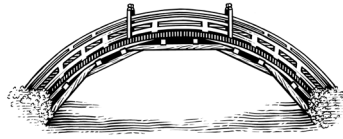


BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Yelena Biberman's  
*Gambling with Violence:  
State Outsourcing of War in Pakistan and India*  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2019  
ISBN: 978-0-1909-2997-8



*Tamanna Salikuddin*

*Rashmi Singh*

*Samir Puri*

*Yelena Biberman*

## A Race to the Bottom: Strong States and the Delusion of Proxy Warfare

*Tamanna Salikuddin*

Today's multipolar world with the re-emergence of great-power conflict and the outsized digital reach of nonstate actors beyond their apparent conventional capacities has encouraged countries to support proxy forces in most major wars.<sup>1</sup> The United States actively supported proxies before and during the Cold War, but since September 11, Congress has granted the Department of Defense unprecedented authorities to organize, train, equip, and advise proxy forces.<sup>2</sup> The significant changes in the global security landscape have prompted a re-examination of the use of proxies: why do states choose to outsource violence when its legitimate use is a fiercely guarded defining characteristic of a modern nation state? Current discourse explores what the costs and benefits are of global proxy use, whether current legal (domestic and international) frameworks are sufficient to handle the explosion of proxy warfare,<sup>3</sup> and how policymakers should assess its utility.<sup>4</sup> Most of this literature is focused on foreign support of state and nonstate actors in civil wars and interstate conflicts, largely leaving intrastate use of proxies untouched.

In her compelling new book, *Gambling with Violence: State Outsourcing of War in Pakistan and India*, Yelena Biberman explores the contours of a state's support for nonstate actors in domestic civil wars. A state's use of proxies against insurgents or separatists within its own borders is a salient, though understudied, phenomenon in the relations between South Asia's nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan. Biberman uses these two states as

---

**TAMANNA SALIKUDDIN** is Director of South Asia Programs at the U.S. Institute of Peace (United States), where she oversees the organization's work in Pakistan and broader South Asia. Formerly, she served twelve years in the U.S. government, including on the National Security Council and at the Department of State, in roles focused on South Asia and conflict resolution. She can be reached at <tsalikuddin@usip.org>.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Byman, "Why States Are Turning to Proxy War," *National Interest*, August 26, 2018 ~ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-states-are-turning-proxy-war-29677?page=0%2C2>.

<sup>2</sup> William Rosenau and Zack Gold, "'The Cheapest Insurance in the World?' The United States and Proxy Warfare," CNA, CNA Analysis and Solutions, July 2019 ~ [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-020227-1Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-020227-1Rev.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Brittany Benowitz and Tommy Ross, "Time to Get a Handle on America's Conduct of Proxy Warfare," *Lawfare*, April 9, 2020 ~ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/time-get-handle-americas-conduct-proxy-warfare>.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenau and Gold, "'The Cheapest Insurance in the World?'"

examples in her revamped theory of “balance of interests” to explain why a state chooses to back proxies and how successfully it is able to do so. She expands this framework to Turkey and Russia to test its usefulness further afield with states that are former imperial powers rather than postcolonial democracies. Her framework is useful in understanding the complex and often convoluted relationships between states and their domestic proxies. Biberman makes the case that a state’s essential motivation in a civil war is to re-establish sovereignty or preserve the status quo. But, notably, she pushes back on the common understanding that a state will enforce its sovereignty at any cost within its borders. Rather, she gives examples of states having competing interests that lead them to tolerate some level of internal intransigence and not fully defend their sovereignty. The balance-of-interests theory recognizes the role of both power and interests in state-nonstate alliances, specifies when states seek nonstate allies, and identifies the conditions under which different types of nonstate actors join counterinsurgency operations. In a departure from much of the literature that assumes proxy support is tied only to a state’s power, Biberman expertly argues that a state’s interests are equally important in the decision to support proxies in a domestic civil war (p. 9).

*Gambling with Violence* shows that strong states with strong militaries cannot always do what they want, even within their own borders. The book’s examination of India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Russia helps make the case that uprisings are common in states with robust armed forces, especially states as diverse and large as these. Previous studies assumed that a state’s weakness leads it to back proxy forces inside its own borders. However, Russia’s experience in the First Chechen War demonstrates that a competent military is necessary to successfully use, manage, and control proxy forces (p. 144). The book observes repeatedly that a state’s power is relative to the context in which it is deployed (see, for example, p. 11). Furthermore, the postcolonial realities of both India and Pakistan are revealed in the discussion of Kashmir and Bangladesh, as well as the fact that each country’s strong military was not well-positioned to fight in these particular civil wars. Independence from colonial rule and the creation of the modern states of India and Pakistan left many unresolved conflicts and territorial disputes that festered under each government’s lack of legitimacy due to the population’s alienation from the state; religious, ethnic, and tribal prejudices; and continued colonial practices of limited sovereignty in certain areas. *Gambling with Violence* shows how the balance of power can easily shift away from a state’s forces (even if conventionally strong) to insurgents,

at which moment a state's calculus will see proxies as a force multiplier and not an admission of weakness. A strong military is well-positioned for conventional interstate conflict, but insurgents and nonstate actors are better positioned for intractable and irredentist civil wars.

So how do strong states decide when to gamble on nonstate actors in conflicts that test their sovereignty? Most international relations theorists will point to avoidance of accountability and shared ideology as reasons that states decide to ally with proxies. Biberman, however, finds clear flaws in these explanations. In almost all cases presented in the book, ideology was secondary to the cold calculus of power and control. The Pakistan Army of the 1970s did not share the ideology of the Islamists it worked with in erstwhile East Pakistan, nor did the secular Turkish military share any common creed with the Kurdish Hezbollah. Ideology can justify but does not drive these state-nonstate alliances. Accountability reasoning falls short in most modern cases where plausible deniability is a farce. The states discussed in the book hardly try to keep these alliances secret, and most are widely known by the rebels and civilian populations. Moreover, there are little to no consequences for the state sponsors, even when they depend on powerful democracies for assistance. It is usually the proxies (for example, Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh) that want to conceal their state benefactors for fear of reprisal.

Biberman instead posits that “distribution of power inside the theater of war” structures the incentives and decision-making for state support of proxies (p. 24). Similar to the cost-benefit analysis a conflict-afflicted state might make in deciding to join a peace process, relative battlefield strength is key. The examples show instances where states are losing or locked in stalemate with the rebels when they opt for a proxy alliance. The nonstate proxy brings other advantages in a civil war, particularly local knowledge and intelligence that conventional forces largely lack in the contested spaces. In the South Asian examples, the lack of local understanding and alienation of the local populace are contributing causes to the underlying conflict themselves. As such, local proxies offer an appealing shortcut to states that choose to outsource fighting. Even if the proxies cannot win the war, they can muddy the waters, undercut rebel cohesion, and sow dissent among the populace.

Biberman argues that the effectiveness of a proxy is dependent on how strongly the state is tied to extension of its sovereignty, contrasting Pakistan's lackluster support for tribal resistance to the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and India's vehement support for the Salwa Judum against the

Naxalites in Chhattisgarh, for instance. While these cases are ostensibly different, there are underlying similarities. Both regions were left largely ungoverned and sovereignty was never fiercely imposed, neither under British rule nor by Pakistan and India. It was only when India had significant fiscal and political motivation to exert control that it became serious about proxies. Likewise, loose control of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas was in Pakistan's interest, and fully supporting the tribes risked empowering *lashkars* that would threaten the Pakistani state and inflame Pashtun nationalism. While not explored in the book, a key factor in decision-making is the level of foreign support rebels receive. Rebels in both Kashmir and present-day Bangladesh were not on their own but received support from powerful neighboring enemy countries, making the need to defeat them integral to India's and Pakistan's respective national security calculus. A state's preoccupation with interstate conflict often leads it to ignore civil wars until they escalate (e.g., Pakistan and the TTP), even though interstate proxy support directly affects the decision to support domestic proxies (e.g., Kashmir and Bangladesh).

The book's exploration of the tribulations faced by the various proxy groups is fascinating: these groups are used and abused by states, often discarded after they outlive their usefulness, and can suffer retribution from the population or rebels. Especially when the rebel cause is popular and ultimately successful, proxies can lose everything, illustrated by the execution of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami activist Motiur Rahman Nizami by the Bangladesh government in 2016, more than 30 years after the civil war (p. 60). The Ikhwan experience in Kashmir is also illustrative: the alliance with the Indian military was no secret, and the insurgents and their families (at least those that survived rebel retribution) continue to suffer pariah status years after the Indian forces abandoned them.

Proxies do not win wars. *Gambling with Violence* offers this particularly resonant lesson to India and Pakistan. None of the conflicts examined in the book have ended successfully, nor have the states been able to fully exert their sovereignty in the rebellious areas. In fact, the use of proxies has led to conflict escalation, exacerbated alienation, increased human rights violations, and persistent ungoverned spaces. In South Asia, Bangladesh is often the cautionary tale of proxy warfare gone wrong, but the lesson is wrongly interpreted that Indian support to Bengali rebels was superior to Pakistani support of anti-rebel groups. The enduring legacy of Bangladesh is rather how the brutality of the proxies was outdone only by the brutality of the Pakistani armed forces against civilians and

erstwhile fellow citizens. Fighting alongside proxies is often a race to the bottom for conventional forces. As Biberman notes, while Pakistan is often criticized for its use of proxies, India also continues to use them in many circumstances. In particular, her observations about Kashmir in the 1990s and early 2000s continue to ring true. While India's "tough" policy on proxies coupled with all-out military force and political repression may try to "get them by their balls—hearts and minds will follow," as a government sign exhorted indelicately at a renegade camp, it is evident that Kashmiri hearts and minds are still not following and the regressive policies further inflame the populace (p. 94).

In South Asia, proxies may successfully sow discord among insurgencies or allow for a state's tactical gains, but the underlying conflicts persist, and the use of proxies deludes the state into never confronting the alienation or disaffection at the heart of these subaltern conflicts. South Asian states' continued oppressive security approaches to what they consider their "frontiers" and "ghettos" replicate the colonial experience and engender continued civil wars and uprisings (p. 169). Rather than advise policymakers on how to improve their proxy wars (as many other discussions on this topic have done), Biberman laudably calls into question the violation of international norms and more practically stresses that such proxy support within a state's borders does not lead to legitimacy or peace. ♦

## Outsourcing Violence in South Asia: More a Low-Risk Certitude Than a Gamble for the State

*Rashmi Singh*

The United States has been the undisputed military power in the world for quite some time. However, this enormous military advantage has not allowed it to succeed in its quest to combat the transnational maneuvers of groups like al Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State. Indeed, although the U.S. government had wanted Osama bin Laden since at least 1999, it took the world's most powerful country nearly ten years after the September 11 attacks to track down and kill al Qaeda's elusive leader. In short, military prowess, despite a state's best efforts, may not be the answer to addressing the dynamic and mobile threat posed by nonstate actor violence. To achieve strategic objectives, nations have begun to rely on unofficial, nonstate armed groups. We see this in the case of states seeking to realize their foreign policy aims as well as secure specific domestic objectives. However, given that the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence is a core characteristic of the modern state, outsourcing violence is both seemingly incongruous and an inherently risky endeavor. Outsourcing carries the risk not only of undermining state legitimacy and prestige but also of creating conditions that augment grievances and fuel violence and conflict rather than achieve peace.

This is the foundation of Yelena Biberman's argument in her timely new book *Gambling with Violence: State Outsourcing of War in Pakistan and India*, in which she addresses the key questions of why governments around the world delegate to informal proxies as well as why nonstate actors, in turn, choose to align themselves with state interests. Biberman argues that even militarily superior states often lack the strategic reach at the local level, which is why indigenous nonstate partners are recruited to provide access on the ground. She also stresses that these local assets are "not mere puppets" (p. 2) but instead exercise agency and possess their own sets of interests.

---

RASHMI SINGH is Associate Professor in International Relations at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais (PUC Minas) (Brazil), Anniversary Fellow in the Handa Centre of the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews (Scotland), and the Co-director of the Collaborative Research Network on Terrorism, Radicalisation and Organised Crime (TRAC). Her work focuses on terrorism and political violence in South Asia and the Middle East. She can be reached at <rsingh@pucminas.br>.

Arguably, the book's most important contribution is the theoretical model it constructs to explain the alliance between states and nonstate actors. Drawing on insights from structural and neoclassical realism, Biberman proposes a "balance of interests" model whereby civil wartime alliances between states and nonstate actors are the product of both power and interests. States rarely use local nonstate actors when the local balance of power is in their favor; instead, they tend toward such alliances either when insurgents have an advantage in the conflict or when the local balance of power is roughly equal. It is in these circumstances that local proxies augment the state's "tactical benefits" (p. 11) by, for instance, providing local knowledge, acting as force multipliers, or facilitating the use of selective violence by the state. Yet, given the state's relative weakness, this is also precisely when local proxies are the most "unwilling to assume the risks of collaboration" (p. 12) with it.

Not all proxies are created equal, however, and Biberman distinguishes between two main types of local nonstate partners: the "activists" and the "opportunists." The former, she argues, tend to be driven much more by ideals and identity than material gain. As long as they are convinced that an alliance serves their long-term interests, activists will partner with a state—even if it is losing. Opportunists, on the other hand, are the "balance tippers" who "prioritize the immediate material payoffs of collaboration, be it protection or patronage" (pp. 11–12). As such, they are only interested in entering into a partnership when the local balance of power either favors the state or is roughly equal.

Having constructed this model, Biberman then dedicates the bulk of the book to operationalizing it through a series of case studies drawn mainly from South Asia. Over the course of three chapters, she guides us through a series of historical and more contemporary examples. The first case is Pakistan's outsourcing of violence to different Islamist and non-Islamist militias in East Pakistan in 1971. With the balance of power roughly equal, the Pakistani army first recruited 40,000–50,000 "irregular volunteers," or the Razakars, who were mainly driven by material incentives. However, as the army was steadily pushed back by the Mukti Bahini, it turned for assistance toward more ideologically driven, fanatical, and brutal Islamist activists, including the al Badr and al Shams brigades.

The second case is India's use of various opportunist and activist proxies in Kashmir from the late 1980s onward. The opportunists of Ikhwan-al-Muslimeen and the Muslim Mujahideen, among others, were former insurgents successfully co-opted by the Indian state in the



Kashmir Valley once the balance of power shifted in its favor. However, although India regained control of the valley with the support of its rebel proxies, this generated the unintended consequence of shifting the insurgency south into the Jammu region. India then raised village defense committees populated by local activists “fiercely loyal to the Indian state” (p. 92), who partnered with it for identity or ideological reasons.

Third, Biberman discusses Pakistan’s weak alliance with anti-Taliban *lashkars* in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the interests of the Pakistani state, worried about the threat posed to the country’s national security, and the local tribal leaders, concerned with retaining their local authority, converged in 2008. Finally, the book examines the case of India’s robust partnership with the Salwa Judum against the Naxalites after 2000, once the local balance of power in the region became approximately equal.

Through these case studies, Biberman concludes that the balance-of-interests framework offers useful insights into how alliances between state and nonstate actors emerge and evolve. When the balance of power tips in the state’s favor, it creates conditions conducive to partnerships with local proxies. However, the state’s outsourcing of violence to local nonstate partners poses both a security risk to the state and an existential risk to the proxy. More crucially, it “degrades the state by corrupting the social contract with its citizens” through treating them like “cannon fodder” (p. 128).

In chapter six, Biberman shifts her focus away from South Asia toward the counterinsurgency campaigns in Turkey against the Kurds and in Russia against Chechnya. After exploring the partnerships between Turkey and the Kurdish clans, on the one hand, and Russia and Chechen warlords, on the other, Biberman concludes that the balance-of-interests model explains civil wartime alliances between states and nonstate actors not only in South Asia but also in other conflict theaters. The book concludes with a series of policy recommendations and suggestions about future avenues of work on the topic of outsourcing violence.

The literature on state outsourcing of violence is still fairly nascent. Although some significant developments have occurred in recent years,<sup>1</sup> much of this work remains heavily state-centric, arguing that governments tend to partner for reasons of plausible deniability while effectively ignoring

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the pro-government militia (PGM) project led by Sabine Carey and Neil Mitchell along with its related publications. Full details, including datasets, can be found at <http://www.sabinecarey.com/militias>.

the role, agency, and interest of nonstate proxies. As such, Biberman's most original contribution to the debate about outsourcing violence is her balance-of-interests model. It not only refuses to privilege the interests and power of one side over the other in the process of alliance formation but also questions whether states are necessarily concerned with appearances when key tactical calculations are at hand. This enormous contribution is the saving grace of the project. While the core case studies have been chosen and constructed with care and might be of interest to the lay reader, they lack the depth required by a specialist on the region. Each case study offers a bird's-eye view of the conflict, but this perforce compromises a nuanced presentation and exploration of the case at hand. For one, in each case the state's interests are portrayed as unified, homogenous, and static, which is far from the truth given the sheer number and diversity of the stakeholders involved in the conflicts under discussion. Consequently, it would have benefited the project had the author interrogated these rarefied notions of state interests and behaviors. Having said that, it is worth noting that Biberman does a better job of providing this nuance when addressing interests and behaviors of nonstate actors.

Biberman also argues that the "jury is still out on whether nonstate counterinsurgents are actually useful" (p. 5); however, her cases studies belie this statement. In nearly all the cases presented, the state's partnership with proxies is both tactically and strategically advantageous. Of course, as she rightly points out, these cases prove that state partnerships with nonstate proxies tend to generate merely territorial gains as opposed to legitimacy and peace. Yet, while true, this argument carries with it the assumption that states are seeking objectives beyond territorial gains and the maintenance of the status quo. In isolated or peripheral regions mired in conflict, states may be satisfied with maintaining the status quo and keeping these spaces isolated to ensure that the conflict does not affect their core territory. Certainly, this has long been the case with India's insurgencies in the northeast and Pakistan's tribal regions.

Biberman's position regarding policy recommendations is particularly appreciated. She makes clear that this work is not about advising "states on how to make violence outsourcing less costly and more efficient" (p. 162). However, her recommendation to military commanders to act professionally and responsibly both in conflict and in their relations with civilians and prisoners is too abstract and difficult, if not impossible, to operationalize without further elucidation. On a more minor note, while commendable effort has been made to clarify a series of concepts, from

alliances to militias, it would have benefitted the book to engage more effectively with the concepts of civil war and insurgency. For one, the argument is presented as addressing civil wartime alliances between states and nonstate actors. While the situation is far from peaceful in Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, or the FATA/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, these are certainly not civil wars. Moreover, while these three cases are quite rightly described by Biberman as insurgencies, categorizing the Israeli deployment in the West Bank as a response to an “insurgency” is a bit of a stretch (p. 3). Nonetheless, everything considered, this is an interesting and compelling work that effectively contributes to the debate around the outsourcing of violence. It will be of interest to both the casual reader and those engaged more profoundly in the study of conflict, political violence, and security. ♦

## The Proxies That Countries Keep

Samir Puri

As Yelena Biberman argues in *Gambling with Violence: State Outsourcing of War in Pakistan and India*, it is wise to judge a state by the company it keeps in wartime. The book is a study of partnerships between state security forces and nonstate militias, auxiliaries, and proxies. This theme is examined in six case studies of counterinsurgent armed conflict. Biberman moves with some novelty through the well-trodden ground of the 1971 East Pakistan War, the Kashmir insurgency, Pakistan's war with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and India's war against the Naxalites before venturing out of South Asia to examine Turkey's war against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Russia's war in Chechnya. The basic narrative of each episode is well-known by historians and experts, but the shady dealings between state security forces and their local armed allies receive less attention in most accounts. Herein resides the value of this compact volume.

As Biberman observes at the close of the Kashmir case study, "the tangled web of interests spun by shifting power dynamics during war can lead to extraordinary measures, not least unexpected alliances" (p. 96). The rogues' gallery of village mafias, ex-convicts, defecting terrorists, and mere opportunists who populate each case study attest to this. Weapons are thrust into hands, and words of encouragement whispered into ears, often by equally roguish intelligence officers. The desperation of the security forces that grapple with remorseless insurgents finds its outlet in their quest for local allies to share the burden of fighting and dying.

Indeed, so common is this desperation that governments of all stripes, whether democratic or autocratic, are forced by exigencies of counterinsurgency campaigns to opt for a shortcut by outsourcing violence. Examples come from far and wide. The book mentions in passing, for example, the collusion between British security forces and various Ulster-bannered Loyalist militias in Northern Ireland. Another example that could have warranted discussion is the Israel Defense Force and its Christian Phalange militia allies that it increasingly relied on after invading Lebanon in 1982. As a relatively concise volume, this book cannot,

---

SAMIR PURI is Senior Fellow for Hybrid War and Urban Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Asia headquarters (Singapore). He can be reached at <samir.puri@iiss.org>.

of course, cover too many case studies, or dilute its primary focus on South Asia, but raising these other examples serves to validate the book's main premise—that reliance on local armed nonstate allies is a common characteristic of anti-insurgent warfare.

Another area that could have received greater focus is the fate of government-supported militias and proxies during peace negotiations. Not all wars or conflicts end with formal peace negotiations, but when they do, the potential for insurgent groups to act as spoilers, or for their existence to become an obstacle during talks, is another important theme that warrants attention. Disbanding these pro-government groups or rolling them into state security forces may not always be possible, and additional reflection on this conundrum would have been welcome.

The historical grounding of the case studies recalls the false novelty that is implicit in the current jargon of “hybrid war.” This term gained currency after Russia fomented an armed intervention in neighboring Ukraine in March 2014 by backing local militias of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” to wage war against Ukrainian armed forces. Such undeclared outsourcing of violence to militias or auxiliary forces has been an occasional feature of warfare through much of history. This raises the question as to what Biberman thinks of the popularization of the hybrid warfare terminology and how it relates to her book and its historical case studies. During my past service as an observer for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe during the Ukraine conflict, I kept in the back of my mind the relevance of lessons learned by the Russian armed forces from the Chechen conflict, not least in how states select which local allies to gamble on and how such wagers can backfire.

The “gamble” in the book’s title points to its greatest strength: a philosophical ease throughout the writing with the variegations of human motivation. Biberman correctly points to the fact that large-N studies neglect the human dimension and that only a dedicated contextual and historical narrative can uncover the diverse reasons actors make certain decisions over others in wartime. To this I would add that it is incumbent on scholars of armed conflict to understand their fellow human beings and not overly rely on the impersonal power of theories. Rarely are incentives purely or rationally calculated—they are driven by circumstantial and emotional forces. At the book’s onset, Biberman’s conceptual chapter loosely frames the reasons that nonstate actors might partner with state security forces as ranging between opportunistic and ideological motivations. At the book’s closing, she quotes from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* to remind us of the

timeless power of personality and chance in determining the path of the protagonists in wars both past and present.

Overall, the material as presented is of high quality. The narrative of the case studies advances at a brisk pace, and the writing is clear throughout. Similarly, the book is undergirded by references to several of the most durable classic philosophies of war and self-interest politics. Carl von Clausewitz is the expected inspiration behind the title, and early on the book quotes from Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, noting that this work from ancient India, written by an adviser to Chandragupta Maurya, predates Machiavelli by over 1,700 years. Kautilya, of course, is credited with the timeless maxim, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Herein lies an insight at the heart of *Gambling with Violence* that is so terribly fundamental to the execution of warfare, whether at the substate or the interstate level. The book's dedicated focus on the former has resulted in a rare and useful addition to the burgeoning library on countering insurgency. ♦

## Author's Response: Reconsidering How We Think about Proxies

*Yelena Biberman*

I am thankful to *Asia Policy* for inviting *Gambling with Violence: State Outsourcing of War in Pakistan and India* to be the focus of this book review roundtable and to the reviewers for their deep engagement with the ideas and evidence presented in my work. As Tamanna Salikuddin astutely observes, proxies are all the rage in academic and policy circles. The book's publication coincides with the release of several works exploring how states can effectively manage their local partners and the complications that invariably arise in proxy warfare.<sup>1</sup> Much of the fascination stems from questions and anxieties surrounding the United States' global decline. Proxy warfare is widely viewed as one of the key instruments through which powerful states will either try to maintain or achieve great-power status in a new era of geopolitical competition.<sup>2</sup> New ideas about state-proxy relations are in high demand, but we must keep in mind that history, and certainly South Asian history, has much to teach us. As Samir Puri points out, novel-sounding ideas like “hybrid war” would be deeply familiar to military philosophers as diverse as Leo Tolstoy and Kautilya.

Rashmi Singh identifies as an “enormous contribution” that my new framework “refuses to privilege the interests and power of one side over the other in the process of alliance formation.” A pattern that continues to strike me in the literature and policy conversations about proxies is the state-centric orientation, which implicitly privileges the state's dominant narrative. This may in part stem from the relationship between one's level

---

**YELENA BIBERMAN** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Skidmore College, Fellow at the Modern War Institute at West Point, and Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center (United States). In addition to her book, Dr. Biberman's research has appeared in academic journals such as the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Asian Security*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Political Science Quarterly*, and *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Her work has also appeared in policy journals and mainstream media such as the *Military Review*, *Foreign Policy*, *Texas National Security Review*, and the *Washington Post*. She can be reached at <ybiberma@skidmore.edu>.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Eli Berman and David A. Lake, *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); and Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

of education and attitude toward state violence.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on U.S. data from the World Values Survey and the General Social Survey, sociologist Landon Schnabel found that those with more education are more likely to consider state-sanctioned violence (specifically, war and police violence) justifiable. He posits that “schooling socializes people to establishment culture, identity, and interests, thereby legitimating ruling authority and its actions.”<sup>4</sup> We tend to see things from the perspective of the state because we are more likely to identify with the state than with those it is most likely to abuse—marginalized groups and foreign actors.

While much of the existing scholarship is methodologically meticulous, the “problems” it seeks to solve seem to privilege powerful states and their needs. This was the point I emphasized in the policy recommendations section in my book’s concluding chapter, and one that the reviewers welcomed. The Machiavellian impulse to advise and give the benefit of doubt to those with the most power—be it the prince or the state—can not only weaken scholarly impartiality but also, especially in times of conflict, blunt our humanist instincts. Take some of the news coming out of Afghanistan in late 2020. It includes atrocities carried out not just by the Taliban, but also by state actors and state-backed proxies. In November 2020 the *New York Times* described how “the elite of the elite among Australian soldiers” in the Australian Defence Force had carried out “a methodical campaign to kill helpless Afghans and cover it up.”<sup>5</sup> In December 2020, the Intercept made public the atrocities committed by U.S.-backed Afghan “death squads,” paramilitary units (known as 01 and 02) outside the control of the Afghan government.<sup>6</sup> What problems or puzzles do these events raise for scholars? We should reflect on the questions that are often asked in scholarly research and the underlying assumptions that motivate them.

My book brings into the limelight the nonstate actors—their interests, agency, and experiences—by making them central to its theoretical framework and empirical inquiry. Singh is correct to remind us that state actors are no less diverse and interesting, and I interviewed dozens of government, military, and intelligence officials for their sides of the story.

---

<sup>3</sup> Landon Schnabel, “Education and Attitudes toward Interpersonal and State-Sanctioned Violence,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 3 (2018): 505–11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.

<sup>5</sup> Yan Zhuang and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Blood Lust and Demigods: Behind an Australian Force’s Slaughter of Helpless Afghans,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2020 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/18/world/australia/afghanistan-war-crimes.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Quilty, “The CIA’s Afghan Death Squads,” *Intercept*, December 18, 2020 ~ <https://theintercept.com/2020/12/18/afghanistan-cia-militia-01-strike-force>.



Their accounts were certainly vital and complex, and often quoted in the book. But the existing accounts of the counterinsurgency operations detailed in the book have, I would argue, already done justice to the conflicting motives and predicaments of these individuals, who are typically quite accessible for scholars. What has been largely missing or misunderstood, partly because of their relative inaccessibility, are the stories of the other side. My book thus aims to contribute to the new body of work that takes seriously the perspectives and experiences of the nonstate actors—be they the ostensible “enemy” or “puppet” of a powerful state.<sup>7</sup> I completely agree with Puri’s observation that “it is incumbent on scholars of armed conflict to understand their fellow human beings and not overly rely on the impersonal power of theories.” Theories can, however, be adjusted to take at least the relevant complexities of human beings into account.

The reviewers identified several questions worth exploring further. Salikuddin points to the role of foreign state sponsorship of rebels. Ahsan Butt has shown it to have played an important role in East Pakistan and Kashmir.<sup>8</sup> How does foreign sponsorship change my book’s “balance of interests” calculus? I would argue that it increases the stakes and likelihood of loss for states, thus strengthening their commitment to defeating the insurgents. However, this is not why Pakistan turned to al Badr in East Pakistan and India turned to the Ikhwan in Kashmir. Both India’s and Pakistan’s support of rebels varied in commitment and intensity, and my book shows that what mattered was how the foreign sponsorship translated into the rebels’ battlefield prowess. The state’s weakness relative to the rebels on the ground incentivized the former to seek alliances with local nonstate actors, but those alliances would not have materialized had they also not satisfied the proxies’ own needs.

Singh proposes that nonstate proxies could potentially be “useful” in isolated or peripheral regions where the states are looking merely to maintain the status quo. Proxy counterinsurgents may not bring about legitimacy or peace, but they may help states hold on to territory. However, the stability or “normalcy” that proxies can bring to ungoverned spaces is temporary at best. Salikuddin beautifully sums it up: “the underlying conflicts persist,

---

<sup>7</sup> Mona Kanwal Sheikh, *Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016); C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019); and Darryl Li, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Ahsan I. Butt, *Secession and Security: Explaining State Strategy against Separatists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

and the use of proxies deludes the state into never confronting the alienation or disaffection at the heart of these subaltern conflicts.”

Where there is fertile ground for further research is in what happens to the proxies or militias at the conclusion of a conflict. Puri makes this important point. Do they become spoilers, or can they play a constructive role? One of Salikuddin’s comments offers a clue to answering this question. She writes: “Similar to the cost-benefit analysis a conflict-afflicted state might make in deciding to join a peace process, relative battlefield strength is key.” Proxies may help to end the conflict by “ripening” it for peace negotiations: making it too costly for the rebels to continue while creating an opportunity for the state to negotiate from a position of strength. Any successful settlement of a civil conflict that involves nonstate counterinsurgents must include a blueprint for proxy demobilization—be it incorporation into the official security forces or ordinary civilian life.

Finally, while there is commendable scholarship on rebel (mis)treatment of civilians,<sup>9</sup> more work needs to be done to understand the conditions under which military commanders uphold, or violate, international humanitarian law. Singh rightly points out that it is not enough to recommend that they follow their code of conduct and not abuse civilians and prisoners. We need to figure out the most effective mechanisms for accountability. I hope that my book demonstrates that the so-called principal-agent problem popularly seen as underlying the state-proxy relationship is also a problem of the principal’s moral hazard, not just the agent’s. ♦

---

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Idean Salehyan, David Siroky, and Reed M. Wood, “External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse: A Principal-Agent Analysis of Wartime Atrocities,” *International Organization* 68, no. 3 (2014): 633–61.