The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations

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Abstract

States in an international dispute sometimes choose to attack their enemies with their own military forces but other times choose to empower domestic insurgent groups. What explains the decision to act through rebel proxies rather than directly engage a rival? Theories and empirical analyses of international conflict have adopted a state-centric bias, ignoring the substitution between direct uses of force and indirect action through rebel organizations. This note examines the decision to delegate conflict to rebels through the lens of principal–agent theory. While states support rebel groups to forgo some of the costs of conflict, they also lose a degree of foreign policy autonomy. Preliminary evidence of conflict delegation is presented, along with a number of empirically testable propositions. Finally, the consequences of delegation from the rebels' perspective are explored. This framework serves as a starting point for future research on rebel–patron interactions.

Keywords

principal–agent theory, delegation, rebellion, substitution, international conflict

While states sometimes confront their foreign enemies with their own military forces, in other cases they choose instead to empower insurgencies. For example, the United States attacked Iraq in 2003 to remove an enemy regime but funded insurgencies in Nicaragua and Afghanistan during the 1980s rather than invading these countries. Pakistan has sometimes clashed with India directly while at other times it supported Kashmiri insurgents. What explains this choice of strategy? The causes and processes of war have long been the central focus of international relations scholarship, but theories of conflict have not adequately addressed this topic. Realists look for the causes

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of war in the structure of the international system and the distribution of power. Liberals seek to identify constraints on the use of force, such as democratic institutions and commercial ties. More recently, bargaining theories of conflict have analyzed strategic interactions among state dyads and the factors contributing to bargaining failure. Finally, quantitative analyses have led to important empirical insights about the resort to force between states. All of these theoretical and empirical traditions focus on state-to-state armed conflicts without accounting for indirect conflict strategies.

Despite the large literature on war, scholars often fail to appreciate the range of strategies and tactics used by states against their foreign enemies. International war—deadly armed conflict between the military forces of nation-states—is a rare event, while countries employ several additional means of providing for their own security and undermining their rivals. As Most and Starr (1984) persuasively argued, states often substitute one foreign policy tool for another. For instance, using historical case evidence from the World Wars, Morrow (1993) analyzes the trade-off between building a state's own military capabilities and seeking out international allies to bolster security (also see Morgan and Palmer 2000). But even among scholars who rightly note the substitutability of foreign policy strategies (for a review, see Palmer and Bhandari 2000),[1] there has been an overly state-centric bias; in other words, states are seen as the dominant actors in international politics, and security threats primarily emanate from other countries. Since World War II, however, interstate wars fought between national armies have declined in frequency and severity (Väyrynen 2006; Zacher 2001), whereas the most significant threats to incumbent regimes stem not from other governments but from internal challengers and insurgent groups (N. P. Gleditsch et al. 2002).

There is no simple dichotomy between civil and international war, however (see K. S. Gleditsch, Salehyan, and Schultz 2008). One of the most common strategies that states employ when confronting their international enemies is funding, harboring, and sponsoring rebel organizations or "terrorist" groups (Bapat 2006; Byman 2007; Salehyan 2009; Schultz 2008).[2] Rather than "go it alone" and attack their rivals directly, many states hire help to do the job. Empowering rebel organizations is often used as a substitute for the direct use of force, as states forgo costly military campaigns conducted with to own armies. Rebel patronage can also serve as a complement to interstate violence when state armies are accompanied by nonstate actors in joint military operations. As an example of the former, Iran and Syria have not recently engaged in direct state-to-state clashes with Israel but instead assist the militant organization Hezbollah as a means to increase their bargaining leverage and influence in the region. As an example of the latter phenomenon, Tanzania invaded Uganda in 1978, fighting alongside domestic rebels of the Ugandan National Liberation Army, as it ousted Idi Amin and installed a new (albeit fractious) government. Yet the most commonly used data set on international conflict—the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data—does not include information on indirect conflict strategies and as such dramatically overstates the level of peace in the international system. Moreover, many full-blown international wars—for example the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo

(DRC)—began with foreign sponsorship of rebel groups. Ignoring these ties neglects theoretically important conflict dynamics and hinders empirical research.

Rebel patronage is not without costs and risks. While states support rebel organizations as a means to avoid the costs of direct interstate confrontations, they also lose a degree of foreign policy autonomy. I argue that external support for rebel organizations is an important example of conflict delegation in international politics, and this choice of strategy should be analyzed as a principal–agent relationship. According to principal–agent theory, delegation is employed as a cost-saving device and can be a useful tool when the principal lacks task-specific knowledge and expertise. However, a pair of related agency problems may arise. *Adverse selection* occurs when principals do not have adequate information about the competence or reliability of agents prior to the establishment of a contractual relationship. *Agency slack*[3] occurs when the agent takes actions that are not consistent with the preferences of the principal once delegation has been established.

In this note, I first discuss the limited attention to rebel patronage in the literature on international war and why this impedes progress in international relations scholarship.[4] Following this, I argue that while some cases of foreign support may be seen as "interventions" in ongoing internal conflicts—or external attempts to influence war outcomes that are exogenous to the root causes of the rebellion—many civil wars are fundamentally shaped by international rivalries. Next, I proceed to the heart of the theoretical framework. I analyze the relative costs and benefits of a "traditional" conflict strategy versus delegation to rebels and how states attempt to design better contracts with their agents. After discussing this principal–agent relationship from the perspective of states, I then turn to the implications of delegation for rebel groups and for how internal conflicts unfold. Just as delegation entails costs and benefits for state actors, rebels must weigh an augmented resource pool against limitations on their autonomy. Next, I discuss several conjectures about delegation that serve as a basis for future empirical work. Although I do not engage in rigorous empirical testing, I discuss several case examples and outline an agenda for future research in the conclusion. The main purpose of this note is to highlight a promising agenda for future research, reorient the manner in which scholars think about international and civil conflict, and urge empirical testing of plausible hypotheses derived from the framework.

The Limited Scope of Conflict Studies

Studies of international war have pointed to the structure of the international system, the incentives of political leaders, institutional constraints, ideology, and bargaining failure, among many other factors, as causes of state-to-state violence. Realist theories of war identify the anarchic nature of the international system, the concomitant security dilemma, the distribution of power, and shifts therein as major causes of war (Glaser 1997; Jervis 1978; Organski and Kugler 1980; Mearsimer 2001; Waltz 1979). Liberals counter that democratic institutions, commercial ties, and international organizations limit the resort to force between states, and these arguments have been bolstered by

many large-*N* quantitative studies (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999; Doyle 1986; Gartzke, Li, and Boehmer 2001; Russett and Oneal 2001; Schultz 2003). Yet these theories suffer from a state-centric bias as it is tacitly assumed that warfare is conducted directly by the antagonists. It has been frequently assumed that states are the main actors in international relations and that wars are fought by the military personnel of their respective governments.

Formal, game-theoretic approaches to conflict have focused on strategic interactions among pairs of states and incentives to engage in war given the expected costs and benefits (see, e.g., Fearon 1995; Fey and Ramsay 2007; Powell 1999; Slantchev 2003; Filson and Werner 2002; Wagner 2000). Typically, these models build on a bargaining framework where war is either considered as the failure of bargaining and a costly lottery deciding the distribution of benefits or as the continuation of the bargaining process, which may be resolved through the defeat or capitulation of the opponent. Private information about capabilities and resolve, as well as problems credibly committing to proposed settlements, are seen as the most important obstacles to peace. In designing their models, scholars focus on strategic interactions between states, and while the resort to armed conflict is often stated in general terms, war is usually understood as contests between governments.

Others have looked at the incentives of government leaders to engage in the use of force, particularly as a way to divert attention from domestic problems (DeRouen 2000; Mansfield and Snyder 2005). Still others have looked at how norms and identities incline actors toward bellicose or pacific relations (Mueller 1989; Van Evera 1994). It is not possible to review all of the literature on interstate war here. However, it is clearly the case that this extensive body of work looks only at the tip of the iceberg. International war is a rare event, and foreign aggression in the form of military attacks constitutes a small fraction of conflict behavior between states. While purporting to study international conflict more generally, these studies—while revealing several important insights about the causes of international disputes—are limited in that they focus almost entirely on states as actors in the world system and do not consider alternatives to direct fighting, such as the imposition of economic sanctions or support for opposition groups. To the extent that scholars have addressed these issues, theories and empirical analyses have looked at various conflict strategies in isolation rather than as a menu of alternatives.

While there is some work on proxy warfare (see, e.g., Byman 2001; Prunier 2004; Swami 2004), the term has been applied descriptively to particular insurgencies. Many analysts have noted that rebel groups often benefited from external assistance, particularly during the cold war when the United States and Soviet Union competed for global dominance. The term *proxy force* was often used to describe the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan Mujahedin, for instance. However, we do not have a proper theoretical or empirical grasp of why states choose such a strategy over direct warfare or why states use rebel patronage in tandem with direct attacks. Analysts must address why states—in whole or in part—delegate to proxy forces, the costs and benefits of doing so, and how external support changes the nature of the insurgency.

The Pervasiveness of Conflict Delegation

Neglecting indirect conflict strategies also presents important obstacles for empirical studies, particularly for quantitative analyses. Work in the quantitative tradition—using conflict indicators such as the MID data from the Correlates of War (COW) project—typically uses dyadic observations with a narrow definition of international conflict, given as the threat or use of force between recognized state militaries (e.g., Bremer 1992; Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996; Partell and Palmer 1999; Vasquez 1995; Vasquez and Henehan 2001). The COW data, moreover, explicitly separate interstate and intrastate armed conflicts despite the fact that many civil wars have international dimensions.[5] By including only militarized disputes between governments, the MID data overlook significant episodes of interstate conflict where governments substitute rebel patronage for direct fighting. In addition, states will often use rebel patronage as a means to weaken and distract their enemies in preparation for a direct attack. External support for rebel groups is quite prevalent, and recognizing that such support is properly understood as *indirect interstate* conflict promises to open new doors for international relations scholars. Importantly, ignoring delegation to rebels understates the incidence of conflict in the international system and can bias our results.

To provide evidence of delegation to rebels, Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan (2008) have compiled a data set (Non-State Actors in Civil Wars data set; NSA) that includes information on all rebel groups active since 1945 based on the list of conflicts provided by the Uppsala University/International Peace Research Institute, Oslo Armed Conflicts Dataset. These data contain information on the estimated strength of the rebels, their territorial base, and their organizational structure, among other variables. Of particular importance here is information on foreign support for rebel organizations. According to the NSA data and coding procedures, information is provided on whether the rebel organization is aided by a foreign government, whether this link is explicit and well known or merely alleged, the type of support given (e.g., foreign troop deployment, military support, nonmilitary assistance, endorsement of rebel aims), and which external state(s) are involved.[6]

Figure 1 indicates that of the 285 rebel groups listed in the data set,[7] a plurality (134) had an explicit or widely accepted link with a foreign patron.[8] This figure becomes an absolute majority if the 30 cases of alleged support indicate real external ties. Seen in another way, for all country-years spanning the period 1946 to 2003, 1,224 involved a state facing a rebellion with *explicit* ties to foreign powers. Roughly 15 percent of all country-years during the period involved a state with a foreign-sponsored rebellion. Thus, the delegation of conflict to rebel organizations is a quite common phenomenon, and many rebel organizations are not purely autonomous actors but rely on foreign governments for their viability. This in no way suggests that local grievances and motivations are unimportant but that insurgencies are facilitated by external patrons that have a greater or lesser degree of influence over rebel operations.

The vast majority of these cases involved a foreign government sponsoring a rebel group through arms or finances. However, at times the lines between international and
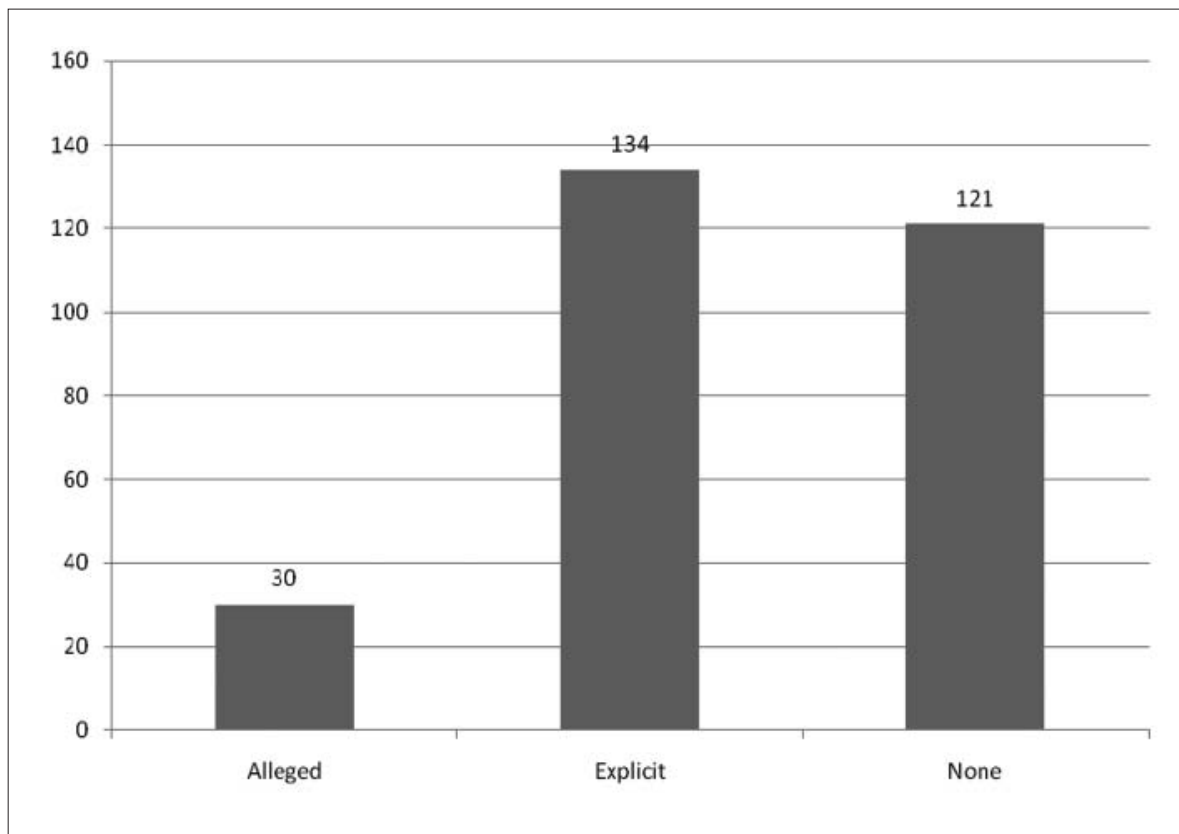
Figure 1. External support for rebel organizations

civil war are crossed. In twenty cases, foreign governments sent troops to the conflict and fought alongside rebel actors, using local groups in tandem with their own forces. For example, Vietnam sent troops into Cambodia in 1978 to oust the Khmer Rouge regime and did so in coordination with Cambodian rebels that were largely funded and organized by Vietnam. Rather than a pure substitution effect, where delegation to rebels takes the place of direct confrontation, such cases reflect complementary roles played by foreign troops and local rebels. Nonetheless, some tasks, for which local insurgents are better suited, are delegated to the rebel group rather than carried out by the invading state itself.

Which countries delegate to rebel organizations? In the NSA data, sixty-six countries were listed as having supported at least one rebel organization to a greater or lesser degree. Some countries have supported a single rebel group over this period, yet several states have delegated to rebel organizations on more than one occasion. Figure 2 lists the states that have supported six or more rebel organizations in the period covered by the NSA data. Cold war rivalries were clearly important, as the Soviet Union and the United States backed several insurgencies during their quest for influence in the "Third World." Yet this phenomenon is not limited to the cold war. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia provided assistance to insurgents in Soviet successor states. Other countries such as China, Libya, Cuba, Iran, and Sudan have provided material support to numerous militant groups.
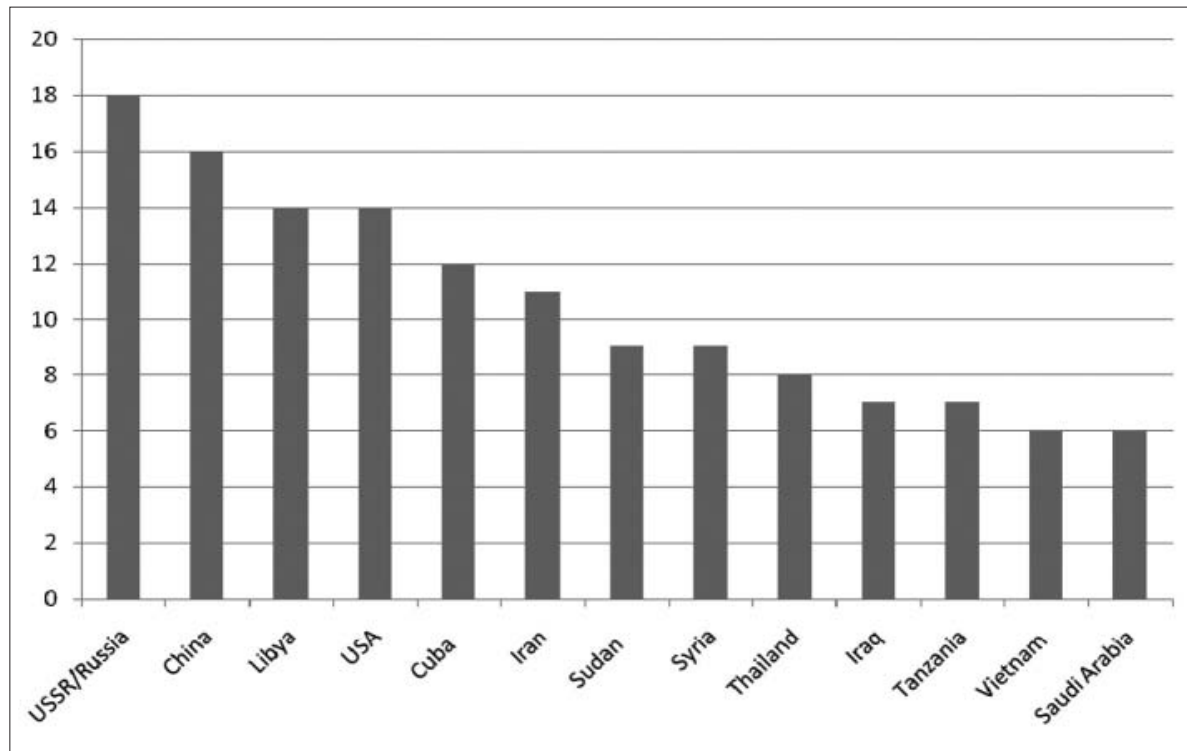
Figure 2. Top rebel sponsors

Table 1. Militarized Interstate Disputes and Rebel Support in Four Dyads

Dyad	Militarized interstate dispute	Rebel support (approximate dates)
Iran–Israel	None	Iran supports Hamas and Hezbollah (1990–present)
Liberia–Sierra Leone	1991, 1999	Liberia supports Revolutionary United Front (1991–2002)
Nicaragua–El Salvador	1997	Nicaragua supports FMLN (1980s)
S. Africa–Mozambique	1983, 1987	South Africa supports Renamo; Mozambique supports the African National Congress (1976–92)

Note: FMLN = Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.

By failing to take into account these relationships, international relations scholars dramatically understate the amount of conflict in the international system. While direct war is relative rare and may be becoming more so (Zacher 2001), other violent means are available to states. Yet the most commonly used data set on international conflict—the MID data—is not equipped to deal with indirect warfare. To illustrate, Table 1 lists four state dyads along with their conflict histories. These four cases—Iran–Israel, Liberia–Sierra Leone, Nicaragua–El Salvador, and South Africa–Mozambique—are not an exhaustive list but serve to highlight broader patterns.

Most observers will note that all of these dyads have had, now or in the past, a significant history of conflict. Yet MIDs between these states are relatively rare. Notably, Iran and Israel—known to have acrimonious relations—have never experienced a MID, although it is well known that Iran aids Hamas and Hezbollah in carrying out deadly operations against Israel. Similarly, Nicaragua supplied arms to Salvadoran rebels (the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) for much of the 1980s, although these states have only had one MID over the past several years and the MID in question was a minor fishing dispute. Liberia under Charles Taylor funded and supplied the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone—which wrecked the state—although there were only minor MIDs between the two, and both of these were related to rebel support. Finally, from the mid-1970s to early 1990s, Mozambique supported the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, while South Africa supported Renamo rebels. These groups waged prolonged military campaigns against their respective states—and by all accounts Renamo was viable only because of external support—although the MID data set hardly picks up activity between these neighbors. The two MIDs fought in 1983 and 1987, moreover, were not state-to-state clashes but consisted of South African attacks against ANC bases inside Mozambique. It is striking that the most commonly used conflict data set would indicate that these dyads have, for the most part, been "at peace."

For the countries in question, these "civil" wars posed vital threats and rebels were known to be abetted by foreign enemies. Examples such as these are not difficult to find; external support for rebel organizations is more common than direct state-to-state fighting, and the human toll of civil wars can be just as disastrous as international ones. While the MID data have revealed much about international conflict, by adopting a state-centric approach to international relations analysts have missed several violent conflicts that, while seemingly domestic in nature, are products of foreign rivalries. Omitting cases such as these can lead empirical analyses to significantly inflate the amount of peace in the international system, potentially leading to biased inferences and faulty conclusions about the declining prevalence of war.

Intervention versus Delegation

Before proceeding further, it is important to distinguish between *delegation* to rebel organizations and conflict *intervention*. While the two are related and often difficult to disentangle in practice, they should be kept conceptually distinct. Scholars have long observed that external parties frequently become involved in civil wars, including by providing support to rebel organizations (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce 2008; Findley and Teo 2006; Finnemore 2003; Regan 2000, 2002). However, this literature typically assumes that external actors are *intervening* in the conflict. This suggests that the civil war has domestic roots; foreign governments are tangential to the onset of the war and become involved once fighting is underway. The incentives of the external party are to influence conflict outcomes—perhaps out of solidarity with domestic actors—but with little direct control or influence over war aims and strategies. Rebels

preserve their organizational autonomy. The growing literature on transnational ethnic alliances and conflict (Cetinyan 2002; Davis and Moore 1997; Jenne 2006; Saideman 2001; Trumbore 2003; Woodwell 2004) also, for the most part, adopts an interventionist framework. Kin groups act in solidarity with their ethnic brethren elsewhere and come to the defense of coethnics when they revolt because of an alignment of interests and a shared identity.[9]

In other words, the literature on intervention assumes that civil wars are primarily caused by *domestic* factors such as ethnic discrimination, poverty, and inequality as well as feasibility conditions including rough terrain and lootable resources to finance operations (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Gurr 1970; Hegre et al. 2001). *Delegation* follows a different logic, and analysts should not infer intervention in all cases where rebels have external assistance. Delegation indicates that external actors play an important role in shaping the insurgency and exert control over it. Domestic grievances and opportunities to fight are certainly important and cannot be discounted; however, foreign governments are critical to the organization's viability and structure. The insurgency is made possible by the provision of arms, sanctuaries, supplies, and so forth. Most importantly, delegation requires some degree of agenda control over agents—patrons influence the aims, strategies, and tactics of the rebel group—although principals may come to lose such control over time. Yet the two can be difficult to distinguish in practice as an intervening state may start to behave like a principal in exchange for its support. Over time, the rebel force may come to depend on foreign aid, and external states can start to assume greater control over the insurgency.

As examples of delegation, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was created in 1964 by the Arab League, which oversaw the PLO's mandate, leadership, and organization. Only later did the PLO, under Yasser Arafat, assert an independent role in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Similarly, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq was formed in Tehran during the Iran–Iraq war and received considerable resources from the Iranian government, which also directed the group's operations to a large extent (Nasr 2006). Finally, the postgenocide government of Rwanda financed and organized Laurent Kabila's rebel organization, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (ADFL). This rebellion most likely would not have occurred in the absence of Rwandan support—Kabila had been a relatively obscure figure—and successfully toppled the government of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, although Kabila would later turn on his former patron (Scherrer 2002). In sum, a delegation perspective recognizes that many rebel organizations are fundamentally shaped by external parties as an alternative conflict strategy for states rather than arm's-length support by interveners.

The Logic of Conflict Delegation

Principal–agent models have been usefully applied to several questions in political science, most notably in studies of delegation to bureaucracies and legislative committees (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). International

relations scholars have begun to apply principal–agent theory to the study of international organizations, noting several similarities between domestic bureaucracies and multilateral bodies such as the World Trade Organization and agencies of the European Union (Brown 2008; Pollack 1997; Nielson and Tierney 2003; Hawkins et al. 2006). Because principal–agent models are now quite standard in political science, I give only a brief sketch of principal–agent theory here and focus on applications to rebel patronage and support.[10]

One of the most important functions of delegation is as a cost-saving device. Delegation allows principals to internalize costs associated with arm's-length transactions as well as realize efficiency gains associated with specialization. Principals may lack time and task-specific expertise to carry out all required operations and so will contract with an agent to perform a specified job or jobs. However, in such relationships, principals and their agents are likely to have some divergent interests, which may lead to agency loss. Informational asymmetries between principals and agents ex ante as well as ex post lead to two potential pitfalls of delegation. Prior to the establishment of a contract, principals typically do not have complete information about the competence and reliability of the potential agent, which risks choosing inferior ones; this is a problem of *adverse selection.* In addition, after contracting, the agent has more information about its behavior than does the principal. The agent can shirk its responsibilities by failing to devote optimal effort to the task or tasks at hand, or it can take actions that are contrary to the preferences and directives of the principal. In the extreme, the principal may delegate powers to the agent that can be used against it. Such problems are referred to as *agency slack* (or, alternatively, moral hazard).

According to Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991) and McCubbins and Schwartz (1984), however, principals are not helpless in the face of agency losses. They can design tools to help minimize these risks. First, when hiring, principals can design screening mechanisms to select among potential agents to evaluate their competence and find those with similar preferences. Second, principals can monitor the actions of their agents through direct oversight mechanisms ("police patrols"), although these are costly, or they can monitor indirectly by having third parties report on bad behavior ("fire alarms"). Third, monitoring is not enough but must be coupled with credible threats that the principal will sanction the agent if agency slack becomes problematic. The credibility of the threat is particularly important since issuing punishments can be costly for the principal as well. Finally, the principal can construct checks and balances where multiple agents are created to increase competition among one another, reveal information about opportunistic behavior, and mitigate agency slack.

Nielson and Tierney (2003) highlight additional problems associated with collective agency. A collective principal is one that is composed of more than one actor; for instance, the U.S. Congress is composed of two chambers and several individual members who delegate to federal bureaucracies. In such cases, the principal is a composite entity that must overcome collective action problems in designing contracts, screening agents, and imposing sanctions. More germane to the study of rebel delegation, however, is the problem of multiple principals.[11] In these instances, a single agent

has contracts with two or more distinct principals, whose preferences and priorities may diverge. The agent can play these principals against one another to win more favorable terms and is less reliant on a single contract for its mandate and viability.

Costs and Benefits of Delegation to Rebels

Scholars have devoted a good deal of theoretical and empirical work to the topic of external support for rebel organizations (e.g., Bapat 2007a, 2007b; Byman 2007; K. S. Gleditsch, Salehyan, and 2008; Regan 2000, 2002; Salehyan 2009; Schultz 2008). However, despite the descriptive application of the term *proxy war* to several insurgencies, scholars have not seriously analyzed rebel patronage as a delegation relationship, nor have they sought to understand the conditions under which states will choose to delegate rather than attack their enemies with their own forces. We do not have a complete theoretical or empirical understanding of the decision to support insurgencies rather than engage in direct military strikes.

To understand the choice to delegate, it is important to discuss the costs and benefits of direct warfare. States engaged in a dispute can resolve their differences and avoid a costly war through a negotiated settlement (Fearon 1995). Rather than war being the end of the negotiating process, however, violence is used as a means to impose costs on the other side and reveal information about one's capabilities, so as to increase bargaining leverage during peace settlements (Filson and Werner 2002; Wagner 2000). War is a costly strategy, however, as the state burns resources and lives are lost. In addition to these direct costs, initiating a violent conflict can invite international condemnation and foreign sanctions, invite the intervention of the state's allies, and be opposed by domestic audiences who are averse to casualties (Gartner 2008). Finally, invading a foreign territory requires costly intelligence gathering about terrain, infrastructure, appropriate targets, and the local population, both to mount an effective assault and to hold onto captured ground. If the invading state intends to govern the area by annexing the territory or occupying it for a period of time, it bears governance costs in doing so as it must control local populations and rebuild damaged infrastructure (Lake 1996; Wimberley 2007).

Faced with these costs, states have several options at their disposal. They can do nothing, attack with their own forces, entirely delegate conflict to a rebel organization, or pursue a blended strategy where conflict occurs through direct and indirect means. In a pure substitution situation, provided that potential agents are available and the state can exert an acceptable degree of control over insurgents, it gains bargaining leverage vis-à-vis its rival at a significantly reduced price. First, while it must expend resources to equip and finance the organization, the patron bears neither direct casualties nor the associated domestic war weariness and discontent. Second, the international community and foreign governments often look the other way when external states support rebel organizations, and such sovereignty violations are not condemned as strongly as border violations by government troops.[12] Because rebels are "domestic" actors with local ties, causal ambiguity about the origins of the insurgency, as well as

uncertainty about the nature of foreign direction and support, does not establish clear culpability in the same manner as border violations. Secrecy can be advantageous, so assistance is often given covertly, hiding information from disapproving international and domestic audiences (Forsythe 1992).

Third, domestic rebels are often better suited for particular combat operations that require extensive local knowledge about populations and terrain. They have location-specific information and expertise that foreign governments lack. Fourth, foreign occupying forces are frequently seen as illegitimate by domestic populations. Rebels can give a local "face" to the conflict, making it more legitimate in the eyes of citizens. Finally, and related to these previous factors, foreign governments can avoid governance costs associated with holding onto external territory. Domestic proxies, with better local knowledge and legitimacy, can more efficiently govern territory under their control or be relied on to govern the entire country in the event of a rebel victory.

Sometimes, states will chose to blend strategies and use rebel forces as a complement to, rather than a pure substitute for, direct attacks. States may support insurgencies as a means to weaken their opponents and gain leverage in preparation for future direct strikes. They may also invade another country's territory while simultaneously supporting domestic rebels. Some tasks are delegated, while for others the state retains agency. Such relationships are still designed to limit the costs borne by the state itself. States may delegate certain tasks to rebel organizations for which they are better suited, benefit from their local knowledge and legitimacy, and rely on them to govern the territory when foreign forces withdraw. While not escaping all of the costs associated with direct warfare, states can still shift some of the burden to rebels and take advantage of their local ties.

Despite these clear benefits, empowering rebel organizations also entails risks, particularly that associated with agency loss. Governments run the risk of losing foreign policy autonomy and the ability to direct the conflict to their advantage. Informational asymmetries make it difficult for states to select competent agents who also share their interests. States therefore face problems of adverse selection since they cannot be entirely certain of insurgent quality. In addition, agency slack can become a problem once a delegation relationship has been formed. Rebels can devote less than optimal effort to the fight, preferring instead to use allotted resources for private consumption. Rebels may also take actions that are contrary to the interests and directives of the patron (e.g., human rights abuses) or in extreme cases use the patron's resources against it. As a final cost, the target government may retaliate against the external supporter with military force, although international war would be virtually guaranteed if the state attacked with its own forces. In many instances, states will view both options as overly costly and will choose to do nothing, although it can be difficult to gauge these costs in advance.

There are many examples where states gambled on an insurgency but faced adverse consequences as a result. Jordan supported and hosted Palestinian insurgents during the 1960s; however, groups such as the PLO began to launch unauthorized cross-border strikes against Israel, provoking Israeli reprisals. PLO forces also began to

openly carry weapons, set up police checkpoints, and collect "taxes"—in effect setting up a rival government. The final straw came when Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine militants hijacked airliners and landed them in Jordan, against government wishes. In September 1970, the Jordanian government broke ties with these organizations and moved to forcibly expel the PLO and other Palestinian militants from Jordanian territory. In another example, Rwanda armed and supplied Laurent Kabila and his ADFL rebels, which successfully toppled the government of Mobutu Sese Seko, who was in turn equipping Rwandan rebels hiding in Zaire.[13] Rwanda hoped that by backing Kabila it would install a friendly regime in the DRC. Its objectives were not met, however, as Kabila turned on his former patron by expelling Rwandan advisors and continuing Mobutu's policy of arming Rwandan insurgents.

Controlling Rebel Agents

While states delegate to rebels to improve bargaining outcomes with their international opponents, their bargaining strength is directly a function of their ability to control their agents (for related arguments, see Bapat 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Schultz 2008). If the state cannot rein in rebel forces, the target government has no incentive to offer concessions since the patron must be able to credibly commit to ending insurgent violence in exchange (Bapat 2007b). Like Frankenstein's monster, governments may create entities that are beyond their control. As such, external principals can use ex ante and ex post mechanisms to gather information on their agents and sanction them for errant behavior. However, unlike delegation relationships in the domestic arena or to international organizations—where principals have established legal channels for enforcing contracts—enforcement problems are particularly difficult in conflict settings. As with other principal–agent relationships, three general categories of tools may be used: screening and selection mechanisms, monitoring, and sanctioning.

First, principals must develop means of selecting agents that are capable and whose preferences are similar to their own. Delegation to rebel groups who share ethnic, religious, and linguistic kinship ties to the state is one such mechanism. Reduced language and cultural barriers make it easier to gather information on potential agents and avoid misunderstandings; moreover, ethnic kin are more likely to share the patron's preferences, or at least be perceived to do so. External states can also send trainers and advisors to the field to collect information on possible agents. Famously, Cuba sent Che Guevara to the DRC to help Laurent Kabila launch a Marxist rebellion in 1964, but Guevara grew disillusioned with Kabila and advised against supporting him, remarking, "Nothing leads me to believe that Kabila is the man of the hour. He is too addicted to drink and women" (CNN 2001). Likewise, states can make rebel leaders undergo long periods of training and indoctrination as a costly signal that they are committed to a particular cause, which distinguishes them from insincere types.[14] During the cold war, for instance, the United States and Soviet Union developed special training facilities for various insurgent groups.

Second, once states have delegated authority to a rebel organization, they can design monitoring tools to oversee their activities and prevent agency slack. Again, ethnic rebels may be easier for kin groups to monitor because of lowered costs of communication and information exchange. States may also embed foreign advisors in rebel units as a "police patrol" mechanism, although such tools are risky, particularly if killed or captured foreigners tip off domestic and international audiences. Of course, rebels and foreign troops invading together in joint operations reduce agency slack significantly, but this strategy is quite costly. "Fire alarm" tools may also be employed. Civilians in the conflict zone may protest abuses by the rebel organization, and somewhat perversely, NGOs may report on bad behavior, making it easier for the principal to monitor its agent.

Third, the patron must be able to impose sanctions for agency slack. Expelling foreign rebels with sanctuaries on the state's territory is one such strategy. States can also threaten abandonment. The patron can cease providing resources to the rebel organization, leaving it vulnerable to attacks by the target state, although the threat of abandonment must itself be credible. In this regard, principals walk a fine line between empowering rebels enough to ensure that they can impose costs on the target government but not so much that the rebels do not fear abandonment nor be able to turn against the patron. For this reason, external supporters may give insurgents just enough resources to be viable but not enough to prevail. It may be enough for the patron to impose costs on the target through a low-level protracted insurgency, without attempting to defeat it. In one notable example of sanctioning, Rwanda arrested Congolese Tutsi rebel leader Laurent Nkunda in January 2009 after reports of extensive human rights abuses by his forces.

Making sanctioning even more difficult, many rebellions have multiple principals, which reduces reliance on any one patron. Abandonment by one principal following a violation of the contract may not be as troubling if other sources of aid are available. Indeed, rebels may foster competition among multiple principals and play them off against one another to win the better terms, namely, more resources with fewer strings attached. For instance, the Angolan rebel group UNITA received support from the United States, South Africa, and other African nations, reducing its dependence on any one patron.

Delegation from the Rebels' Perspective

The section above looked at the choice to engage in direct hostilities or delegate to rebel organizations from the perspective of the state patron. However, it is important to appreciate that external support for rebel organizations is not solely the choice of the state but is a strategic partnership between the principal and the agent. Opposition groups conspiring to start an insurrection also face a choice between contracting with a foreign government and relying on their own efforts and resources. As with the decision to delegate to a rebel organization, the rebels' decision to accept foreign assistance implies important trade-offs.

Accepting assistance from foreign states promises to significantly augment the rebels' capabilities. Insurgent groups face the challenge of mobilizing supporters, training recruits, finding sources of finances, and acquiring arms, all within the shadow of government repression (Tilly 1978). Foreign patrons can help overcome large power asymmetries between states and rebels and, importantly, help the opposition mobilize resources quickly. External sanctuaries beyond the coercive capabilities of government forces can provide substantial cover to rebel organizations as well (Salehyan 2009). Thus, finding a foreign patron can be quite attractive as a strategy to quickly overcome initial vulnerabilities, evade repression, and improve capacity to attack government forces.

As principal–agent theory suggests, however, these resources almost always come with strings attached and reduce the autonomy of rebel organizations. Therefore, rebels face a trade-off between improving their resource base and maintaining organizational independence. This dilemma is analogous to a start-up firm deciding between relying on its own funds versus finding a willing venture capitalist, which may impose its own vision on the enterprise. Faced with the threat of government repression, however, many potential rebels will find that accepting external patronage is their only viable option. Thus, as with nonviolent protest movements, seeking out external allies is more likely when domestic channels are blocked (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

As an additional cost, finding external sanctuaries and foreign backers may cause the rebellion to "lose touch" with its local constituents. Domestic audiences may come to see the rebels as agents of a foreign power rather than sensitive to local concerns—and home governments have an interest in promoting such an image. For instance, during the Iran–Iraq war, the Iranian Mojahedin-e-Khalq lost credibility in the eyes of many Iranians because it was based in and supplied by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. This may not simply be an "image problem," however. As opposed to rebel organizations that primarily gather resources from domestic populations and hide among sympathetic constituents at home, rebels with external bases and patrons may be less sensitive to the demands of locals or the costs they bear. Domestic rebels must provide desired goods to the communities they claim to represent in exchange for their goodwill, tax resources, willing recruits, and hiding places. Such rebels must establish social bonds with these groups and respond to their needs in exchange for their support or, at the very least, acquiescence (Beardsley and Quinn 2009; Petersen 2001; Wood 2003). By contrast, rebels funded externally and without deep local ties are less sensitive to the costs of conflict borne by civilians and may become abusive themselves (Weinstein 2006, 7). Losing domestic support may cause the insurgency to ultimately fail in meeting its aims.

Finally, externally supported rebels are subject to the whims of their patrons and their changing foreign policy priorities, which leads to potentially unreliable resource streams. Rebels who are dependent on external backers run the risk of abandonment. While principals may desert their agents as punishments for agency loss, abandonment may also occur if domestic pressures in the principal or changing geopolitical interests dictate an end to the contract. For instance, the waning of the cold war and

domestic political considerations in the United States and Honduras led the Nicaraguan Contras to fear abandonment, which in turn inclined the Contras to engage in peace talks with the Sandinista government (see Salehyan 2009). Thus, because of changing external priorities, rebels may lose their supply of resources and become vulnerable to state repression.

When Is Delegation Likely?

From the discussion above, we can derive a few conjectures about when delegation will be more likely than the direct use of force. States can certainly find both options unattractive, but if violence is chosen over inaction, states must decide whether to engage in direct or indirect warfare. The discussion below assumes that a potential rebel group exists in the target state, although this may not always be the case; options will be limited if no effective opposition can be identified. Rigorous empirical testing of such propositions, including through large-*N* statistical analyses and detailed case studies, is certainly feasible, although it must await future research for now. Instead, I develop several propositions here and leave empirical analyses for subsequent work.

First, delegation will be more likely when the costs and expected casualties of warfare are high and tolerance for such costs is low. Governments that can expect high casualties and considerable resource expenditures may find direct warfare to be too costly. Such regimes are more likely to avoid these costs by supplying rebel organizations instead. Second, beyond these direct costs of warfare, delegation will be more likely when international and domestic audience costs of direct warfare are high. To hide their actions, states will covertly support rebels to foster ambiguity about the origins of the civil conflict and avoid blame. Acts of foreign adventurism that are seen as illegitimate by constituents and the international community are more likely to be conducted through proxies. Leaders that are sensitive to public opinion and domestic casualty aversion are more likely to use indirect strategies.

Third, fighting directly will be most likely when the state's aims are more immediate and dire. States will prefer to use their own forces when they must quickly and decisively meet some objective. Because of the potential for agency slack and incentives to withhold resources from rebels so that they do not become too powerful to control, indirect force is more likely to be used when stakes are relatively low. Issues such as vital territory, strategically important resources, and imminent threats may be too important to sacrifice control over and are prerogatives over which states will want to maintain autonomy of action.

Fourth, strong states are more likely to use rebel organizations against weaker targets since they are less threatened by retaliation and have better means of controlling agents through monitoring and sanctioning. Weak states fear being attacked in response for their support of rebel organizations and are unlikely to gain bargaining leverage in the international dispute since they are more likely to lose control over agents. Weak states are more likely to have their efforts backfire. Nonetheless, power preponderance makes all options more viable for the stronger state as it has greater means to both attack enemies directly and support insurgents.

Fifth, support for insurgents is more likely when the external state faces high costs for governing captured territory and lacks critical location-specific intelligence. Delegation to rebels is more likely to be used when there are considerable gains from specialized knowledge about local populations, terrain, and targets and if the state does not wish to govern captured territory. Rebel organizations can also serve as a local face to the conflict, thus being seen as more legitimate and minimizing resistance to occupying forces. For these reasons, even when states choose to attack directly, they often simultaneously employ local agents who can assist with the war effort and who can be installed as a new, friendly governing regime following the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Sixth, delegation is more likely to occur when the principal has ethnic kin in the target state since shared ethnicity eases the burdens of delegation. In addition, the rebel group is more likely to accept assistance from ethnic kin since it has less reason to fear divergent interests and imposed agendas. Whether real or merely perception, it is often believed that because of similarities in traditions, religion, and historical experience, ethnic groups share similar preferences over the means and outcomes of conflict (see Saideman 2001). Importantly, common languages, reduced barriers to communication, and shared cultural understandings ease the process of screening, monitoring, and sanctioning agents, thus reducing agency slack.

States seeking rebel agents must also find willing partners. Therefore, the seventh expectation is that rebel groups are more likely to accept foreign resources if they lack domestic sources of funding. Rebel groups will prefer to rely on local bases of support and establish deep ties with their own communities since becoming too dependent on foreign patrons can undermine their decision-making autonomy. However, if the home state can hinder rebel mobilization, dissidents are more likely to seek resources and sanctuaries abroad as this is their only viable option. Moreover, if the rebel group lacks extensive local support and sources of funds—perhaps because their views are at the fringes of society—the group is more likely to seek external allies. Finally, rebel groups are more likely to accept foreign funding if there exists more than one source of support. Since multiple principals often have a hard time sanctioning their agents and agents are not dependent on a single principal, concern with autonomy is alleviated when several patrons exist.

This list is not exhaustive, and several other observable implications of the theory may be derived. In addition to asking why states delegate to rebels, other interesting questions may also be addressed through this framework. When do states act wholly through rebel proxies, and when do they engage in joint operations with rebels? What types of resources do external patrons provide, and what explains the forms of assistance? When is delegation likely to be successful from the point of view of the patron? How does external support change the character of rebel organizations? How do states choose among several potential opposition groups? Looking at principal–agent dynamics in civil and international disputes promises to significantly improve empirical studies of war. As was mentioned above, failing to account for alternative strategies to interstate war can bias our results since analysts do not fully specify choices available to actors involved in a dispute.

Conclusion

In this note, I have argued that international relations scholars have ignored alternative strategies that states use to attack their enemies. The delegation of conflict to rebel organizations is a frequently used technique employed by states wishing to avoid the costs of warfare. However, principal–agent problems potentially make such a strategy risky, as it is difficult to select appropriate agents and maintain control over them. I have provided descriptive data and numerous case examples of delegation to rebel groups, but more sophisticated empirical testing is needed to draw firm conclusions about when delegation is likely to occur.

Although I have not provided an exhaustive list, I have developed propositions about when conflict delegation is likely. Combing data sets on civil and international war and including new information on delegation to rebels can be used to test hypotheses about conflict substitution. More generally, scholars must pay greater attention to conflict strategies beyond war, how these affect bargaining between states, and why one strategy is chosen over another (Most and Starr 1984). In addition, future research and analysis should be devoted to understanding how civil wars unfold when external actors are central to the conflict dynamic. There are likely to be important differences between rebellions that are wholly domestic, those that have an external intervener, and those that exhibit principal–agent relationships. Understanding these differences will greatly improve our understanding of civil conflict.

Conceptually, scholars and policy makers alike have been hampered by definitional blinders when it comes to thinking about and responding to international war. In commonly used academic data sets as well as in international law and discourse, war is defined narrowly as violent exchanges between the armies of nation-states. In domestic settings, however, hiring a hit man is as morally and legally culpable as murder itself. Threats to international peace and security not only arise from states but also from rebel organizations, which often benefit from state sponsorship and foreign sanctuary. Indeed, international legal prohibitions against territorial violations, backed by powerful states, may have inadvertently made indirect proxy wars more attractive. Failing to respond to clear instances of rebel patronage allows state sponsors of militant activities to escape blame for their deliberate actions. Therefore, it is prudent for scholars and policy makers to take proxy warfare seriously.

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Notes

1. A special issue of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (vol. 44, no. 3) was entirely devoted to substitution.
2. Because of the normatively charged connotations of the term and definitional ambiguities, I prefer to avoid the use of the term *terrorist* in this article, instead using *rebel* or *insurgent*.
3. Agency slack is sometimes referred to as *moral hazard.* Both terms refer to actions taken by an agent that are contrary to the interests of the principal. Moral hazard is also used to describe relationships where actors have incentives to take on excess risk because others will come to their assistance (see Kuperman and Crawford 2006). I prefer to use the term *agency slack* to be consistent with Hawkins, Lake, and Tierney (2006).
4. External support for rebel organizations fighting a foreign enemy is not the only form of conflict delegation. Delegation problems also arise when states employ mercenaries, para-militaries, or private military contractors (Avant 2005; Singer 2005). While my framework can be readily extended to such principal–agent relationships, for clarity and tractability, in this article I choose to focus on delegation to rebel organizations fighting foreign governments.
5. See http://www.correlatesofwar.org/ (accessed July 27, 2009).
6. Because I am interested in *delegation* to rebel organizations by states and not why states *intervene* in ongoing civil wars, here I display only information on rebel support in the first period of the conflict. Conceptually, intervention implies that a rebellion emerges for domestic reasons and with a local resource base and external actors are later drawn into the conflict; delegation implies that the rebellion exists with foreign help. Observing that rebels had external support at the onset of the civil war suggests that foreign powers played an important role in instigating the war and are more likely to behave as principals. However, even intervening states can assume control over the rebels' agenda over time, and the two may be difficult to disentangle in practice.
7. Although the Non-State Actors in Civil Wars data also include coups, these are theoretically different from popular revolts, and as such coup cases are excluded from the present analysis.
8. I acknowledge that these data might understate the amount of foreign support for rebel organizations since some states covertly provide assistance and can keep their actions hidden. However, with time, many of these relationships become known and reported on.
9. However, in line with the argument here, Jenne (2006) argues that external kin groups can actually *encourage* rebellion.
10. This discussion draws heavily from Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991).
11. There are few examples of a collective principal delegating to a rebel group. The Arab League's support of the Palestine Liberation Organization is one such example, however.
12. As a case in point, in March 2008, Colombia violated Ecuadorean territory to attack a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel base. While the border

violation was promptly condemned by regional governments, evidence of Venezuelan and Ecuadorean support for the FARC was not. Similarly, the UN Security Council strongly condemned Rwanda and Uganda's invasion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the late 1990s but was relatively silent about the Kabila regime's support of militant groups.

13. This was an example of a mixed strategy as Rwanda invaded Zaire's eastern provinces to root out Hutu insurgents. Rwanda delegated the task of taking Kinshasa and setting up a new government to Kabila while it focused on its goal of eliminating rebel sanctuaries.

14. Jeremey Weinstein (2006) makes a similar argument, applying it to rebel leaders finding reliable recruits.

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