vietnam) to increase its forces. It will attempt to gain a substantial victory." [782] The rest of LBJ's cabinet agreed with the assessment that "the VC now had the capability to push ARVN out of positions they now control with a consequent inevitable takeover of the Government."[783] On 28 July, Johnson communicated its decision to the country, announcing an immediate increase of U.S. fighting strength in Vietnam to over 100,000 troops.

The only dissenting opinion came from Undersecretary of State George Ball, who, like JFK, was concerned about the long-term repercussions of American troop involvement, both in the evolution of the war and on the international stage:

> "If we could win in a year's time, and win decisively, world opinion would be alright… However, if the war is long and protracted, as I believe it will be, then we will suffer because the world's greatest power cannot defeat guerrillas…. I truly have serious doubt that an army of westerners can successfully fight orientals in an Asian jungle."[784]

The granting of ground troops gave way to the Americanization of the Vietnam War. The gradual escalation which the December 1964 decision called for had to be abandoned in the light of what appeared to be a rapidly deteriorating scenario and an immediate collapse of the recipient, as the escalation theory suggests. As George Ball had predicted, the intervention took on a momentum of its own, involving ever-increasing numbers of men, until the president finally called a halt at more than half a million American troops.[785]

[782] Ibid., 371–372.
[783] Ibid., 373.
[784] Ibid.
[785] Ibid., 366.

Assessment

As Table 7.3 suggests, Support Escalation Theory can still explain the unfolding of the Americanization of the Vietnam War, even when other explanations are at play and can explain other aspects of this specific case. Although the LBJ administration initially delayed the intervention due to electoral concerns and the military planners had an international conflict with North Vietnam in mind, these factors are not sufficient to discard Support Escalation Theory. In fact, the minutes of the meetings of July 1965 support the interpretation that perception of poor proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action pushed the U.S. to scale up the intervention.

Table 7.3. *Overview: the United States in Vietnam.*

Case	**Fit with direct support ideal type**	**Fit with Support Escalation Theory**	**Alternative explanations evaluated and fit**
Vietnam War **Year: 1965** **Sponsor: United States** **Recipient: South Vietnam**	Good (significant troop contingent)	Good – but also evidence of other factors at work	Domestic politics in sponsor state – good International conflict dynamics – good

Turkey's intervention in Libya: At the limits of direct support

Libya's last decade has been characterized by conflict and instability. Since an internal uprising unleashed a civil war that toppled the 40-year government of Muhammar Ghaddafi in 2011, the country has not managed to find a political settlement between the country's Islamist, military, tribal and secessionist political forces. After an initial period of relative stability that followed Ghaddafi's removal, the country plunged into civil war in 2014. It was called the Second Libya Civil War, the first being the 2011 fight between Ghaddafi and revolutionary forces.

Despite the multilateral nature of this conflict, two main factions rose to prominence. On the one side were the House of Representatives (HoR), which was ousted from Tripoli after the hotly contested 2014 elections and moved to Tobruk in Cyrenaica, and its military forces, the Libyan National Army led by General Khalifa Haftar. A former member of the Libyan Army under Ghaddafi who defected in 2011, Haftar launched a campaign against Islamist movements in Benghazi called "Operation Dignity" in 2014, which marked the resumption of civil war across the country.

On the other side was the Tripoli-based government formed by politicians from the moderate Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties that controlled the General National Congress (GNC) since 2012, lost the June 2014 elections, but did not recognize the defeat on the basis that voter turnout was less than a fifth of the population. The GNC was replaced as part of the United Nations-brokered Skhirat Agreement by a broader Government of National Accord (GNA) in December 2015, led by Sayez al-Ferraj.[786] Other factions involved in the

[786] See Lacher 2020, 37–54; Wehrey 2018, 187–205; IISS 2020.

civil war were the National Salvation Government (also known as Libya Dawn Coalition), Islamist Shura Councils of Benghazi Revolutionaries, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Daesh)'s Libyan provinces, the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna, and tribal militias.[787]

The conflict lasted for about six years, from 2014 to 2020. In 2019, after the last strongholds of Daesh were defeated, the conflict became effectively bilateral. Haftar's LNA forces attempted to oust the GNA from Tripoli for about a year, without succeeding. In October 2020, the 5+5 Joint Libyan Military Commission representing the LNA and the GNA reached a "permanent ceasefire agreement in all areas of Libya."[788] Although general elections have yet to be held at the time of writing and national institutions controlling the entirety of Libya are not yet in place, the levels of violence have fallen significantly, and the Second Libyan Civil War is generally regarded as concluded.[789]

The conflict in Libya was characterized by a high degree of foreign meddling and intervention. In 2011, an international force led by NATO implemented a no-fly zone over Libya, thereby enabling anti-Ghaddafi rebels to defeat government forces.[790] Since open conflict resumed in 2014, many countries intervened in the war: the LNA received military support primarily from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia, including through the Wagner Group.[791] The GNA, instead, received most of its material assistance from Qatar and Turkey, while a broad

[787] Harchaoui and Lazib 2019, 7–13.
[788] Wintour 2020.
[789] According to some authors, the period starting with Haftar's 2019 Western Libya and the ceasefire agreement of 2020 constitutes a "third civil war". Lacher 2020, 52.
[790] Wehrey 2015, 105.
[791] There were also other countries providing support to the LNA, such as Sudan and Chad. Moreover, other countries have provided political support to the faction, such as France and the United States during the Trump administration.

coalition including countries from the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States (until 2019) provided political clout to the GNA under the formula of the United Nations-brokered government. Foreign support has had a significant impact in the Second Libyan Civil War: actors that received little to no foreign support, like Daesh, eventually collapsed. The 2019 offensive on Tripoli by the LNA was enabled by foreign assistance, and the resistance of the GNA in the capital was also made possible by Turkey's intervention. The 5+5 ceasefire agreement was also made possible by negotiations between the warfighters' main backers, Turkey and Russia.[792]

Throughout the war, some of the sponsors provided forms of assistance that are very similar to direct support. However, in none of the cases we see a clear-cut direct intervention. The chapter will focus on the escalation of support by Turkey in late 2019 in the GNA's favor, which consisted of national officers in charge of drone operations and Syrian mercenaries in ground combat roles. Many civil wars today experience a form of support blurring the lines between direct and indirect assistance. Hence, exploring foreign powers in Libya allows us to explore the limits of Support Escalation Theory and see its applicability to situations that do not fit the theory as much as the main case studies.

The results of this short analysis show that (1) despite not consisting of troop support, the escalation by Turkey in late 2019-early 2020 does resemble direct assistance; and (2) the two theoretical variables (proxy effectiveness and costs of delaying battlefield action) still matter in determining why and when Turkey opted for escalation.

[792] Al-Jabassini and Badi 2023, 7.

Turkey's role in the civil war prior to 2019

Turkey had been one of the NATO Allies who most opposed the intervention against Ghaddafi in 2011. Turkey's closeness to Gaddafi dated to when the latter backed the former's invasion of northern Cyprus in 1974, and economic activity between Libya and Turkey grew significantly over the subsequent years.[793] By early 2011, Turkish companies had over $20 billion of outstanding projects in Libya, mostly in construction, engineering, and energy. These enormous economic interests suffice to explain why Turkey first vetoed the intervention. Ankara dropped its opposition only under mounting pressure from the United States.[794]

However, not long later an opportunity presented itself: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government "came to appreciate the aura and ideological advantage it possessed in post-Gaddafi Libya" as a model for Islamist democratic governance.[795] Moreover, between 2011 and 2013, the Egyptian and Syrian crises brought Qatar and Turkey closer together in support of Islamist movements, jostling against other actors such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who instead supported military factions.[796] Further, supporting these factions was a way of recovering control of Turkey's economic assets in Libya while also advancing its geopolitical agenda in the region, especially in the context competing claims to exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece.[797]

Consequently, Ankara had political incentives to be more involved in Libyan politics after 2011 and to support a variety of moderate Islamist factions akin to the Muslim Brotherhood.

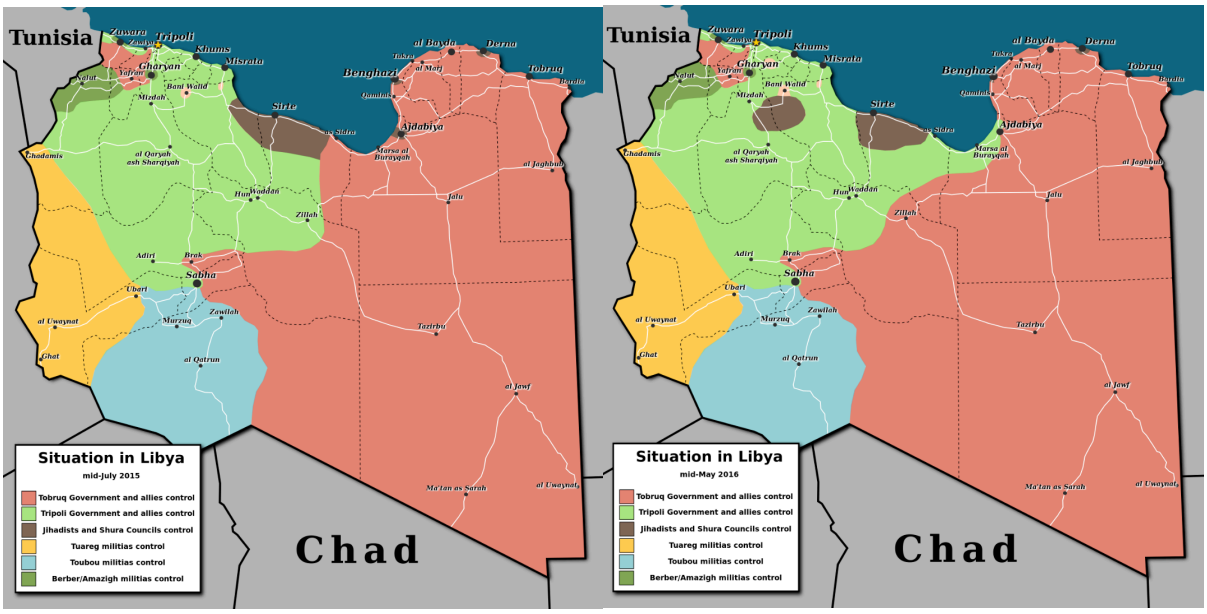
[793] Liel 2001, 176.
[794] Fuller 2014, 197; Harchaoui 2020a, 2.
[795] Harchaoui 2020a, 2.
[796] Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 889; Harchaoui 2020a, 3.
[797] Badarin and Schumacher 2022; Grigoriadis 2022.

When Haftar's Operation Dignity campaign against all Islamist groups in Benghazi began in 2014, Turkey's support assumed a military dimension. However, this was only limited to a form of indirect assistance that Jalel Harchaoui describes as a "*laissez-faire* attitude, which turned a blind eye whenever Libyan actors based in Turkey shipped weapons to Islamist brigades committed to fighting Haftar's armed coalition."[798] Turkey's transfer of weapons to Islamists fits squarely into the category of indirect support as described in this dissertation.

For a long time, Turkish assistance did not increase, for a number of reasons. First, as the maps in figure 7.2 show, after Haftar's Operation Dignity first failed to take over Tripoli, the frontlines remained relatively stable. Despite internal political divisions, the GNC first and the GNA later maintained control of Tripolitania, the region of Western Libya that includes the capital, thereby preventing the LNA from making significant gains towards the center of political power.[799] Second, the Tobruk-based HoR, the LNA and their backers were dedicating a large portion of their forces to fight Islamist forces in Benghazi— the Battle of Benghazi lasted from October 2014 to December 2017—and Derna—where a battle against Daesh first and the Shura Council of Mujahideen later lasted until February 2019.[800] This contributed to reducing the threat to Tripoli. Third, Qatar carried the lion's share in supporting the GNC and then the GNA for the period between 2014 and 2018.[801] Fourth, the inclusion into the GNA of some political forces in the central Libyan coastline allowed the government to encircle Daesh forces around Sirte, and to reduce the threat to oil facilities in the area.[802]

[798] Harchaoui 2020a, 4. See also Wehrey 2022, 19; Schanzer 2015; United Nations Security Council 2016, 32.
[799] Lacher 2020, 54.
[800] Wehrey 2018, 277.
[801] Yüksel and Tekineş 2021, 23–24.
[802] Lacher 2020, 48–49.

Figure 7.2. *Patterns of territorial control in Libya, 2015 and 2016.*[803]



According to the logic developed in the theoretical chapter, a sponsor would be incentivized to escalate to direct support if the recipient displayed poor effectiveness and the costs of delaying battlefield action were deemed too high due to a closing window of opportunity or vulnerability. In the years between 2014 and 2018, no closing window seems to have opened up, and the supported party did not appear to be ineffective – although Haftar's forces maintained control of most of Cyrenaica (Eastern Libya), they did not appear on the verge of threatening Tripoli. Hence, Ankara was happy to maintain the same level of support.

In the two years leading up to Haftar's April 2019 offensive against Tripoli, interference emanating from Turkey even diminished, as the GNA showed little interest in strengthened ties with Ankara at the cost of alienating other potential backers such as Greece. For instance, in November 2018, a few days before a peace conference in Palermo, Italy, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar visited GNA officials in Tripoli and presented them with maritime maps

[803] Wikimedia Commons 2019a; Wikimedia Commons 2019b.

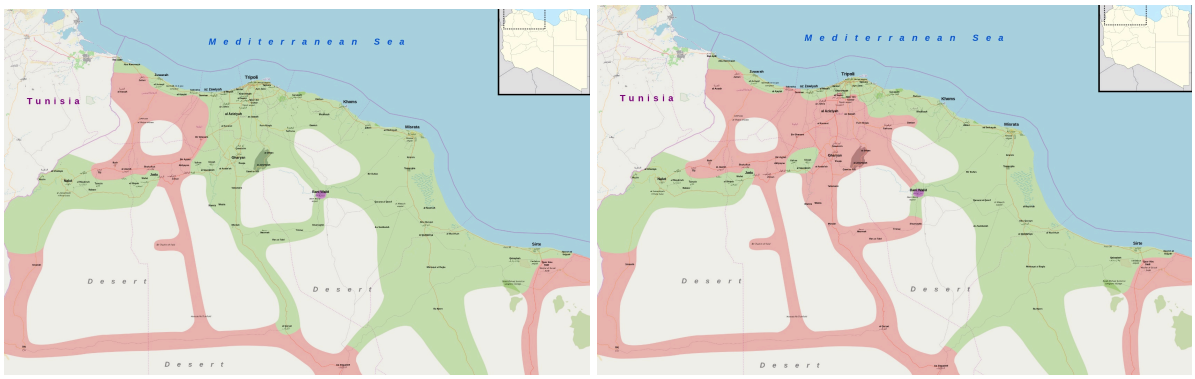
meant to highlight Greece's alleged attempts to encroach upon Libya's continental shelf, attempting to severe ties between Athens and Tripoli, but he "was ignored" by his GNA counterpart.[804] This indicates a low degree of Turkish influence over the GNA, which may be attributed to the relatively low degree of support provided over that period.

Escalation in mid-2019: still within the realm of indirect support

However, the situation changed significantly in 2019. In January of that year, the LNA carried out a successful offensive to the south in a bid to secure oil fields.[805] In February, the Shura's last strongholds in Derna were overwhelmed by a combined effort from the LNA ground forces, the Wagner Group, and air support from the UAE and Egypt.[806] Emboldened by the downgrading of the jihadist/Islamist threat and by the coalition of external sponsors that was forming around him, Haftar launched a surprise offensive in Western Libya, moving in the direction of Tripoli. On 4 April 2019, Haftar published an audio recording on Facebook declaring war on the GNA.[807] The LNA's advance into Tripolitania was very rapid, reaching the capital's outskirts in a matter of days.[808] In response, the government in Tripoli ordered a general mobilisation. Figure 7.3 compares territorial control in Tripolitania on 31 March (left) and on 7 April (right): it conveys an idea of how quickly areas immediately surrounding Tripoli came under the LNA's control (from green to red).

[804] Harchaoui 2020a, 4.
[805] Lacher 2020, 52–53.
[806] Wilson 2024, 44.
[807] Assad 2019.
[808] Kington 2019; Harchaoui 2020b.

Figure 7.3. *The front in Tripolitania in 2019: 31 March (left) and 7 April (right). Territory under GNA control in green, territory under LNA control in red.*[809]



The sudden change in the GNA's conflict outlook resonated in Turkey. Suddenly, Ankara's economic and political interests in Libya appeared once more under threat. The speed of Haftar's advance could be interpreted, using the theoretical lenses of this dissertation, as evidence of a rapidly closing window: unless immediate action was taken to secure Tripoli, the recipient could be wiped out of existence, compromising Turkey's proxy war efforts. President Erdoğan was therefore incentivized to beef up assistance to avoid the collapse of the GNA faction led by Ferraj.

As the theory argues, the presence of a closing window does not lead to the provision of direct support unless the sponsor believes that the recipient is also ineffective. In the case of Turkey and the GNA, there is no clear open-source evidence on Turkey's understanding of the GNA's effectiveness. However, we could infer this by looking at the way in which Haftar's offensive was interpreted. In particular, drones were regarded as a key component of the battle for Western Libya. From April to November 2019, over 1,040 recorded drone strikes were recorded, prompting Ghassan Salamé, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-

[809] Wikimedia Commons 2020c; Wikimedia Commons 2020d.

General and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), to speak of "the largest drone war in the world."[810] Analysis at the time suggested that the use of drones in this conflict was a "game changer," which has implications for the "future of warfare."[811]

At the beginning of the offensive, the LNA could count on a large number of Russian-manufactured drones provided by the UAE, which could identify and attack GNA infantry units. On the other hand, GNA forces relied mainly on man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and small artillery to protect assets.[812] If drones were the decisive element in the war, as many analysts believed at the time, it followed that providing drones to the weaker side (the GNA) would help level the playing field. And, at first sight, it seems that Turkey followed this rationale. Providing drones to the GNA could have an immediate impact on the battlefield, therefore blocking the LNA's attempt to occupy Tripoli. This would be akin to a new form of weapons provision, which falls under indirect support rather than indirect. And it would be consistent with the theoretical expectations, as long as the sponsor regarded the recipient as effective enough to use the new weapons on the battlefield.

Hence, the type of assistance that Turkey provided in May 2019 to support the GNA does not fit into the category of direct support. Turkey provided a fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, to the GNA. Among them were twelve Bayraktar TB2 drones, a medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) UAV capable of remotely controlled or autonomous flight operations.[813] The TB2 is one of the most advanced combat UAVs, and Turkish drone systems

[810] Calcara et al. 2022, 150.
[811] Kington 2020; Vest and Clarke 2020. New research carried out since 2020 has disputed the claim that drones have revolutionized warfare. see Calcara et al. 2022; Calcara 2021; Gilli and Gilli 2016.
[812] Thomas 2020, 4; Calcara et al. 2022, 150.
[813] Fishman and Hiney 2020.

are generally ranked among the best in the world.[814] Erdoğan justified his decision of providing drones to the GNA by claiming to be levelling the playing field: "Egypt and the UAE's [Crown Prince] Mohammed bin Zayed are supporting Haftar's forces. They were very strong in terms of equipment and drones. Now there is a balance after the latest reprisals."[815] This further highlights the relevance that policymakers assigned to drones in that conflict. It also suggests that Turkey did not aim for more invasive forms of intervention at the time. Indeed, Turkey's support remained limited to indirect forms at the beginning of the campaign against Tripoli.

Escalation in late 2019: drones, officers, and mercenaries as direct support?

The supply of Turkish drones, together with the general mobilization of all GNA forces, initially succeeded in preventing the fall of Tripoli. By June 2019, the GNA had recovered some of the territory it had lost in April. However, by the fall, the LNA received new assistance. Starting in September, the Wagner Group sent fighters near Tripoli to assist Haftar's coalition in attacking the GNA-aligned forces.[816] The enhanced cooperation with Wagner gave the LNA new impetus to take over the capital. Haftar announced a beginning of a new offensive in December, which he said would be the "final battle" for Tripoli.[817] Furthermore, the initial fleet of drones Turkey had provided to the GNA was only somewhat effective: while their impact was highly publicized as a game-changer, the TB2s "failed to penetrate enemy air defense systems and thus yielded no offensive advantage against capable enemies."[818] Within a few months, the LNA "virtually eradicated from the aerial battlefield" the GNA's newly acquired

[814] Thomas 2020, 6.
[815] Soylu 2019.
[816] Kington 2019; Wilson 2024, 44.
[817] France 24 2019, 24.
[818] Calcara et al. 2022, 150.

drones.[819] Sirte, a major city on the Libyan coast under GNA control, fell by December, and Tripoli was once again under threat of collapse. The new offensive "enabled the LNA to slowly grab parts of the city outskirts."[820]

It was under these circumstances that Turkey considered a new upgrade in support, which was provided between November 2019 and January 2020. The renewed offensive by the LNA suggested two points: first, the anti-GNA coalition was stronger than initially expected, both in terms of air superiority and of manpower, and seemed once again on the verge of taking over Tripoli unless action was immediately taken to affect battlefield dynamics. Second, as the previous increase in indirect support showed, the GNA by itself could not turn the tide, and simply providing new weapons would not be sufficient. Under Support Escalation Theory's expectations, high costs of delaying battlefield action and low proxy effectiveness would incentivize the sponsor to escalate to direct support. However, the empirical outcome was different from what has been observed in other chapters of this dissertation.

The escalation of support provided by Ankara consisted of two components. First, Turkey increased the supply of drones and provided the GNA with "air defense, electronic warfare systems", but crucially also "proficient personnel to operate them."[821] By sending its own officers to Libya with the purpose of operating drones and air defense systems, Turkey could address the GNA's vulnerabilities and inexperience, which contributed to the ineffectiveness in driving the LNA out of Tripolitania, and enabled its forces to offset the LNA's capabilities. For instance, Turkey's electronic warfare system helped GNA forces detect, locate, and target the LNA's air defense systems. Turkish forces also deployed surface-to-air missile batteries in

[819] Pack and Pusztai 2020, 5; Iddon 2019; IISS 2019; IISS 2020.
[820] Harchaoui 2020b.
[821] Calcara et al. 2022, 152–153; Fishman and Hiney 2020.

the airports of Misrata and Mitiga, and frigates for offshore patrols and detection of enemy assets.[822]

Second, Turkey transferred ground troops to strengthen the GNA's land contingent. The Grand National Assembly authorized the deployment of combat troops to Libya in early January 2020.[823] However, these troops did not primarily come from the Turkish Armed Forces. Instead, the ground force consisted of Syrians who had been fighting in various Turkish-aligned forces against the government of Bashar al-Assad, such as the Sultan Murad Division, the Suleiman Shah Brigade, the Hamza Division, and the al-Mutasim Division.[824] The number of Syrian forces deployed by Turkey grew "from 1,000 in January 2020 to about 15,000 over the summer."[825] These forces were sent to beef up the GNA's brigades on the ground.

Hence, the empirical outcome was not the intervention of a Turkish Army contingent. The question then emerges as to whether this could be characterized as direct support. As discussed in the theoretical chapter, deploying forces that are part of the sponsor's army presents specific advantages for the sponsor: as these forces are integrated into the sponsor's chain of command, their loyalty to the sponsor's objectives can be assured more than that of foreign forces. As they are better skilled in using the sponsor's own weapon systems, they resolve the problem of proxy ineffectiveness. And because they do not require a long training period, they can have an immediate impact on the battlefield. To what extent can deploying officers from the regular armed forces and foreign mercenaries allow the sponsor to have a similar impact?

[822] Calcara et al. 2022, 154.
[823] al Jazeera 2020.
[824] Thomas 2020, 5; Al-Jabassini and Badi 2023, 17.
[825] Syrian Observatory of Human Rights 2020; Tayea 2020.

A first preliminary analysis suggests that this combination of forces could be compared to direct support even if it did not involve a significant ground contingent of Turkish troops. Let us first analyze the role of the Turkish officers. As mentioned, the Western Libya campaign was primarily interpreted as a war over air superiority, in which drones played a key role. The GNA forces had proven unable to deploy Turkey drones on their own against superior LNA air defenses, which included Russian short-range air defense systems (Pantsir S-1) supplied by the UAE.[826]

To offset the lack of proxy effectiveness in a war in which air combat is regarded as key, while ensuring an immediate impact on battlefield dynamics, it makes sense for the sponsor to deploy specialized personnel rather than a large ground force. "[b]y deploying uniformed Turkish military officers" Turkey "focused on establishing an 'air defence bubble' around Tripoli, but also built up an offensive capacity."[827] Hence, their deployment fits within the theory's expectations: the Turkish officers provided the expertise to operate drones and air defense systems, which local fighters did not have and could not have gained in a short time span.

On the second point, concerning the deployment of Syrian fighters, the problem that the sponsor sought to solve was to strengthen the GNA's ability to fight a more intensive form of ground warfare, which was necessary to push back the LNA's advance. In those circumstances, the use of Syrian mercenaries presented several military advantages for Ankara. The majority of Syrian mercenaries sent to Libya were "familiar with most types of light, medium and heavy-weaponry that were available to GNA-aligned militias in the Libyan conflict" since they had

[826] Calcara et al. 2022, 151.
[827] Al-Jabassini and Badi 2023, 17.

been using them while fighting in Northern Syria against Assad forces.[828] This compatibility allowed these troops to take an immediate frontline role.

Moreover, the more intense nature of the Syrian conflict—as opposed to the slow pace that had characterized the Libyan Civil War for large periods—meant that Syrian fighters had a military advantage vis-à-vis Haftar's forces by virtue of their prior military experiences. Syrians were therefore "quickly embedded as sub-units operating under individual GNA-aligned military commanders, which Turkish military advisors considered necessary local counterparts for Syrian mercenaries' deployment." [829]

A third advantage was Syrian mercenaries' knowledge of Arabic, which meant they were quickly able to coordinate with their Libyan counterparts to learn the surrounding terrain, whereas Turkish troops would have needed more time to adapt and have an impact due to linguistic barriers. [830] The combination of these three factors may explain why Syrian mercenaries could have an immediate battlefield impact and be more effective than Turkish forces themselves. In addition, mercenary forces have an obvious benefit for the sponsor: the latter will not need to bear the costs of lives lost, which could create domestic backlash and make the intervention unpopular.[831]

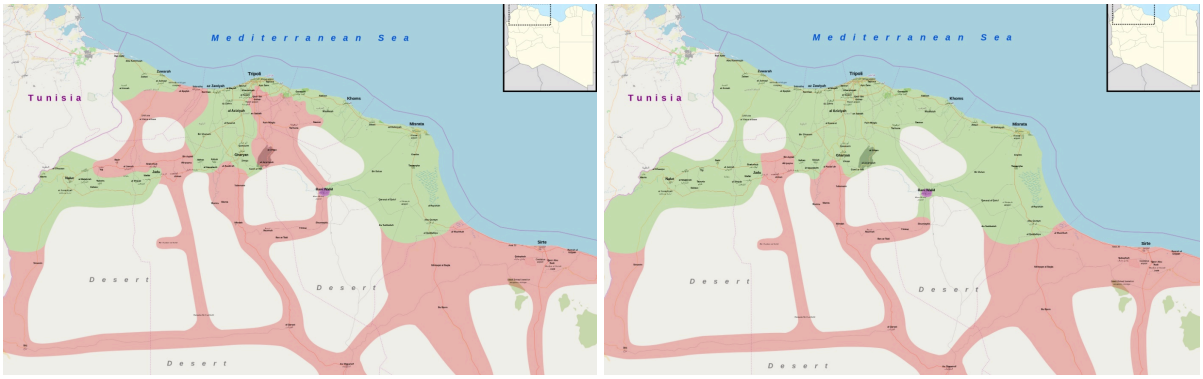
As a result, a combination of specialized officers to operate UAVs and air defense systems, and the availability of combat-hardened Syrian forces who could operate easily in Libya essentially constituted a form of direct intervention even without significant Turkish ground

[828] Ibid.
[829] Ibid.
[830] Ibid., 17–18.
[831] Arielli and Collins 2013; Percy 2013; Petersohn 2014.

contingents. This allows to make a preliminary test of the limits of the theory: even in a situation in which clear-cut direct support is not provided, the dynamics of escalation seem to follow the theory's expectations.

The Turkish intervention was very successful. The deployment of professional drone operators, appropriate air defenses, and a combat-ready Syrian mercenary force effectively "turned the tide" in the war, enabling the GNA to end the siege of Tripoli and to conquer lost territory.[832] The GNA and its backers launched multiple coordinated operations against strategic Al-Watiyah base (west of Tripoli) and towards Abu Grein (east of Misrata), which were key bases for the LNA's air attacks on Tripoli. As Figure 7.4 shows, the Turkish-backed GNA effectively expelled Haftar's armed coalition from Tripolitania by June 2020, moving the frontline south beyond Bani Walid. The GNA was also able to take back the Jufrah Airbase, 260 kilometers to the south of Tripoli.[833] The outcome of the battle for Tripoli led the LNA's backers to conclude that there was no military solution to the conflict, paving the way for the negotiations of the October 2020 ceasefire agreement.

Figure 7.4. *The front in Tripolitania in 2020: 12 January (left) and 5 June (right). Territory under GNA control in green, territory under LNA control in red.* [834]



[832] Pack and Pusztai 2020, 1–6; Calcara et al. 2022, 154.
[833] Harchaoui 2020a, 5; Thomas 2020, 3; Pusztai 2020.
[834] Wikimedia Commons 2020a; Wikimedia Commons 2020b.

According to commentators, the Turkish support to the war was decisive. According to Pack and Pusztai (2020):

> "The ability of Libyan or mercenary ground forces to conquer or retake territory was only ever possible when and where aerial dominance was previously achieved…. Ever increasing levels of Turkish ISR and aerial firepower capabilities were the decisive elements in an uneven war of attrition. From March onward, it was obvious that the LNA would eventually be defeated."[835]

Pack and Pusztai also diminish the role of ground forces on the outcome of the Tripoli campaign:

> "The military importance of foreign mercenaries… fighting in ground engagements has been largely overstated. All meaningful ground engagements in which territory was lost or gained were fought by Libyans. Yet, the war was contested by foreigners and essentially won by the Turks."[836]

Calcara et al. (2022), while dismissing the myth of drones as revolutionary factors in fighting, also highlight the relevance of the Turkish intervention:

> "Traditional military assets and equipment are still fundamental for both enabling drone strikes and fighting against capable adversaries. In the battles for western coastal Libya, drone operations proved 'useful, but not decisive.' The final outcome of the military campaign—the end of the siege of Tripoli—was largely determined by Turkey's intervention on the side of the GNA, and by the lack of foreign support for the LNA."[837]

As mentioned in most empirical chapters of this dissertation, whether direct intervention was the right solution has no bearing on the validity of the theory. However, these excerpts indicate how the Turkish role in late 2019 and early 2020 was interpreted as a form of direct support by commentators and analysts. This further increases the relevance of the theory for the Libyan

[835] Pack and Pusztai 2020, 13–14.
[836] Ibid., 1.
[837] Calcara et al. 2022, 154.

case, even though the intervention is not similar to other forms of direct support as explored in other sections and chapters.

Rewards and punishment logic in Turkey's calculus?

Before concluding, we should discuss one alternative explanation for the escalation of Turkish support in late 2019, linked to the rewards and punishment logic. According to this explanation, a sponsor rewards the recipient by providing more assistance when the latter behaves in accordance with the former's wishes, and punishing it when it behaves erratically by withdrawing aid. An important episode of fall 2019 could be consistent with this logic.

As mentioned above, Turkey had for years attempted to sign a maritime agreement with the GNA. However, the GNA had rejected the deal, in order not to alienate Greece, Cyprus and the European Union, who were regarded as important patrons, as the perspective modification of their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) would infringe upon Greek and Cypriot EEZs.[838]

Then, by late summer 2019, Turkish drone assistance "ceased altogether for several weeks" due to "a combination of technical and politically motivated reasons."[839] This contributed to weakening Tripoli's strengths precisely at the time in which Haftar's offensive resumed. Under pressure, the GNA agreed to Turkey's requests. In November 2019, Serraj and Erdoğan met in Istanbul to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on maritime jurisdiction and claims to seabed resources. The agreement encompassed an expansion of Turkey's EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea granting Ankara rights to conduct drills for seabed resources in a broader

[838] Harchaoui 2020a, 4.
[839] Analysts have speculated that Turkey withheld assistance precisely to pressure the GNA into signing the memorandum. See Ibid., 5.

area, and heightened security and military cooperation between Tripoli and Ankara. The controversial deal sparked protests from Greece and other states in the Mediterranean basin and beyond. Hence, the argument could be made that the desire to reward or punish the recipient, not the worsening conflict scenario, was the factor behind escalation. Turkey might have withheld aid on purpose, to pressure the GNA into signing the Memorandum. When the recipient finally gave in, Turkey unrolled a new wave of support. This could cast doubt on the escalation theory's fit for the case.

However, as the following paragraphs suggest, the theory has strong explanatory value for this case – and cast doubt on whether Turkey's aim to reward or punish the recipient was actually at work. First, the LNA's threat to the GNA became really acute in early December, when Sirte fell and the offensive for Tripoli gained full speed. Consistent with the closing windows argument, the costs of delaying battlefield action were becoming insurmountable. This was not necessarily the case beforehand.

Second, one of the reasons why the GNA's situation had become dramatic was because Turkey's aid to Libya had proven less effective than expected. The first wave of drone supplies by Turkey, in the spring, had helped slow down the LNA's advance. However, as discussed above, the LNA and its backers culmed the disadvantage by the summer, weakening the GNA's newly acquired drones.[840] Even if Ankara's aid had continued unabated, it was not sufficient in light of the GNA's poor effectiveness in using it.

[840] Pack and Pusztai 2020, 5; Iddon 2019; IISS 2019; IISS 2020.

Third, Turkey's stakes in the survival of the GNA were only increasing. Haftar and the Tobruk-based HoR's position was anti-Turkish and close to Egypt and the UAE.[841] It was quite unlikely that, had this rival government replaced the GNA, Ankara could maintain, let alone expand, its influence and interests in Libya. Hence, Turkey had a strong interest in ensuring the GNA's survival. The signing of the memorandum only increased Turkey's interest in Libya, but the new memorandum could only be enforced if Serraj and the GNA remained in power.

Assessment

As in other sections, Table 7.4 summarizes the argument made in this short case. Like in the case of Germany in Spain, the section deals with a form of escalation that diverges from the "ideal type" of direct support. Yet, the reasons why Turkey resorted to Syrian mercenaries and only sent a contingent of officers without troops are consistent with the theoretical argument for direct support: this combination of forces was meant to have an unmediated and immediate battlefield impact. Furthermore, like in the Vietnam case, this section cannot completely rule out an alternative explanation—that Ankara conditioned escalation on the GNA's compliance with its maritime claims. Declassified records in the future may better inform us whether Ankara's calculus was to delay aid in order to punish or coerce Tripoli, and then roll it back as a reward, or if instead it was a result of conflict dynamics. However, circumstantial factors appear to be inconsistent with this logic, and aligns instead with Support Escalation Theory.

[841] Thomas 2020, 1–5.

Table 7.4. *Overview: Turkey in Libya.*

Case	Fit with direct support ideal type	Fit with Support Escalation Theory	Alternative explanations evaluated and fit
Second Libyan Civil War **Year: 2019** **Sponsor: Turkey** **Recipient: GNA**	Low (provision of officers and foreign mercenaries)	Good	Rewards and punishment – partial

Conclusion

This last empirical chapter shows that Support Escalation Theory can travel beyond the two main case studies, and it fares well against alternative explanations in many contexts.

In particular, the chapter shows that the theory can apply across the many forms that direct support can take. The interventions by Cuba in Angola and by the U.S. in Vietnam reflect the "ideal type" of direct support as defined in Chapter 2: a large ground troop contingent. Nazi Germany's intervention in Spain does not have the same fit since it was mostly limited to air support, while Turkey's escalation in Libya is even further distanced from the model since most of the soldiers it provided were foreign mercenaries. Nevertheless, in all four cases the chapter found at least prima-facie evidence that the mechanisms behind escalation theory were at work. This suggests that the theory could travel even further.

The chapter also highlights the extent to which alternative explanations challenge the escalation theory. The first two cases show that outbidding between allied sponsors and complex delegation dynamics do not match escalation theory. In the third and fourth case, alternative explanations at least partially fit the historical record. In the case of the Vietnam War, domestic politics has long been regarded as the main explanation behind the timing of the decision to send U.S. troops, and international confrontation was the main lens through which decision-makers looked at the issue. However, the short overview highlighted the worsening situation on the ground in South Vietnam which follows the dynamics of the escalation theory. In the case of Libya, the timing of Turkey's intervention could be linked to a logic of rewards and punishment, but Support Escalation Theory still seems to provide the most convincing explanation. This could suggest that, in some cases of direct intervention in civil war, equifinality could be at play, and multiple explanations could be true at the same time.

Conclusion

What have we learned?

Foreign support makes civil wars longer, more violent, and harder to end by negotiated settlement.[842] When foreign sponsors send their own combat forces to fight, these features are exacerbated, as local conflicts are more likely to turn into international wars. Yet previous research has treated military assistance to proxies and direct combat support separately, missing an important phenomenon: the escalation from one type of support to the other over the course of the conflict.

When a conflict actor is doing poorly, appears unable to defeat its opponent, or is on the verge of collapse, it would be natural to expect that actor's backers to withdraw their support. There are many reasons to jump off before the ship sinks: to cut one's losses, like the USSR did by withdrawing from Republican Spain in 1938,[843] or to find a deal with the other warring side, like Russia who moved from supporting Haftar to negotiating a ceasefire over Libya with Turkey in 2020.[844] However, this dissertation presents an opposite, surprising outcome under the same conditions. Faced with a worsening conflict evolution for its recipient, sponsors may prefer increasing support. Not only that, but they can also be incentivized to become directly involved in combat on the recipient's side.

[842] Regan 2002; Anderson 2019; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014.
[843] Viñas 2008.
[844] Al-Jabassini and Badi 2023; Pack and Pusztai 2020.

According to this dissertation, foreign support in civil war can be divided into two categories: indirect support, which ascribes to a logic of conflict delegation—the sponsor provides resources to the recipient, who then uses them in combat—and direct support, which follows a logic of intervention—the sponsor's forces fight alongside the recipient's. Direct support is costlier than indirect support for the sponsor, since the former requires the sponsor to accept both financial and fighting costs, and carries higher risks. At the same time, the two characteristics of direct support are its immediate and unmediated impact on the battlefield. Therefore, if indirect support takes too long to have the desired effect on the battlefield—as is the case with many forms of training and advising—or if the recipient of support is unable to use indirect support effectively, the lower costs will not be worth it, and the sponsor could opt for direct support. This distinction creates the premises for escalation from indirect to direct support.

Support Escalation Theory argues that sponsors escalate from indirect to direct support as a measure of last resort, in the wake of a negative conflict evolution. The sponsor state takes two variables into account when deciding escalation: the costs of delaying immediate battlefield action, and the degree of proxy effectiveness. The former measures whether the sponsor perceives a closing window, i.e. a limited timeframe to affect battlefield dynamics before the costs of supporting the recipient to victory (or to the achievement of the sponsor's objectives) become insurmontable. The latter variable measures the recipient's willigness and/or ability to "be a good proxy": i.e., the extent to which it can or wants to use the sponsor's resources to obtain meaningful battlefield success. These two variables do not necessarily reflect the objective balance of power and the recipient's intentions, but rather the sponsor's viewpoint and perception of them.

The theory's central prediction is that the sponsor will escalate to direct support only when the perceived costs of delaying battlefield action are high and the recipient is an ineffective proxy. If the sponsor perceives a high cost in delaying battlefield action, it needs to provide a form of assistance that can have an immediate battlefield effect rather than a delayed one. At the same time, to the sponsor's eyes, the recipient is ether unable or unwilling to convert additional resources into combat power. This calls for the provision of support that can either improve the recipient's proxy effectiveness or bypass the recipient altogether. Under these conditions, indirect support is insufficient to solve the conundrum: proxy ineffectiveness prevents a deployment of subsidies such as weapons because the recipient would not be able to apply them to quickly change fortunes on the battlefield, and the closing window does not allow the sponsor sufficient time to transfer the necessary skills via training and advising. Faced with the prospects of a collapse of the recipient, and with no time to transfer skills via training and advising, the sponsor will be incentivized to intervene directly, since only direct support can have an immediate and unmediated impact on the battlefield. On the other hand, escalation to direct support will not take place if no closing window is perceived, since the sponsor can provide indirect support with a delayed effect such as training, or if the recipient appears effective, in which case a direct impact on the battlefield is unnecessary.

The next section provides an overview of Support Escalation Theory's fit with the evidence presented in this book. The following section discusses the book's contributions to International Relations literature and the limitations of the dissertation. The two sections after that propose avenues to expand the scope of the theoretical argument and to test the theory quantitatively. The final section draws policy implications stemming from the dissertation.

The empirical record of Support Escalation Theory

Overall, the empirical evidence provided in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of this dissertation provides strong support for Support Escalation Theory. The theory's internal validity is tested in two cases: Fascist Italy's intervention in the Spanish Civil War (1936) and Russia's intervention in the Donbas War (2014). The two cases, selected from the pre- and post-Cold War period, represent very different historical contexts. In light of the emphasis on the Cold War and bipolarity placed in the existing literature on proxy war, this constitutes an important novelty, and also facilitates the theory's relevance for the contemporary world order that is moving towards multipolarity.[845]

The degree of external meddling in the two conflicts is also very different: while in 1936 a significant number of foreign countries played a direct role in Spain, either in support of the legitimate Republican government or for the Nationalist rebels, the Donbas War saw only Russia as the main provider of support, first indirectly and then directly. On the other hand, while many Western states later became major supporters of Ukraine, in 2014 their degree of material support was very limited if at all. Furthermore, the type of civil war was also very different: while the Spanish War was a center-seeking conflict, with both sides aiming at the control of the entire country, the Donbas war was a secessionist conflict. There is therefore a high degree of variation between the two conflicts.

The two case studies show a high degree of internal validity for the escalation theory, as the four main empirical implications are verified in each case. First, the cases show that sponsors tend to support a warring party in a foreign civil war when they have a minimum level of

[845] Rauta and Spatafora 2024; Karlén et al. 2021b.

interest in the conflict but face high costs of direct war. In the Spanish Civil War, Fascist Italy was keen on preventing a pro-French or (later) pro-Soviet state from taking hold in Spain, but wanted to prevent a European war over Spain—a sentiment that most European powers shared. Supporting Franco's rebellion without intervening directly was a good start. In 2014, after annexing Crimea without fighting, Russia wanted to prevent the rest of Ukraine to continue integrating with the West: supporting pro-Russian separatist movements in the Donbas was a viable strategy to achieve this.

The second empirical implication postulates that if the recipient experiences a negative conflict evolution, the sponsor is likely to re-evaluate the type of support it is providing. In each case, two episodes of negative conflict evolution (so four in total) prompted the sponsor to make such re-evaluation. In Spain, the first episode was Franco's inability to break through the initial resistance by sectors loyal to the Republic in August 1936, who were able to re-organize their position and form a new government. The second, in the late fall of the same year, was the failure of several offensives by the Nationalists on Madrid, which remained under government control, while at the same time the Republicans received additional support from the Soviet Union. In the case of Ukraine in 2014, the first setback was the Ukrainian government's reaction to separatism in Donbas: instead of helplessly watching the two oblasts break away like in the case of Crimea, Kyiv set up the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) against the rebels in the spring. The second episode was the ATO's successful offensive in July 2014, which pushed the rebellion to the brink of collapse. Hence, in each case, the negative conflict episode pushed the sponsor to change its form of assistance.

The third implication is selection into escalation: the sponsor is more likely to provide additional assistance to the recipient in the wake of a negative evolution when it has high

interests in the recipient winning or remaining a viable actor. In both case studies, the sponsor selects into escalation: both Italy in Spain and Russia in the Donbas had sufficiently high interests to remain engaged in the conflict in spite of the setbacks. Furthermore, escalation is more likely when there are no acceptable alternatives to supporting the existing recipient that are readily available to the sponsor. And in both case studies, the two conflicts were bilateral, pitting the incumbent government against a single, more or less unified rebel entity. Neither Fascist Italy nor Russia could find an alternative actor to support in the wake of the negative conflict evolution.

The fourth, and key, empirical implication consists in the prediction over escalation to direct support. When the sponsor perceives the recipient as an ineffective proxy and the costs of delaying battlefield action as high, it is likely to escalate to direct support. In both case studies, this condition materialized. In December 1936, Mussolini and his cabinet came to the conclusion that Franco was unable to take over Madrid and unwilling to lead a Blitzkrieg-style conquest campaign, while growing Soviet support seemed to prepare the Republicans not only to eliminate the danger to the capital, but also to reverse Franco's territorial gains. In the Donbas, by August 2014 the Ukrainian Army was on the verge of sealing the border between the separatists and Russia, while an internal leadership transition reduced proxy effectiveness.

While the two cases are not perfectly analogous—in the Donbas, the sponsor feared a collapse of the recipient, whereas in Spain, the sponsor's main fear was forsaking the opportunity for a short war—the sponsor's conclusion was similar: the only form of support that could prevent the negative outcome from materializing was the commitment of the sponsor's own troops with a sufficient degree of effectiveness who could quickly reverse the battlefield outcomes. Furthermore, the results of the decision for escalation were different: while the Russian army's

intervention in 2014 turned the odds against Ukraine, forcing the latter to accept the Minsk agreement, the Italian intervention failed to bring about a quick victory. But these differences do not weaken the theory's internal validity: it does not matter whether the sponsor's forces are indeed the most adequate to achieve the sponsor's goal; what matters is that the sponsor sends them under the belief that they would achieve it.

A corollary of the fourth empirical implication of the theory is that the sponsor is unlikely to escalate to direct support if either of the two factors (low proxy effectiveness and high costs of delaying battlefield action) is not present. The two case studies also contain analysis of alternative outcomes. In Spain, Italy refrained from providing direct support in late August 1936: Franco's army showed features of ineffectiveness to Rome's eyes, but the weakness of the Republican side did not cause concerns about closing windows. Hence, Mussolini opted for a military mission that could train and advise the Nationalists to be more effective. In Donbas, the two variables scored opposite values in spring 2014: to Putin's surprise, the Ukrainian army reacted to the outbreak of rebellion, showing a potential to retake rebel territories in a short time unless new support was provided—indicating a closing window. However, the Kremlin-backed separatist forces appeared quite capable of holding the cities they had occupied, and their leadership included Russian citizens who followed the Kremlin's line. Hence, Putin provided a form of indirect support with an immediate but not unmediated impact: additional weapons that could be used by the separatists.

Hence, the two case studies include four outcomes of support escalation. These are highlighted in the table below. They are organized in Figure 8.1 according to the interaction of the two main theoretical variables (see Figure 3.2 for reference).

Figure 8.1. *Outcomes of support escalation from the two in-depth case studies.*

		Costs of delaying battlefield action	
		Low	*High*
Proxy effectiveness	*High*	No escalation	Indirect support **Russia in Donbas, Spring 2014**
	Low	Indirect support **Italy in Spain, August 1936**	Direct support **Italy in Spain, December 1936** **Russia in Donbas, August 2014**

The same exercise could be repeated for the four short case studies in Chapter 7. The outcomes of the conflict episodes analyzed in the Chapter are also consistent with the theory's last implication. Turkey's first escalation in May 2019 fits with the top-right quadrant: high costs of delaying battlefield action but high perception of proxy effectiveness push the sponsor to provide indirect support with an immediate, albeit mediated, effect, in the form of drones. Two other episodes—Germany in Spain in August 1936 and Cuba in Angola in September 1975—

reflect instead the bottom-right quadrant: the escalation took the form of a training mission since the costs for delaying battlefield action were deemed low, in spite of the recipient's low proxy effectiveness. Figure 8.2 is missing the US change in support to South Vietnam in October 1963, since that constituted a shift to a different actor (the factions behind the anti-Diem coup) rather than an escalation of assistance. Finally, all four cases include an episode of escalation to direct support which is consistent with the prediction in the bottom-right quadrant.

Figure 8.2. *Outcomes of support escalation for the two short case studies in Chapter 7.*

		Costs of delaying battlefield action	
		Low	*High*
Proxy effectiveness	*High*	No escalation	Indirect support **Turkey in Libya, May 2019**
	Low	Indirect support **Germany in Spain, August 1936** **Cuba in Angola, September 1975**	Direct support **Germany in Spain, November 1936** **Cuba in Angola, November 1975** **US in Vietnam, July 1965** **Turkey in Libya, December 2019**

Chapter 7 also tested the theory's ability to travel across contexts and different types of intervention by looking at four additional cases. The interventions by Cuba in Angola and by the U.S. in Vietnam reflect the "ideal type" of direct support as defined in Chapter 2: a large ground troop contingent. Nazi Germany's intervention in Spain does not have the same fit since it was mostly limited to air support, while Turkey's escalation in Libya is even further distanced from the model since most of the soldiers it provided were foreign mercenaries. Nevertheless, in all four cases the chapter shows at least prima-facie evidence that the key mechanisms behind escalation theory were at work. This suggests that the theory can be applied beyond clear-cut cases of intervention. For instance, it could play an explanatory role in cases such as Saudi Arabia's air campaign in Yemen to support the Hadi government against the Houthis in 2015, or in interventions with volunteers, like the International Brigades in Spain, or mercenaries such as the Wagner Group.

The three chapters also study the extent to which alternative explanations challenge the escalation theory. The fit between alternative explanations and outcomes is reviewed in Table 8.1. In Chapters 5 and 6, alternative explanations have a poor predictive power compared to escalation theory. In Chapter 7, the first two cases (Nazi Germany in Spain, Cuba in Angola) show that outbidding between allied sponsors and complex delegation dynamics do not match escalation theory. However, in the third and fourth case (US in Vietnam and Turkey in Libya), alternative explanations at least partially fit the historical record. In the case of the Vietnam War, domestic politics has long been regarded as the main explanation behind the timing of the decision to send U.S. troops. However, the short overview highlighted the worsening situation on the ground in South Vietnam, as a main driver of the deliberations in Washington,

which follows the dynamics of the escalation theory. In the case of Libya, the timing of Turkey's intervention could be linked to a logic of rewards and punishment, since Ankara did block additional support to Tripoli for a short period, but the escalation theory still seems to provide the most convincing explanation. This preliminary analysis suggests that, in some cases of direct intervention in civil war, equifinality could be at play, and multiple explanations could be true at the same time.

Table 8.1. *Overview of alternative explanations' fit with empirical evidence.*

Alternative explanation	**Chapters testing it**	**Fit with outcome**
Sponsor's domestic political developments	Chapter 6 – Russia in Donbas	Poor
	Chapter 7 – US in Vietnam	Good
Independent role of the sponsor's bureaucracy	Chapter 6 – Russia in Donbas	Poor
Rewards and punishment	Chapter 5 – Italy in Spain	Poor
	Chapter 6 – Russia in Donbas	Poor
	Chapter 7 – Turkey in Libya	Partial
Outbidding between different sponsors	Chapter 5 – Italy in Spain	Poor
	Chapter 7 – Germany in Spain	Poor
Complex delegation dynamics	Chapter 5 – Italy in Spain	Poor
	Chapter 7 – Cuba in Angola	Poor

Contributions: What does International Relations literature learn from this research?

This dissertation makes several contributions to the international relations and conflict studies literature. First, it reorganizes the links between the literatures on proxy war, external intervention, and foreign support in conflict. Chapter 2 acknowledged the difference between intervention and proxy war as ascribing to two different logics.[846] The concept of external support, which encompasses both proxy support and intervention on behalf of a warring party, is mostly used in the existing literature as an empirical rather than a theoretical category.[847] By developing the two categories of indirect and direct support, ascribing respectively to a logic of proxy war and one of intervention, as two alternative forms of external support, this dissertation gives analytical rigor and theoretical depth to this phenomenon. It also theorizes a mechanism to explain the shift from the former to the latter, thereby strengthening the argument on the "internationalization of civil wars."[848]

Second, the dissertation extends the phenomenon of "escalation" from the interstate and nuclear literature to the phenomenon of external support.[849] By deconstructing the concept of escalation into its fundamental components, Chapter 3 defined "support escalation" as the crossing of significant thresholds of foreign involvement, the most relevant of which is direct participation in fighting by the foreign sponsor. By transitioning from a logic of conflict delegation or proxy warfare (in the form of indirect support) to one of direct intervention, the

[846] Aydin 2012; Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce 2008; Byman 2018; Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023; Rauta 2021b; Rauta and Spatafora 2024.
[847] Meier et al. 2022; Karlén et al. 2021b; Karlén 2017; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017.
[848] Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz 2008.
[849] Colaresi and Thompson 2002; Danilovic and Clare 2010; Huth 1988; Morgan 2003; Morgan 2012; Schelling 1980; Schelling 1966; Staw and Ross 1989; Wilkenfeld and Murauskaite 2023.

sponsor becomes a belligerent by directly partaking in combat with its own armed forces. Moreover, this participation in combat is likely to be recognized as a significant threshold to cross in virtually all conflict contexts. This theoretical innovation opens up a debate between direct support escalation and traditional escalation—that is, the expansion of the conflict both horizontally and vertically. As the case study chapters show, this is a concern for many would-be interveners. However, foreign sponsors often find a way to keep the risks of traditional escalation limited even as they send their forces to fight abroad, and even if their rivals also intervene.[850]

Third, the dissertation highlights the role of endogenous conflict developments as opposed to external factors in determining interveners' decisions. It is often claimed that extra-conflict factors, such as the distribution of power in the international system or international rivalry between regional and/or global powers, are key factors in determining whether sponsors provide, escalate, or withdraw support.[851] While acknowledging the relevance of international and extra-conflict factors, this dissertation ties the dynamics of external support to the evolution of the situation on the battlefield. Victories or defeats by the recipient of support determine whether the sponsor will consider escalation to direct support. International factors and extra-conflict events will affect the sponsor's decision, but mainly *through their expected impact on conflict evolution*. If the sponsor's rival increases support for the recipient's opponent, this will affect the sponsor's calculus because it affects the expected outcome of future engagements, potentially altering the perceptions of proxy effectiveness and costs of delaying battlefield action.

[850] Anderson 2019; Carson 2018.
[851] Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Balcells and Kalyvas 2014; Bak, Chávez, and Rider 2020; Aydin and Regan 2012; Karlén 2019.

Finally, the dissertation's argument is that Support Escalation Theory is applicable in conflicts across the 20th century and 21st centuries. The global distribution of power has changed dramatically, first from multipolarity to bipolarity, then to unipolarity, and now seems to be moving towards a new form of multipolarity.[852] The threat of uncontrolled escalation emerged after WWI and became more acute after the advent of nuclear weapons, affecting the incidence of major wars relative to localized conflicts.[853] The way in which civil wars are fought has also changed: from periods in which conventional war featuring pitched battles and clear patterns of territorial were prevalent, to others in which asymmetric forms of rebellion were the norm, and further to "new new civil wars" in which the advent of information technology is transforming the way combatants mobilize and fight.[854] And yet, throughout all these epochs we see episodes of civil war in which foreign sponsors become belligerents, hinting that certain phenomena are recurring feature of international conflict.

Avenues for future research

Theoretical extensions of Support Escalation Theory

The interactions between proxy war and direct intervention represents a fruitful avenue for future studies. This section suggests possibilities for theoretical extensions of support escalation. One potential avenue is on the role of non-state actors, both as sponsors and as recipients of support. In the conclusion of the "Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars", Rickard, Chinchilla and Spatafora (2021) advocate for affording greater agency to the non-

[852] Fearon 2017; Waltz 1979; Waltz 1993.
[853] Bell and Miller 2015; Carson 2018; Waltz 1979.
[854] Biddle 2021; Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Walter 2017.

state actors in proxy war: "the most acclaimed studies in proxy warfare explore the ways in which external states accept, address or circumvent the problem of agency slack…However, we lack the same degree of attention on the proxy."[855] This dissertation shares an emphasis on state sponsors. While the attention on the sponsor was justified theoretically—the sponsor is the actor that makes the decision to escalate—and confirmed empirically, there could still be avenues in which recipients—especially rebel recipients, support to whom is generally against international law—can influence state sponsors.

Non-state sponsors, too, deserve attention. Moghadam and Wyss (2020) shows non-state sponsors, such as transnational terrorist groups and political factions make use of proxies, albeit in a different ways than states.[856] Other actors, such as diasporas, militias, tribes, organized criminal groups, and private military contractors (PMCs), are also becoming increasingly relevant actors in external sponsorship.[857] To what extent can these actors escalate foreign support, and can they provide direct support? Can Support Escalation Theory be generalized to all types of sponsor? This dissertation opens numerous research opportunities to explore when, and why, actors shift between different forms of intervention.

Second, future research efforts should explore the inverse phenomenon, that is, de-escalation from direct to indirect support. Once sponsors become directly involved in the conflict, what factors will lead them to disengage from the conflict or reduce their involvement back to indirect support? Conflict-level variables, such as battlefield dynamics, could still play a role: for instance, if the situation on the battlefield improved significantly, the sponsor's troops could be withdrawn. However, this symmetric relationship may not always hold. The only large-N

[855] Chinchilla, Rickard and Spatafora in Karlén et al. 2021b, 2073.
[856] Moghadam and Wyss 2020.
[857] Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss 2023; Kruck 2020; Petrova 2019.

study of foreign support withdrawal to date suggests that "only some of the factors that explain support provision can offer insights into its termination."[858] Albeit this does not distinguish between direct and indirect support, the variables and processes involved in the de-escalation process may also be very different from the ones theorized for escalation. Since the use of force abroad is a major effort for most states, all sectors of government but also public opinion could become a key factor in de-escalation. Domestic constraints made it difficult for the United States to disengage from Vietnam at first, and then precipitated a withdrawal in the 1970s.[859] The Soviet Union too went through a very complex domestic change before finally withdrawing from Afghanistan in 1989.[860] Other factors that matter could be the ideological or kinship relations between sponsor and recipient, which could be strained over the course of conflict.[861] The number of possible factors at play calls for a dedicated study to de-escalation dynamics.

Finally, Support Escalation Theory could be extended beyond the limits of civil war. Foreign sponsors can also provide support to other states engaged in an interstate conflict. This state-to-state support could be indirect but could also extend to direct support, such as when allies intervene to honor a collective defense pact. Future research efforts could test whether the assumptions of the theory apply to interstate war, and whether the same constraints to sponsors—such as the fear of uncontrolled escalation—are more or less acute.

An example of a case where the theory could apply is current war between Ukraine and Russia, which was mentioned in several points of this dissertation. In 2022, Western countries provided

[858] Karlén 2019, 733.
[859] Payne 2021.
[860] Mendelson 1998.
[861] Fox 2020b.

new weapons to Ukraine but not troops: this was based on the argument that Ukraine possessed a sufficient degree of effectiveness, partly as a result of the training that it had been receiving over the past years in preparation for a potential Russian invasion.[862] This is in line with the theory's prediction: the costs of delaying battlefield action were high (Russia threatened to destroy the Ukrainian state) but the recipient showed significant proxy effectiveness, which obviated the need for direct support. Ukraine's quick mastery of these weapons resulted indeed in tangible battlefield gains against Russia, first by halting the Russian advance, and then by conquering back some of the occupied territories.[863]

In 2023, arguably, the opposite values of the two variables were realized. Ukraine appeared unable to recover additional territory against Russia's sophisticated defensive lines.[864] At the same time, differences between Western advisors and Ukrainian military staff were emerging, which caused friction over the strategy that Ukraine should prepare for, and arguably affected the preparation of the summer counter-offensive.[865] This could be interpreted as poor proxy effectiveness. At the same time, the frontline appeared stable and Russia unable to reverse Ukraine's gains, and the survival of Ukraine did not appear at immediate risk. This could be interpreted as low costs of delaying battlefield action. Under these values, escalation theory predicts an increase in indirect support such as training that takes time but can improve effectiveness, without needing to provide direct support. Indeed, the year 2023 saw the establishment of several training missions for Ukraine.

[862] Chinchilla and Rosemberg 2023.
[863] Zabrodskyi et al. 2022.
[864] Watling and Raynolds 2023.
[865] Washington Post 2023.

Further, in early 2024, as intelligence reports of a potential Russian offensive circulated, countries such as France and Poland claimed they could not rule out sending troops to Ukraine.[866] French President Emmanuel Macron's claim that he would not rule out the option of sending French troops to Ukraine if Russia threatened Kyiv falls in line with the argument made in these pages: it reflects the dilemmas that foreign sponsors would face if their recipient were showing signs of low proxy effectiveness and the costs of delaying battlefield action were rising.[867]

While the last paragraphs are largely speculative, they suggest that the theory could apply to the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and perhaps to interstate wars in general.

Ideas for quantitative testing of Support Escalation Theory

While this dissertation contains a number of case studies, both for process tracing and generalizability, it lacks a dedicated large-N analysis of theoretical implications. Chapter 4 provided an overview of patterns of direct support since 1946, using the most advanced datasets on foreign support and intervention, the ACD and ESD, as well as their limitations for theory testing. To test the empirical implications of Support Escalation Theory, the data should be expanded and further disaggregated. As Chapters 5 to 7 show, many episodes of support escalation take place in less than a year since support onset. Hence, rather than yearly observations, it would be necessary to collect data on external support at monthly intervals, which would allow to pick up these short-time changes, and to observe whether indirect or direct support are provided continuously throughout the year or discontinued over time. These

[866] Bear and Besch 2023; Crowther, Matisek, and O' Brien 2024.
[867] The Economist 2024.

disaggregated data would also make it possible to compare external support to other datasets on micro-dynamics of conflict, such as the Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED).[868]

Such data could be used to evaluate implications of Support Escalation Theory on a large-N scale, thereby improving generalizability and external validity. For instance, future research could measure the effect of a negative conflict outlook on the continuation of support. As Chapter 3 illustrates, negative events will act as a cue that foreign support is not having the desired effect in tilting the balance of power in favor of the recipient. Faced with adverse feedback, sponsors are more likely to grow dissatisfied with the ongoing support relationship and will seek to alter it.[869] Hence, it follows that support change should be more likely after negative events, such as a battlefield defeat, or after a worsening balance of power.

However, defeat by itself is not enough: it may lead to either an increase or decrease in commitment, depending on whether the sponsor has sufficiently high interests and appealing alternatives are available. Additionally, it is complex to measure escalation or de-escalation of support as most available datasets only provide qualitative information on support type but not its quantity. Future studies will therefore need to zoom in on escalation to direct support as a clear measure of escalation.[870]

[868] Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2023.
[869] Karlén 2022, 3.
[870] One alternative strategy of measuring increase in support (or escalation) is to count the number of forms of assistance that one sponsor provides to one recipient at a given time point as a proxy for sponsor involvement: an increase in the count of support types as compared to the previous year would represent an escalation of assistance, whereas a lower count would indicate a reduction in support (Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2022, online appendix.). This is an approximative way of measuring escalation, which does not account for variations in magnitude within each single form of support: "limited" types of assistance—i.e., a lower count of support types at a given type—may actually represent a stronger sponsor commitment if they are issued in high quantity, as opposed to "broader"—a higher count—but shallower forms of aid.

Support Escalation Theory predicts that, following negative conflict outcomes, a sponsor state is more likely to provide direct support to their recipients when its interests are sufficiently high. Interests are a complex phenomenon for which it is hard to find an unequivocal and comprehensive indicator. Nevertheless, future studies could rely on the relevant factors that, according to the current literature, are proxies for sponsor interests: proximity, rivalry, ethno-ideological affinity, and past support or sunk costs.[871]

In addition to interests, the sponsor may escalate commitment in the absence of appealing alternative strategies. Alternative strategies include switching support to another faction, engaging in mediation, or referring to an international body. While measuring a state's "availability" for mediation is difficult from a quantitative perspective, and international organizations—the UN and regional IGOs—are always available, we can proxy the availability of alternative actors by counting the number of actors on the same side of the main cleavage of the conflict. When the count is low, the sponsor has fewer alternatives, and not all of them might be suitable recipients due to concerns about goal alignment.

Hypotheses could also be made around the costs of escalation. Direct support requires the sponsor to incur significantly higher costs. If the costs are expected to be too high, the sponsor may refrain from direct support even if the situation has worsened. This could be the case when other foreign actors have already intervened with direct support on the opponent's behalf. Since a second intervention may turn the civil war into an interstate conflict, the sponsor may be incentivized to back down. It follows that non-first interveners should be less likely to provide direct support.[872]

[871] Abu-Bader and Ianchovichina 2019; Anderson 2019; Byman 2013; Gleditsch 2007; Grauer and Tierney 2018; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017.
[872] Carson 2018; Anderson 2019.

Finally, direct support is more likely to take place when the war has a conventional character than when it is asymmetric. The sponsor's military forces are particularly valuable for their impact on the battlefield.[873] All sides—government and rebels—can benefit from direct support, other things equal. In irregular warfare, which relies much more on the need to win the population's allegiance, the use of foreign troops might generate higher costs and be less effective than in conventional warfare. While the incumbent government might still benefit from the expertise of foreign forces, it can still suffer a legitimacy backlash; rebel groups, instead, find it even less likely to require direct support when carrying out insurgency campaigns.[874] These features reduce the sponsor's utility of resorting to direct support for the sponsor while increasing its costs. The consequence should be a lower probability of observing this form of escalation even after negative conflict events.

All the hypotheses above are not appropriate for qualitative testing and could be tested quantitatively if data at the appropriate level of disaggregation are provided. Future quantitative research promises significantly expand our understanding of the dynamics of foreign support and intervention.

Policy implications: when and how to (de-)escalate?

To conclude, this dissertation provides a number of insights for policy-makers, especially for countries that are considering whether—and how—to support a warring party in a civil war, how to predict the intentions of a potential intervener, or how to bring the conflict to an end.

[873] Kalyvas and Balcells 2010.
[874] Hazen 2013.

However, it should not be forgotten that external support escalation is only one of the many ways in which foreign actors can intervene in a conflict. There are alternative forms of internationalization, some of which entail "unbiased" intervention—that is, intervention that is in support of neither party.[875] The dissertation does not cover this type of interventions.

One key takeaway from Support Escalation Theory is the role of conflict dynamics in determining the decisions of would-be interveners. Factors external to the country at war do matter, of course. But this dissertation highlights how the changing dynamics on the battlefield can be a powerful predictor of escalation. A conflict party that is doing poorly could receive additional support, even combat troops, if it is perceived to be on the verge of defeat. This is particularly important for actors that are considering supporting one conflict party: providing support for one actor, even if limited to advising, could paradoxically increase the chances of another actor's intervention on the opponent's side. Foreign sponsors should also consider that, were the opponent's backer to intervene first and dramatically affect battlefield dynamics, they might face a dilemma: either intervene on their own, turning the civil war into an interstate conflict, or witness the defeat of their supported side.

Another implication is that various forms of assistance and support can be useful in right circumstances, but can also be detrimental if they are provided to solve a problem that they are not suited for. First, new weapons could have a major impact on the battlefield if the recipient actor possesses the necessary skills to deploy them in combat; however, they are not useful for an actor that lacks those capabilities. Hence, foreign actors should be wary of sending weapons, even sophisticated ones, that are regarded as a "silver bullet" if the recipient of those weapons is not well equipped to use them.

[875] Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz 2008.

Second, training and advising can significantly improve the effectiveness of a fighting force, but they may take long time to have the desired effect. Therefore, strategic patience and perseverance are necessary. Training programs should, if possible, be designed in advance, even in period of peace and relative calm, to prevent surprises and ensure the preparation of the recipient in case the situation takes the turn for the worse. The train and assist program for Ukraine, implemented after the events of 2014, proved successful in preparing Ukrainian forces to withstand the invasion of 2022.[876] Hence, train-and-advise missions should be designed to last the necessary time, and the providers must be prepared to wait before they can see the fruits of training in combat.

Third, a foreign state's combat forces are often better than civil war parties, are more familiar with the weapons that are being provided, and their loyalty is higher than that of recipients. However, they do not guarantee success. Chapter 5 showed that Italian forces, expected to be masters of "Guerra celere", ended up bogged down in Spain for three years. The United States experienced the same in Vietnam and Afghanistan, and so did the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Hence, while foreign backers tend to be over-confident about their own forces' abilities to quickly conclude wars, they should check their assumptions before entering foreign adventures.

To conclude, this dissertation has touched upon the importance of alternatives to escalation. Foreign sponsors may refrain from becoming directly involved in fighting if there are other actors to support or if there are appealing mechanisms for mediation or conflict resolution. Actors who are supporting one of the conflict parties but are also interested in bringing about a peaceful resolution to the war should match their support for their preferred party with

[876] Arel and Driscoll 2022; Chinchilla 2023.

diplomatic overtures to the other side's sponsor. By providing the right inducements to mediation in the wake of a positive conflict evolution (which likely represents a negative conflict evolution for the other side), they could stave off the risk of support escalation and increase the other actors' willingness to end the conflict.

This is an important lesson for civil wars that are raging today, and potentially for interstate wars as well. For instance, actors that are supporting a warring party could, while providing support to one side, lay the groundwork for negotiations. For instance, if the side one is supporting is performing well in combat as a result of external support, its backers could reach out to the other side—and their respective backers—and propose a resolution to the conflict on the basis of a peace treaty or ceasefire. This could, at the very least, reduce the chances of escalation to direct support by providing a potential intervener with an alternative, precisely at a time in which that would-be intervener's recipient appears weak. Even biased sponsors, working with multilateral institutions and third parties, could provide such a format for mediation and negotiation.[877]

In short, would-be mediators need to recall the lesson from Horace in *Carpe Diem*: the period following major battlefield developments could be decisive, either for escalation of the conflict, or for its resolution.

[877] Menninga 2023; Svensson 2007.

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