

Proxy Politics™ I: An Analysis of Global Politics in the 21st Century

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"We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow." – Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston, 1848 | Figure 1: [Pixabay](#)

This article is an analysis of global politics in light of the increasing relevance of social media and intellectual warfare. In this article, I will provide a brief overview and assessment of the transitions in the global status quo from the 20th to the 21st century, as well as a prescription for policy advocates, activists, diplomats, legislators, politicians, and world leaders based on this assessment.

The political atmosphere of the world in the 20th century is best summarized by great-power rivalries resolved through proxy wars. By great-power rivalry I mean competition between major powers who fear each other's security, economic, or political power (Ikenberry); and by proxy war I mean, "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country; disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country" (Wehrey). In other words, major powers indirectly confronted each other through smaller scale, seemingly irrelevant wars. On the surface, proxy wars do not clearly relate to the rivals' power conflict. However, these proxy wars greatly impact the status quo for all involved in the power conflict.

One recent example of a proxy war that affected the great-power rivalry or global status quo is the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the Cold War, Soviet Union Premier, Nikita Khrushchev set up nuclear weapons 90 miles from Florida to instigate conflict with the United States. Khrushchev

essentially tested how much (military, economic, and political) legitimacy the United States possessed and would be willing to assert in the Cold War by instigating a smaller scale conflict around missile deployment in Soviet territory (Turkey) and American territory (Cuba). The United States asserted its legitimacy in the Cold War in part by “winning” this proxy war through a quid pro quo with the Soviet Union. The quid pro quo was a trade of power; of respect for one another’s legitimacy as a global leader. This established the most recent global status quo with the United States as one major power and police of the world and with Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) as a continued major power as well.

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Resolution of great-power rivalry through proxy wars did not suddenly cease at the turn of the century. American sanctions on Russia for Russia’s proxy wars or conflicts regarding Crimea (2014) and Syria (2015) make this abundantly clear. However, the ways in which great-power rivalry is resolved is expanding. Now, in the post-Cold War era, we still have proxy wars, but we also have what I label as Proxy Politics™.

If a proxy war is a seemingly irrelevant conflict that is instigated to establish what happens in relation to a great-power conflict, then Proxy Politics™ is the negotiation of seemingly unrelated policies that act as a form of intellectual or political warfare to establish the status quo of any relevant parties involved. Proxy wars still exist, but this term only applies to literal, physical warfare between countries. Proxy Politics™ is different from proxy wars because Proxy Politics™ accounts for the following new factor: intellectual and political warfare involves new, less defined warfare tactics and allows for (perhaps, even requires) more players or fighters than in literal, physical warfare.

Politics today is far more complex than in the past. In the past, there were only a few, well-known major players, and the path to become and remain a major player was well-defined and fairly straightforward. To be considered a major player before the turn of the century, you

had to have money, strong defense, and/or political leverage. Wars had structure: you knew which countries were on which side of the war (Allies v. Axis) and the extent to which other countries were involved in the war. Fighters involved in warfare were trained by predetermined institutions (CIA, KGB, navy, etc.) and fighters' paths to getting on the battlefield were clear and structured. There were defined rules of engagement and set punishments for war crimes. In other words, the players and rules of the game were unambiguous and well defined.

However, at the turn of the century, it became abundantly clear that the power struggle is no longer unilateral, bilateral, or even multilateral. Multilateral implies that there are several *known* players which is not the case; there are billions of potential players now. Nearly anyone with a functioning brain and internet access can become a major player because now, warfare is intellectual and political. For instance, with the increased dependency on internet access in almost every part of the world, anyone who knows how to hack into an important online network and has the willpower to do so can leverage power by cyber-attacking a country (or even just part of a country).

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Proxy Politics™ is an important new rubric to understand because it even explains the political and intellectual warfare going on at the legislative level. For example, net neutrality is a policy that allows the internet to have its “flattening effect”. If net neutrality is repealed, internet service providers (ISP) can show favoritism to internet-based companies based on things like money, status, and nepotism. So, the repeal of net neutrality potentially “unflattens” the world by cutting out anybody who is too poor to afford an inclusive internet package and by allowing ISPs to give certain businesses leverage over others.

This is a great example of Proxy Politics™ because the fact that internet service providers want to change the way they sell internet access seems like a very simple issue- on the surface, the only frustration to citizens and businesses is that they may have to pay more money to post their selfies and to advertise their products. The issue of net neutrality *seems* unrelated to the

power-struggle that existed between countries before the turn of the century. However, the issue of net neutrality has the potential to change the status quo on a global scale because it unflattens the current playing field.

The Proxy Politics™ rubric shows that laws aren't necessarily hard to pass just because the laws aren't good or noble enough. Laws are hard to pass because laws are used to either change or maintain the status quo. So, the application of Proxy Politics™ for politicians, activists, and policy advocates is to work smarter, not harder. The world doesn't necessarily need more laws to solve all its problems. As a change agent, your policy changes and new practices are all forms of proxy war that will either adjust or maintain the status quo because warfare is now physical, intellectual, *and* political. Learn to play the game of Proxy Politics™. The best way to learn how to play is to first realize that the game is always bigger than you.

References

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