

Abstract

The dissertation draws on the literature on indirect warfare based on principal-agent theory, which conceptualizes indirect warfare as an example of delegation. Principals play an important role in shaping the rebellion and exerting control over it through the delegation used as a low-cost and deniable device for empowering the rebel proxies. However, the delegation is fraught with problems, especially when delegated to fragmented rebels.

The literature considers the fragmented rebel militias as weak non-state actors prone to rapid failure and decay. My argument focuses on the paradox of delegation to the fragmented rebel groups. I claim that such delegation is inherently costly and visible, which contradicts the original intention of delegation as a low-cost and deniable foreign policy tool. In my dissertation, I introduce the concepts of self-defeating patronage and decentralized delegation as my contribution to the discussion on indirect warfare.

The principal suffers self-defeating patronage because it must keep the barriers-of-entry low for the incipient rebel groups to overcome the collective action problem that the would-be rebels experience due to their weak social ties. Keeping the barriers low without strict control by the principal - that would raise the costs and visibility - fuels incessant fragmentation, resulting in the imminent failure that the principal has to avoid by costly and visible means, such as direct military inroads and forced merger of the rebel groups.

The literature considers the principal as a collective actor. It means that the principal is “black boxed” in the agent-centric literature. It has been discussed *why* principals delegate, but not *who* delegate within the principal’s institutions. I claim that the principal’s institutional subsystems, managing the delegation chains, might be driven by internal tensions, have divided interests and compete with each other. Such decentralized delegation may result in weaker control over the rebels and multiply the delegation problems, including fragmentation.

The empirical part focuses on Russia’s patronage of the rebel proxies in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in eastern Ukraine from 2014-to 2022. This dissertation is grounded in the epistemology of scientific realism and is designed as an explanatory case study using process tracing as a qualitative method when each part of the theorized causal mechanism can be disaggregated and conceptualized.