



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

America's Hot and Cold Relationship with Its Counterterrorism Partners

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Summary

Stephen Tankel's new book, *With Us and Against Us*, looks at the troubled relationship between America and its counterterrorism partners in the Middle East and North Africa.

1. Introduction: A Timely Assessment of U.S. Counter-Terrorism Partnerships

Derek Chollet

With many Americans — led by the current occupant of the White House — questioning the value of global partnerships and talking as though the United States would be better off going it alone, there is no better time to assess the role other countries play in achieving U.S. counter-terrorism objectives. Anyone who has been involved in crafting U.S. counter-terrorism policy inside the government knows the essential importance of these relationships. But they also are soberly aware of how troubling they can be.

America's fight against terror has been the subject of a mountain of books over the nearly two decades since 9/11. Most have been inside-accounts of policymaking from Washington's bureaucratic trenches or dramatic tales of counter-terrorism missions. Yet few have made a systematic assessment, benefitting from the latest scholarship, of the ways counter-terrorism cooperation actually works, showing how and why success is often so elusive. That's what makes Stephen Tankel's latest book, *With Us and Against Us*, so timely. It combines his solid grounding in the academic literature on alliances and international cooperation with his first-hand experience in sausage-making policy at the Pentagon to give readers a comprehensive and thought-provoking tour through some of the toughest — and certainly most frustrating — counter-terrorism relationships in recent U.S. history.

The fight against terrorism is usually discussed simplistically as one in which there are only friends and enemies, best summarized by the “with us or against us” statement of

President George W. Bush just a week after the September 11 attacks. Yet the reality is far more complex, and the countries that take up the most time for policymakers are those that fall in between the categories of ally or foe — especially Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Mali, and Pakistan. In many ways, when it comes to tackling terrorist threats, these countries are both firefighters and arsonists. And while cooperation with them is crucial, it has been exceedingly difficult, whether because of state weakness, conflicting interests, or outright duplicity.

Tankel takes a deep-dive into the toughest cases, detailing the recent history of Washington’s approach toward these “frenemies” and providing a useful analytical framework for understanding when and why success is possible or not. It is an unflinching account of how difficult these partners can be. He also reveals the difficulties that the United States itself brings to the table, whether it is unrealistic expectations that cooperation will be easier or leverage more effective, over-reliance on military tools, sending mixed messages, or misunderstanding threat perceptions. Any aspiring policymaker will benefit from this book, as well as by following the debate and discussion it provokes, illustrated by the three insightful contributions to this roundtable.

In a comprehensive overview of Tankel’s book, Stanford’s Martha Crenshaw supports his core arguments, highlighting the value of his conceptualization of the challenge and his clear and informative case studies. At the same time, she also proposes several interesting avenues of research that are worth further exploration. For example, Crenshaw highlights the fact that, despite trillions of dollars spent on a variety of counter-terrorism activities during the past 15 years, the United States still has difficulty accounting for where the money goes and what precisely the impact has been. She also makes the intriguing suggestion that there is something to learn from U.S. efforts to cooperate with other

countries in other security areas, such as with Mexico in counter-narcotics efforts and law enforcement.

Finally, Crenshaw echoes a point Tankel stresses: The United States will never be able to get more out of its partnerships with these difficult states unless it develops a comprehensive, clearly articulated counter-terrorism policy with improved integration of policy tools. Tankel's concluding chapter offers some pragmatic suggestions, but the subject is so knotted it warrants a book of its own.

Jacob Shapiro, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton, seems to agree with many of Tankel's and Crenshaw's assessments and policy recommendations, but focuses mainly on the theoretical foundations of Tankel's work, offering an alternative academic literature, which he argues provides a more compelling way to understand the problem. (Crenshaw makes a similar point, but spends far less time on the subject.) Instead of seeing these counter-terrorism partnerships as interstate security relationships relying on the logic of alliances, Shapiro contends that they are better described as interdependent relationships with only partially-aligned interests, and, therefore, are better understood through the frameworks of agency theory and organizational economics.

To make his case, Shapiro highlights the work of other scholars working in these traditions, going into detail about theoretical arguments that will be unfamiliar to many non-academic readers, including this one. His explanation of competing conceptual arguments is informative and adds some nuance to Tankel's analysis. But despite the differences in theoretical approach, the bottom-line remains essentially the same: If interests diverge and threats to punish partner states — such as curtailing engagement or

withholding assistance — don't generate meaningful costs, then cooperation will be limited.

Policymakers fully understand this point, as Christine Abizaid's thoughtful and revealing response to Tankel makes clear. Abizaid spent several years during the Obama administration shaping the Pentagon's approach toward Pakistan. Her account reinforces Tankel's narrative about the difficulties in dealing with that deeply troubled but essential counterterrorism partner. She reviews the tangled recent history of Washington's attempts to influence Islamabad's behavior to make it a more "strategic partner," from pouring in civilian and security assistance to threatening to withhold it. These efforts achieved narrow results where interests overlapped — such as the disruption of al-Qaeda and Tehrik-e-Taliban — but not the kind of strategic shift anyone hoped for. Creating and using leverage has proven to be much easier in theory than it is in practice.

So where does this leave things? Taken together, Tankel's book and the responses to it in this roundtable explain the limits of American power, even when it comes to addressing an issue that is at the core of U.S. national security. All these authors suggest ways the United States could be more effective in getting what it wants — such as by better understanding America's partners, adjusting expectations, sending a consistent message about goals and redlines, and having greater balance among U.S. military, diplomatic, and development tools. These are hard to achieve even in the best of times. With the current administration, progress in any of these areas seems unlikely.

Although none of these authors offer a silver bullet — or assert that any are available — policymakers and citizens alike will benefit from thinking about the post-9/11 counterterrorism challenge, soon entering its third decade, with a clearer analytical

framework and a dispassionate understanding of recent history. And in this respect, Tankel's *With Us or Against Us*, and the essays it inspired in this roundtable, are a terrific place to start.

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2. The Imperfect Truth Behind Counterterrorism Partnerships: Reality Bites

Christine Abizaid

Seventeen years after al-Qaeda's devastating attack on the U.S. homeland, the U.S. fight against terrorism goes on amidst questions of how best to wage that fight, in what geographic boundaries to engage, against what permutation of the enemy, and toward what ultimate end the United States is fighting. In April, Congress attempted to energize the national debate on these questions when Senators Bob Corker and Tim Kaine reached across the aisle to collaborate on a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) aimed at better situating the Executive's power to wage war against terrorists within a clarified constitutional framework.¹ While the discussion continues about whether their particular bill improves the current authorities structure, one aspect of the debate must not be overlooked: The United States cannot fight terrorism alone.

This is where Stephen Tankel's new book, *With Us and Against Us*,² makes an important contribution. Tankel provides counterterrorism professionals, U.S. policy makers, and the academy a serious and thoughtful examination of one the most complex aspects of the United States' counterterrorism strategy: working by, with, and through partners to protect the United States. By focusing on Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Mali, Algeria, and Pakistan, Tankel chooses to tackle the most challenging of these partnerships, and in so

¹ Garrett Epps, "A Bill to Curtail the Forever War, or Extend It?" *Atlantic*, May 7, 2018,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/05/a-bill-to-stop-the-forever-war-or-extend-it/559769/>.

² Stephen Tankel, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

doing, provides insight into the necessary tradeoffs and many limitations the United States must navigate in trying to meet its counterterrorism objectives.

Counterterrorism (CT) partnerships are not often given their due credit for the role they play in enabling the United States' CT successes. However, as Tankel demonstrates, partnerships — yes, even the difficult ones — are the essential ingredient to any successful effort to protect U.S. citizens, U.S. interests, and the U.S. homeland.

Maintaining them requires a steady hand. The current administration would do well to recognize just how many of America's CT achievements in the past 17 years have relied on other countries, as well as how the United States' ability to form these partnerships has been underpinned by its leadership and credibility in the world. That credibility allowed America to build the kind of counterterrorism coalition that has, so far, protected it from another attack on the scale of 9/11. Preserving it is no small task. It requires hard work and wisdom from civil servants and political leaders, alike, who must articulate to both the American public and partners abroad what the U.S. strategy is and how it will advance everyone's goals against terrorist violence. The Trump administration has yet to coherently communicate its CT vision or explain why America's overseas engagements, military and non-military alike, are worth the risks they entail. The longer the U.S. CT strategy remains unnecessarily shrouded in mystery, the higher the costs will be to the execution of CT operations and to the U.S. coalition against terrorism. Credibility and strategic communication, therefore, must go hand-in-hand.

Burden-sharing in the Fight against Terrorists

As a former practitioner, I am grateful for Tankel's recognition of the United States' partner-dependency as a key aspect of its CT approach. Indeed, over the years, the

United States has built “patterns of cooperation with partner nations [as] a way to increase burden sharing and make U.S. counterterrorism efforts more sustainable.”³ Although many books have been published about CT in the post-9/11 era, few have dealt as directly with the complex situation in which the United States, working alongside its partners, has sought to prosecute its CT objectives. Direct action operations — including the deployment of U.S. military boots-on-the-ground and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (commonly referred to as drone strikes) — have been the subject of much recent study in so far as they pertain to the efficacy of U.S. counterterrorism strategy.⁴ Interest in the topic grew as the Obama administration expanded its predecessor’s use of these tactics, including in areas outside of Iraq and Afghanistan, where the nature of the metastasizing terrorist threat demanded American action.⁵ However, even U.S. direct action is not accomplished in a vacuum. It is the end result of a complex set of access agreements, overflight approvals, strategic asset positioning, and bilateral negotiations, all of which must be pursued in concert with partners before the United States is able to act against threats internationally and outside of declared war zones.

Moreover, direct action is just one aspect of the U.S. CT effort that is reliant on America’s relationships with other states. Tankel rightly observes that, “[b]ecause the United States cannot and should not put combat troops on the ground in every country where

³ Tankel, *With Us and Against Us*, 58.

⁴ Paul Scharre, “Why Drones Are Still the Future of War,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-02-15/why-drones-are-still-future-war>.

⁵ *Recommendations and Report of the Task Force on US Drone Policy (Second Edition)* (Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, 2015), https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/recommendations_and_report_of_the_task_force_on_us_drone_policy_second_edition.pdf.

terrorists operate, it has looked to partner nations to act as the tip of the spear...” The U.S. ability to disrupt specific threats to the homeland has required a complex array of intelligence relationships. It has been able to dismantle some terrorist networks overseas only through robust law enforcement cooperation. And even its ability to try foreign terrorists in U.S. criminal courts has rested on the United States’ skill in working with its partners across the globe. Cooperation with foreign partners has significant bearing on the United States’ ability to pursue its national interests abroad. In the case of CT, that cooperation requires deft maneuvering, often on short timelines and with lives at stake, only adding to the pressures of getting things right.

There is no one-size-fits all approach to counterterrorism partnerships. Tankel demonstrates this fact in great detail in his case study examination of different U.S. partnerships. Each partner has its own security paradigm, unique history with the United States, capacity limitations, and individualized approach to dealing with both domestic and regional developments. All of these influence partner perceptions of local CT dynamics and the value of working with the United States to achieve CT goals. In no case is it more apparent how these dynamics can lead to difficult tradeoffs than in the case of Pakistan.

Satisficing with Pakistan ...

Tankel is an expert on Pakistan’s history with terrorism and his chapter on this relationship is well worth the price of admission. He rightly characterizes the U.S.-Pakistan relationship as riddled by divergent threat perceptions, a history of mistrust, and different approaches to threat mitigation. Both as a former counterterrorism intelligence officer and former U.S. defense official with policy oversight of U.S. security

assistance to Pakistan, I regularly wrestled with the complexity of this relationship. Whether having to do with the United States' CT imperatives in Afghanistan, concerns over a volatile relationship between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, specific threats to the United States and U.S. forces emerging from a vibrant militant safehaven in Pakistan's tribal areas, or mourning with Pakistani counterparts over losses their country has experienced at the hands of terrorists, America's engagement with Pakistan has always been filled with contradictions. Despite the nuances and frustrations of working with a partner that has so many security priorities out-of-step with those of the United States, the relationship with Pakistan has always been critical to the U.S. ability to pursue its vital national security interests in the region. How best to work with Pakistan to achieve the United States' CT goals has been a hotly debated topic, full of criticism, optimism, skepticism, and even naivety. And yet, while America's record of cooperation with Pakistan is not straightforward or clear-cut, that cooperation has been essential to the protection of the United States.

On the one hand, Pakistan has been one of the United States' most prolific partners in the fight against al-Qaeda. For several years after its ouster from Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's network in Pakistan presented the most significant threat to the U.S. homeland and the West — a reality America's British partners experienced firsthand when operatives guided by al-Qaeda's Pakistan-based leadership attacked the London underground and buses on July 7, 2005. America's Pakistani partners understood U.S. and Western concerns, and over time, cooperated with the United States to neutralize operatives, disrupt plots, and pressure those parts of al-Qaeda's network residing in the country. This CT cooperation resulted in some of the most important disruptions to al-Qaeda's network over the course of its existence (this, despite Pakistan's non-cooperation during the raid on which U.S. forces killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011).

On the other hand, some of the fundamental enablers of al-Qaeda's network in Pakistan have been viewed by Pakistan's military as too precious, or too dangerous, to make a move against. As Tankel describes it, "no amount of [financial] assistance or threats to withhold it would lead the Pakistani security establishment to turn on the Taliban, Haqqani network, or other state-allied organizations."⁶ These groups' Pakistan-based infrastructure has supported, even if indirectly, the efforts of groups like al-Qaida and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistani (TTP) against the United States and the West, creating a persistent threat in and from the region in a way Pakistan has yet to fully acknowledge through deed or word.⁷

Of course, every nation acts in its own self-interest and Pakistan is no different. It just has yet to calculate that its approach to terrorism actually accrues to its own detriment. The United States' challenge remains how to convince Pakistan that what Tankel rightly describes as Islamabad's "segmented" approach to terrorists and militants is, in the long run, the primary threat to its own existence, and is not merely a problem for U.S. security interests in the region.⁸ It is not clear why this has been such a difficult case for America to make. Over time, the threat from Pakistan's tribal areas has morphed from one that was largely externally focused to one that increasingly has included Pakistan's settled

⁶ Tankel, *With Us and Against Us*, 159.

⁷ For further reading on Pakistan's history of cultivating non-state actors, as well as the history of its cooperation with the United States, see Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004); Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006); Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Free Press, 2001); and Stephen Tankel's *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Tankel, *With Us and Against Us*, 131.

regions. At no point has Pakistan's cultivation of non-state actors actually improved its own security outlook over the long term. And yet, even today, as Islamabad struggles with terrorist threats to civilians in its most populous cities,⁹ the Pakistani military refuses to take a consistent position that fundamentally challenges terrorist and militant exploitation of Pakistani soil.

Tankel is correct that over the course of America's post-9/11 relationship with Pakistan, the space for CT cooperation gradually narrowed.¹⁰ By the end of the Obama administration, patience with Pakistan had run thin, both in the Executive branch and in Congress. Despite regularly engaging on the importance of dealing once-and-for-all with those whom the United States perceived as serious threat actors, Pakistan continued to hedge. Meanwhile, the U.S. security dynamics were changing. Al-Qaeda's network was on the ropes and America's presence across the border in Afghanistan was shrinking, meaning there were fewer U.S. security imperatives on which to build with Pakistan. The United States began signaling that, with its reduced regional presence, Pakistan should expect gradual reductions in U.S. security assistance. Pakistan complained, but did not change the kind of behavior that Washington had made clear was problematic. So, in 2015, when Department of Defense policymakers recommended for the first time that the Secretary of Defense effectively withhold \$300 million in security assistance intended for

⁹ Aamair Latif, "Pakistan Nuclear Body Staff Comes Under Suicide Attack," *Andalou Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-nuclear-body-staff-comes-under-suicide-attack/1134625>; Gul Yousafzai, "Pakistani Army Kills Senior Militant, Seven Suicide Bombers," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-05-17/pakistan-kills-senior-lashkar-e-jhangvi-militant-in-baluchistan-raid>.

¹⁰ Tankel, *With Us and Against Us*, 158

Pakistan,¹¹ Islamabad was not pleased. Unfortunately, they were also unmoved. While Pakistan counted on U.S. security assistance to fund important military and non-military initiatives that helped the country remain financially solvent, it was clearly not reliant enough on U.S. funding — nor appreciative enough of or confident enough in the relationship with the United States — to meaningfully change its strategic approach to terrorist and militant groups.

Pakistan has been playing a dangerous game for years, supporting terrorist and militant proxies that it found useful and cracking down on elements that posed a significant threat to the West and to Pakistan. Some of those proxies evolved to become not instruments of the state, but instead unpredictable allies, liabilities to control, and eventually, in some cases, threats to Pakistan itself. By segmenting their approach to this evolving threat landscape, Pakistani generals have established for themselves an environment that will fuel the country's own insecurity for years to come. As long as this policy continues, Islamabad will be trading a healthy relationship with the international community with one that too often caters to hostage-takers in the region.

So What Do We Do?

It is unlikely the United States will be able to talk Pakistan out of viewing certain non-state actors as critical foreign policy tools. Between this, Pakistan's prioritization of a perceived threat from India, and its unwillingness to strategically cooperate on Afghanistan, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is fated to remain transactional. Progress will center on those narrow issues on which the two countries can agree. And paradoxically,

¹¹ Tankel, *With Us and against Us*, 158.

given their joint disruption over the last 17 years of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda or TTP, there are fewer and fewer issues on which they can easily, transactionally cooperate. America's CT successes have changed the U.S. security paradigm in the region and Pakistan's calculation of what is in its own self-interest militates against expansive cooperation with the United States. Conversations with Pakistan about regional security will only get less satisfactory from here on out. And yet, the United States must not disengage. America's ability to manage this relationship and extract cooperation will be critical to achieving its goal of never again allowing this region to become a platform from which terrorists can threaten the U.S. homeland.

The Trump administration has upped the ante for Pakistan, threatening to withdraw all security cooperation, including support for Pakistan's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts in the tribal region.¹² It is hard not to take some satisfaction in signaling to Pakistan that its incremental approach to meeting U.S. counterterrorism and security needs is no longer acceptable. But that doesn't mean the tactic will work. If Pakistan cared that much about U.S. largess, it would have changed its behavior when the U.S. government first signaled a reduction in funding levels in 2014. Additionally, the U.S. military still has over 10,000 troops in Afghanistan helping Afghan forces fight a resilient

¹² Lisa Ferdinando, "Pentagon Spokesman: U.S. Wants Pakistan to Take 'Decisive Action' Against Terrorism," Department of Defense, Jan. 8, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1410401/pentagon-spokesman-us-wants-pakistan-to-take-decisive-action-against-terrorism/>. Missy Ryan and Carol Morello, "Trump administration suspends most security aid to Pakistan," *Washington Post*, Jan. 4, 2018; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-suspends-security-aid-to-pakistan/2018/01/04/303145e4-f18a-11e7-b3bf-ab90a706e175_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b4db88e61e92.

insurgency, over which Pakistan has significant influence.¹³ The United States needs to leverage what partnership it does have with Pakistan to get the Taliban to the negotiating table and deter insurgent violence in the region. Pakistan is the key to shrinking the size of the Afghan insurgency, thus enabling Afghan forces to truly own security in their country, and giving the United States the ability to draw down in the region with the confidence that its local security partners can contain the terrorist and militant threat. Disengagement will not help make that argument, nor will it put the United States in a position to steer Pakistan away from strategic miscalculation or mismanagement in the region that could lead to a nuclear exchange.

This is where neither Tankel's work, nor any work in the last 17 years (including this book review) has offered a real solution to how America can move to a truly strategic partnership with Pakistan. As Tankel's other case studies also show, no CT fight abroad can be narrowly waged. Effective CT campaigns cannot stop at targeting terrorists. They have to address the underlying causes that create the conditions that terrorists exploit. Dealing with those underlying causes is a long and costly affair, especially in a region as multi-layered as South Asia. Fundamentally, to make progress against such an enormous challenge, America must broadly share with its partners the same basic interests. That is just not the case with Pakistan.

The United States is now at a stage in its CT campaign where it can and should move away from counterterrorism as the orienting principal for its engagement in the world. To do that, a partnered approach, especially in the Middle East and South Asia, is more

¹³ Robert Burns, "Amid little scrutiny, US military ramps up in Afghanistan," *Military Times*, Mar. 10, 2018; <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/03/10/amid-little-scrutiny-us-military-ramps-up-in-afghanistan/>.

important than ever. But how much America must invest — or sacrifice — to make those partnerships work for both sides remains a difficult equation to solve, especially because every situation requires a unique solution tailored to the circumstances of the region in question.

This dilemma is well captured through Tankel’s exploration of America’s most complex counterterrorism relationships. He exposes with great clarity and a sense of history and proportion the difficulty associated with maneuvering through intractable problem sets with multifaceted partners. In so doing, Tankel provides an objective perspective on why these relationships can be so problematic, even when dealing with a threat that, from the U.S. perspective, appears so straightforward. As policymakers continue to evaluate how best to navigate these relationships to protect the United States, they would do well to read *With Us and Against Us*, absorb what it has to say about the difficulties ahead, and enter into counterterrorism partnerships clear-eyed and purposeful, knowing there is much history — and folly — to learn from.

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3. Counterterrorism Partnerships: A Two-Way Street

Martha Crenshaw

Stephen Tankel's latest book, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror*,¹⁴ makes a valuable contribution to better understanding the complicated picture of post 9/11 counterterrorism, a topic that is especially relevant now that the global war on terrorism seems both endless and inconclusive. His thorough research delves into the understudied domain of the role of America's partners in the war on terror, highlighting the fact that effective counterterrorism is difficult in both its conceptualization and its implementation. American leaders, beginning with Donald Rumsfeld, have struggled to measure or demonstrate the effectiveness of chosen counterterrorism policies, ranging from the blunt use of military force to the subtleties of "countering violent extremism" (CVE) or preventing "radicalization." Tankel is to be further commended for situating his analysis of counterterrorism cooperation in the general framework of theories of alliances and foreign policy, rather than treating it in isolation. Implicit in his analysis is a critical question about the current U.S. strategy of "by, with, and through," which emphasizes reliance on local forces rather than committing American combat ground forces in large numbers.¹⁵ This model may have been successful in destroying the Islamic State (ISIS) caliphate after 2014, but the United States should be cautious about relying on it as a general solution to managing civil conflict. Recommending caution does not imply that unilateralism is a better alternative.

¹⁴ Stephen Tankel, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Linda Robinson, "SOF's Evolving Role: Warfare 'By, With, and Through' Local Forces," *Rand Blog/Cypher Brief*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/05/sofs-evolving-role-warfare-by-with-and-through-local.html>.

However, U.S. decision-makers need a better grip on appraising the security interests and cooperative inclinations of local partners in the war on terror.

In his book, Tankel develops a specific question: What can the United States reasonably expect from its partners in counterterrorism operations abroad? His answer is based on an impartial consideration of a select subset of those partners: states that have active jihadist insurgencies and terrorist groups and that are aided by the United States in the absence of any formal treaty obligations. To be included in Tankel's analysis, these states must also be countries where the United States does not or did not have a major military presence. Afghanistan and Iraq are thus excluded as Iraq is a former occupation zone, and nearly 15,000 active troops are still deployed in Afghanistan. Included in his sample set are Algeria, Egypt, Mali, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The set is thus weighted toward the Middle East and North Africa, where the United States is engaged in extremely volatile conflicts with local and transnational dimensions. To put this selection in global context, by mid-2017, U.S. Special Operations forces were deployed to 137 countries.¹⁶

While these partner states are relatively friendly to the United States, the strength of each bilateral alliance varies. Some partners are much more ambivalent and reluctant — indeed recalcitrant — than others. In addition, some ongoing conflicts are more “frontline” in nature for the United States than others, making American interest in partner security uneven. The comparative case studies that Tankel presents are tightly organized around four aspects of partnership: domestic counterterrorism efforts, tactical cooperation with

¹⁶ Nick Turse, “American Special Ops Forces Have Deployed to 70 Percent of the World’s Countries in 2017,” *Nation*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/american-special-ops-forces-have-deployed-to-70-percent-of-the-worlds-countries-in-2017/>.

the United States, regional cooperation, and the somewhat ambiguous catch-all of “countering violent extremism.” The case studies are clear and informative, presented chronologically, giving the reader a sense of how cooperation has fluctuated over time.

Tankel argues that U.S. expectations of partner cooperation should be tempered by the recognition that there is often a fundamental misalignment of the threat perceptions of a given terrorist group or insurgency. This misalignment seems largely inevitable and likely to continue. To the United States, the threat is external. The greatest concern is preventing terrorist attacks on the American homeland that might emanate from groups active in these countries, such as Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Pakistan, both of which have directed terrorist plots against the United States that came near to completion.¹⁷ AQAP was behind the thwarted Christmas 2009 airliner bombing, and LeT instigated the Times Square bombing plot in 2010.¹⁸ But these instances of externally organized terrorism are rare. There is also the danger of decentralized “homegrown” terrorism, inspired by jihadist appeals to action, especially from ISIS. Still, the direct terrorist threat to the United States from these groups is far from existential. The United States also has a less proximate, but nevertheless real, interest in ensuring that hostile jihadist organizations do not take over territory that they can then use to attack Americans or to destabilize local allies. Hence the switch from opposing Bashar al Assad to opposing ISIS in the Syrian civil war after ISIS had declared its caliphate and occupied large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. The United States

¹⁷ Stephen Tankel has also written an excellent book on LeT, *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Taiba* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ See the useful website maintained by New America, *Terrorism in America After 9/11*, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/>.

is similarly concerned with groups in Pakistan that undermine the security of Afghanistan.

For the weaker partners at the center of Tankel's analysis, the threat is primarily an internal one — and sometimes even an existential one. Cross-border transnational terrorism overlaps with local insurgencies that undermine state control and could potentially trigger the collapse of the state. What is at stake for these countries is profound. Yet, paradoxically, sometimes the “threat” is also an asset. Some of these partners agree with the U.S. position that jihadist groups are belligerent opposing forces to be diminished, defeated, or eradicated, even at high cost. Others see good reason to collaborate with such groups, since these countries typically face multiple armed opposition groups. There are also various levels of indifference and tolerance that lie in between total belligerence and total cooperation.

Tankel points out, logically, that longstanding bilateral alliances, in which two states share a history of cooperation, can ease the path of partnership. But there are limits to such familiarity. He notes that Saudi Arabia, certainly a long-time U.S.-ally, in the end resists doing much about the doctrine of Wahhabism, which bolsters jihadism worldwide but remains the source of the regime's legitimacy. Tankel also finds that tactical military cooperation (e.g., providing intelligence) is easier than initiatives of larger scale or that have more of an impact on domestic politics in the host country, such as countering violent extremism (CVE) or, in particular, the acutely sensitive subject of security sector reform.

The Future for U.S. Partnerships Is Not So Bright

The overall conclusions of this book are not optimistic, which is unsurprising. Tankel finds that “absent catalytic events, efforts to change partners’ threat perception have not met with much success.”¹⁹ Providing security assistance to partners is highly problematic, and it is hard to see how to fix the problem. Any solution depends on tackling such confounding issues as poor governance and corruption, problems that are deeply rooted in the countries in question. Effective counterterrorism goes beyond building state capacity to encouraging the sorts of political solutions that have so far taken the back seat to military ones. Tankel argues that military capacity-building efforts have emphasized tactics over the basic reform of the partner’s institutional security apparatus. Military planners (who are at the forefront of partner relations) must find it frustrating and unrewarding to tackle endemic, intertwined problems of graft and corruption, lack of motivation, poor training, and weak leadership. Kinetic efforts are much more glamorous, producing visible results in the short term, even if the long-term effect is, at best, inconclusive, and at worst, harmful. As Tankel notes, U.S. partners abroad sometimes act as enablers in this respect. They provide tactical cooperation such as access to territory, intelligence information, and detention and rendition of suspects, in order to avoid more onerous, demanding, and costly forms of cooperation, especially those that would jeopardize the hold on power of local elites.

Adding further to the problem is the fact that the United States has not excelled at assessing the cost or the pay-off of counterterrorism efforts. Here there is obvious room for improvement, at least incrementally. For starters, the United States could better

¹⁹ But if there are some even modest successes it would be good to know more about them.

monitor security assistance. Tankel includes in a footnote in *With Us and Against Us* the telling observation that the United States cannot even track the money it is spending on security assistance.²⁰ Similarly, America's CVE efforts in Pakistan were hampered by a lack of knowledge about the sources of the problem. Despite the encouraging observation that these efforts became more informed over time, indicating that governments can learn, there was still a "lack of metrics."²¹ Tankel was unable to figure out how much American assistance was devoted to CVE because the different agencies involved characterized it differently.²² The Stimson Center in Washington recently released an impressive, although admittedly imprecise, report on the overall cost of U.S. counterterrorism activities, including overseas assistance as well as homeland security, which estimated a total of \$2.8 trillion spent during fiscal years 2002 through 2017.²³ The report cited lack of transparency, inconsistent criteria for what counts as counterterrorism, and incomplete data as the basis for its conclusion that it is impossible to assess whether or not money is being spent to counter the most important threats or how efficacious such spending is overall. The war on terrorism has become so diffuse and open-ended that it is impossible to track accurately.

²⁰ Tankel, *With Us and Against Us*, 345.

²¹ Tankel, *With Us and Against Us*, 161, 357.

²² Admittedly CVE remains a nebulous concept and practice, even within the United States. The core of the policy is countering violent ideologies, attitudes, and beliefs rather than degrading, defeating, or eradicating an enemy organization.

²³ Stimson Study Group on Counterterrorism Spending, *Protecting America While Promoting Efficiencies and Accountability* (2018), <https://www.stimson.org/content/counterterrorism-spending-protecting-america-while-promoting-efficiencies-and-accountability>. See also "Counterterrorism: DOD Should Fully Address Security Assistance Planning Elements in Global Train and Equip Project Proposals," U.S. Government Accountability Office, May 30, 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-449>.

While Tankel's book focuses primarily on exposing the inconsistencies of America's partners, the U.S. government can also be erratic. Even under the same administration in Washington, different agencies can have different threat perceptions, in addition to all the other divisions that foster compartmentalization and bureaucratic rivalry.²⁴ The United States is also likely to switch enemy priorities: The adversary in Syria, for example, was Assad — until it was ISIS.²⁵ Tankel does acknowledge such American inconsistencies, but it is likely that they affect U.S. partners' perceptions more than most American policy makers realize. It would be very enlightening to have a glimpse at that perspective to see how those partners view America's role in counterterrorism cooperation.

Although Tankel does not stress this point, he does allude to some disastrous American policy mistakes, including the “difficult to overstate corrosive effect” of the invasion of Iraq, and the “enduring stain” of Guantanamo. But it was not just these tragic blunders that disrupted chains of events and patterns of partnership. It was the way that decisions, which perhaps seemed inconsequential or even helpful at the time, in the end had unexpected consequences in the region. Adapting to these faulty decisions and sometimes shocking consequences is made all the more difficult if allied relationships are not robust and if local partner elites are divided and insecure. One example of this is the

²⁴ See the vivid accounts in Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

²⁵ Tankel says that a noteworthy effect of building an anti-ISIS coalition after 2014 was that it brought Muslim majority countries into the counterterrorism cooperation framework. Still, ISIS was less of a priority for Saudi Arabia than for the United States. In Yemen, the Houthi threat entirely dominates the security concerns of America's erstwhile counterterrorism partner.

Obama administration being blindsided by the Arab Spring and by the civil war in Syria, setting the stage for the breakdown of Yemen. The behavior of America's partners there — the regimes of Ali Abdullah Saleh and Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, as well as Saudi Arabia — was, at best, unreliable and opportunistic, and at worst, destructive, causing even more problems. Counterterrorism efforts in Yemen that were focused on AQAP eventually morphed into supporting the Saudi campaign against the Houthi rebels.

Another example is Libya, where the overthrow of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi led to an unexpected descent into chaos that disrupted the entirety of North Africa and the Sahel region (in addition to causing the death of the American ambassador to Libya).²⁶ Both Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara now have operational bases there, which has, in turn, led to American drone strikes. Yet another example in the region is Mali, which was so caught off guard and threatened by the movement of AQIM into the north of the country, due to the Algerian state's victory in the Algeria civil war that began in the 1990s, that France was invited to intervene. Now, the region is in turmoil, and the United States is establishing an armed drone base in Niger. In effect, Algeria, a U.S. ally, was so effective in defeating what was largely a local jihadist movement that it pushed the local organizers to ally with Al Qaida in 2006. AQIM's southern branch then spilled over into partner Mali, undermining Mali's own security and territorial integrity as well as regional stability more broadly. The chaos in Libya only made the conflict worse by providing ungoverned spaces as well as an abundant supply of arms.

²⁶ Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman, *North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2013), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR415.html.

Tankel's study reinforces the findings of other scholars who have similarly stressed misaligned preferences as the cause of difficulties in patron-client relationships. Their research expands the analysis beyond counterterrorism to other areas, counterinsurgency in particular, and highlights different state partners.²⁷ These scholars are equally pessimistic about what can be achieved through these types of U.S. partnerships. In documenting the obstacles to effective security assistance, they find that, in order to work, it requires levels of intrusiveness and conditionality that might not be practical or desirable. The bottom line is that differences between patron-client preferences require the patron, in this case the United States, to drive a hard bargain to get any sort of compliance or cooperation. The January 2018 suspension of State and Defense Department security assistance to Pakistan, in the hopes of compelling stronger action against the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network, might be an instance of such a hard bargain, but its effectiveness is doubtful.²⁸ Paul Kapur has argued convincingly that Pakistan is irreversibly committed to the idea that supporting jihadist groups, as well as the Taliban, is essential to its regional security. It regards India as a much greater threat than domestic extremism, and it will not abandon the relationship with its jihadist clients,

²⁷ Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small footprint, small payoff: The military effectiveness of security force assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41, nos.1-2 (2018): 89-142; Barbara Elias, "The Big Problem of Small Allies: New Data and Theory on Defiant Local Counterinsurgency Partners in Afghanistan and Iraq," *Security Studies*, 27, no. 2 (2018): 233-262; Walter C. Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relations in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Daniel Byman, "US counterterrorism intelligence cooperation with the developing world and its limits," *Intelligence and National Security* 32, no. 2 (2017): 145-60.

²⁸ Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, "Trump, Citing Pakistan as a 'Safe Haven' for Terrorists, Freezes Aid," *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/us/politics/trump-pakistan-aid.html>.

despite the disastrous consequences that Kapur predicts.²⁹ What's more, a Brookings report by Vanda Felbab-Brown points out that the United States decreased its military aid to Pakistan by 60 percent between 2010 and 2017 without any discernible impact on Pakistani behavior.³⁰

It is understandable that U.S. military leaders might not completely grasp the complexities and ambiguities that Tankel describes, especially when they are dealing with newer counterterrorism partners. Transparency is not, after all, a strong point in these regimes. Tankel is certainly right to say that it is critical for the United States to understand its partners' calculations. But is it realistic to expect this level of insight or to expect mutual comprehension? Reading this book would be a good start, but distrust and suspicion of duplicity and manipulation are likely to remain.

There's More to Learn About U.S. Partnerships

Tankel's analysis raises questions that merit further consideration and research. The argument proposed in his book could be extended to partners who are engaged in active combat against jihadists, such as the Philippines, which is a U.S. treaty ally that has had close military cooperation with America over the years. Niger also comes to mind, since American soldiers have been killed in military operations against the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and, as noted above, the United States is expanding its commitment there

²⁹ Paul Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy: Islamist Militancy, National Security, and the Pakistani State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³⁰ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Why Pakistan supports terrorist groups, and why the US finds it so hard to induce change," Brookings Institution, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/05/why-pakistan-supports-terrorist-groups-and-why-the-us-finds-it-so-hard-to-induce-change/>.

by building a new base for armed drones. Another potential point of comparison to explore is between state and non-state partners, such as the Kurds.

A further question to explore is how different is the problem of combatting terrorism from other security areas in which the United States similarly needs the help of sometimes dubious or less than willing/capable partners, and wants its partners to be the “tip of the spear.” For example, would it be instructive to examine U.S. cooperation with partners like Mexico in combating transnational drug dealing and organized crime? Jihadist violence may be fundamentally different because the actors behind it are what Tanisha Fazal describes as “religionist rebels” whose intransigence distinguishes them from other regime opponents.³¹ However, there might still be lessons to be learned by applying Tankel’s analysis to these non-terrorism security areas.

Tankel finds that as time passed after 9/11 the United States reduced its reliance on unreliable partners. It would be worthwhile to know more about how this withdrawal was possible and what was the alternative to that reliance. Is it easy to switch partners? What happens if the United States abandons a partner? Can partner reliability be predicted? It would not seem so, but there are surely some identifiable characteristics of partners that could be known in advance, beyond their past performance as an ally.

Perhaps there is a correlation between U.S. uncertainty about the gravity of a given threat and U.S. willingness to press partners in the sensitive areas of security sector reform and civilian institution-building, both of which appear central to effective counterterrorism as well as counterinsurgency. When the United States perceives a threat as acute, local

³¹ Tanisha M. Fazal, “Religionist Rebels & the Sovereignty of the Divine,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 25-35.

partners are able to play the weak ally card, as South Vietnam did and as Pakistan still does. The United States is probably more willing to impose the conditionality recommended by Tankel and others when American policy makers are less impatient and less eager to see immediate results. But then again, paradoxically, uncertainty about the jihadist threat in Mali did not stop the United States from escalating involvement in the Sahel region.

In the end, it seems unlikely that the problems with partners that this book identifies can be solved without a better defined and better articulated national counterterrorism policy. The current anti-jihadist strategy is essentially a mix of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies. Partners are asked to counter jihadist insurgencies and terrorism not just to help themselves but to help the United States defend its interests against transnational terrorism and cascading instability as the number of civil wars involving jihadist movements steadily increases. Furthermore, the various elements of counterterrorism policy are not well integrated. How can military operations, whether unilaterally conducted by the partner or in cooperation with the United States or regional allies, be compatible with countering violent extremism and undermining the jihadist claim that the West is at war with Islam? It is also hard to reconcile Washington's opposition to "nation-building" with providing effective security assistance to these weak partners. Jihadists take advantage of and exploit civil conflicts stemming from local grievances that U.S. partners have not been able or willing to deal with. Military cooperation will not resolve those grievances, although it could buy time for solutions to be pursued. Tankel is right to emphasize that, ultimately, the problem is more political than military.

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4. America and Its Counterterrorism Partners: A Principal-Agent Relationship

Jacob Shapiro

Stephen Tankel's new book, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror*, marks a significant contribution toward understanding why states do (or do not) cooperate with major powers to fight terrorist groups.³² The book addresses a basic puzzle: What accounts for the great variation over time and across groups in how hard key states have worked to cooperate with America's counterterrorism efforts? Pakistan, for example, worked reasonably well with the United States to capture and kill al-Qaeda operatives from 2002 to 2005 (with important exceptions), generally allowed a range of militants to operate with near impunity from 2006 to 2008, and then provided tacit support to the massively ramped up U.S. drone campaign in some regions of the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier from 2009 to 2011. Pakistan has also had the habit of targeting some groups while leaving others untouched at the same point in time.

Tankel's book reveals that this kind of variation is not unusual. In his chapters on Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Mali, and Egypt/Algeria, Tankel lays out the competing strategic incentives that influence the United States' putative allies in the "War on Terror." Each chapter walks through the history of how the country in question has cooperated with U.S. counterterrorism efforts over the years, as well as how it has worked at cross purposes to U.S. goals. What becomes clear as the book progresses is

³² Stephen Tankel, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

that there is tremendous variation in the extent of cooperation with U.S. efforts. Understanding the cause of that variation is critical in several respects, most importantly because policies that assume unconditional cooperation are clearly misguided and doomed for failure. But more subtly, having a clear sense of the conditions that hinder cooperation can help policy makers identify ways to set the stage for our allies to do more.

To analyze patterns of cooperation in each country, Tankel employs a pair of two-dimensional graphs that illustrate (a) the extent to which the United States and its ally share the same threat perception of different terrorist groups and (b) the extent to which a terrorist group is either useful or poses a threat to the U.S. ally in question. By placing specific groups on these two graphs, Tankel concisely highlights whether the United States and its ally would be conflicted about cracking down on a given group. Tankel argues that when the United States and its ally disagree about the threat-level and when a group has some utility to the ally — situating it in the lower right quadrant of each graph — then one should expect to see shoddy cooperation or outright subversion of U.S. interests on the part of the ally.

This is a clean argument that helps make sense of a great deal of variation within each individual case — e.g., Pakistan cooperating with the United States against some Islamist militants while supporting groups with superficially similar ideologies — and the evidence laid out is persuasive. The case studies provide tight chronological narratives for each country and bring together a range of events that every scholar and policymaker working on the topic should know about. Overall, the book highlights the inherent limits on cooperation between states in counterterrorism efforts and should encourage caution among policymakers who have too-easily assumed that other states will follow U.S.

priorities on counterterrorism because they are strong allies in some other area. Tankel's key advice to the policy community is dead on:

It is critical to comprehend the security paradigm that drives a partner's decision-making, how relations with the terrorists that are the target of cooperation fit into that paradigm, and how U.S. policies influence the political and security challenges the partner faces.

Great History, Wrong Framework

The main weakness of the book is that, by framing the analysis in the literature on alliances,³³ Tankel situates his work in the wrong literature. As Tankel himself points out, the kind of cooperation the United States is seeking in its counterterrorism efforts is fundamentally different from the commitments sought in traditional interstate alliances. Moreover, the alliance literature that Tankel presents never deals explicitly with the complexities of politics within individual states, and so provides little guidance for thinking through how potential counterterrorism partners will behave. Although Tankel does not rely heavily on alliance theory in his analysis, there is nevertheless a missed opportunity here. Specifically, alliance theory, with its focus on structural conditions, provides little insight into the vexing question of how the United States and other great powers should work with allies in the counterterrorism fight.

The issues Tankel studies would have been better understood through the lenses of agency theory and organizational economics. Because these approaches are focused

³³ Tankel, *With Us and Against Us*, 49–54.

tightly on how to configure relationships that can lead to cooperation between interdependent entities with partially aligned interests, they provide deeper insights into how to shape the strategic thinking of allies in counterterrorism than do the literatures on alliance behavior and coercion. In particular, principal-agent models highlight the challenge of sustaining cooperation when (a) the principal has to delegate certain activities to an agent, e.g. running counter-radicalization programs; (b) the agent's preferences differ from those of the principal, e.g. it might disagree about which groups are truly "radical"; and (c) the principal cannot credibly punish the agent for taking actions that are in its own interest instead of the principal's. Threats to punish can fail because the principal cannot be sure whether the agent has taken advantage of the principal's discretion (say by not working as hard as the principal would like) or because the threat of punishment is not one the principal is likely to carry out when the time comes.

From the perspective of organizational economics, the United States is clearly engaged in a principal-agent relationship with its counterterrorism partners. The United States, the principal, seeks to delegate various counterterrorism activities (collecting intelligence, protecting U.S. sites, running de-radicalization programs, etc.) to another state, its agent. That state, however, can take actions that are not in U.S. interests and the United States has only imperfect tools to compel cooperation. That is both because it is hard to measure counterterrorism efforts (because many are necessarily covert) and thus difficult to know how hard an ally is working, and also because the agents are balancing multiple priorities and know that the United States will not completely cut them off even if they misbehave. Take Pakistan, for example: United States policy makers wished to punish Pakistan for its support of the Haqqani Network at points, but were constrained by their reliance on Pakistan for cooperation against al-Qaeda and for transshipment of supplies

to U.S. forces in Afghanistan, making a complete breach in relations over counterterrorism issues unthinkable.

Two books — one that was recently published and one that is forthcoming — that address the challenges of working with allies to achieve counterinsurgency goals from a principal-agent perspective can help foster a better understanding of the rich case histories that Tankel presents. Walter C. Ladwig III's, *The Forgotten Front: Patron Client Relations in Counterinsurgency*,³⁴ applies agency theory to understand why the United States had such difficulties achieving its strategic goals in the Philippines after World War II, Vietnam from 1957 to 1963, and El Salvador from 1979 to 1992. He begins the book by pointing out that, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, military action by outside powers created moments of political opportunity that were not capitalized upon by local governments. Ladwig then pivots to outline in rich detail the many problems agency theory predicts states should have in managing what he terms “patron-client relationships.”

Ladwig argues that structural factors in the international system do a poor job of explaining the variance in the extent to which principals in counterinsurgency efforts (essentially great power patrons) can shape their agents' actions. Put more provocatively, the kinds of variables that play a major role in theories of alliance behavior and interstate coercion have little explanatory value when trying to understand cooperation in counterinsurgency. It is easy to argue that the same is true with respect to understanding

³⁴ Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron Client Relations in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). For an outstanding review of Ladwig's book see Will Selber's excellent piece at War on the Rocks: Will Selber, “Hope and Hype: Advising Foreign Forces in the Middle of a Counterinsurgency Campaign,” *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 17, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/hope-and-hype-advising-foreign-forces-in-the-middle-of-a-counterinsurgency-campaign/>.

cooperation in counterterrorism, and it would seem Tankel agrees, given that his analysis makes little use of alliance theory after the introductory setup.

Ladwig demonstrates that moral hazard — a term of art for the problems that occur when an agent can take actions that increase its utility at the expense of the principle — loomed large in each of his three examples because it was usually hard for the U.S. government to monitor what its agents were doing and to credibly threaten punishment for any identified transgressions. Sometimes that difficulty arose from the lack of credible options outside of the local partner, as when the U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam was quoted as arguing “we would assist a Communist takeover by withholding our aid, even if it must necessarily be given to a government which is less than perfect,”³⁵ and sometimes it stemmed from the unwillingness of leaders in the United States to publicly acknowledge their allies’ shortcomings in the context of zero-sum Cold War competition.

Many of the themes in Ladwig’s volume are deepened and extended in the forthcoming *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*, edited by Eli Berman and David Lake.³⁶ The authors of this volume argue that “working through local proxies has always been a central tool of foreign policy,” and therefore, “Understanding *indirect control*, how to motivate local leaders to act in sometimes costly ways — and when and how it succeeds — is essential to effective foreign policy in today’s world; especially for managing violence and illicit activities by non-state actors operating from the territory of

³⁵ Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 71–72.

³⁶ Eli Berman and David Lake, *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming). Full disclosure, I am a co-PI on the grant that funded the book, but did not participate in writing it.

other states.” This insight is driven by years spent talking with U.S. policymakers as they struggle to “do more with less” and “work by, with, and through” local allies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

To help build a richer understanding of indirect control Berman and Lake take a novel approach, working with game theorists Gerard Padró i Miquel and Pierre Yared to lay down a logically coherent and mathematically-derived account of the principal-agent dynamics involved in indirect control. Eight other authors in this edited volume then apply that theoretical framework to nine proxy relationships, including the United States and South Korea, Nazi Germany and Denmark, and Israel and Hamas, among others, examining a different outcome and different set of principal-agent challenges in each case.

The book’s essential argument is that the great power principal can choose different methods for addressing what Berman and Lake generically term “a disturbance,” which can include terrorism emanating from poorly governed spaces, as in parts of Pakistan, or drug production in remote areas, as in regions of Colombia. At one extreme, the principal can engage in direct action (e.g. military strikes) or it can *disengage* and accept ongoing disturbances. The principal can also attempt a strategy of indirect control in which it either (a) promises rewards and punishments to the proxy to induce the proxy to suppress the disturbance,³⁷ or (b) enhances the capacity of the proxy to manage the disturbance, for example, by providing security force assistance.³⁸ The optimal mix of carrots, sticks, and supplements depends on how tightly aligned the principal’s interests

³⁷ Along the lines of the contract that Ladwig advises establishing at the start of a principal-agent relationship for counterinsurgency purposes.

³⁸ Interestingly, both methods have been used over the years as the United States tries to manage its counterterrorism relationship with Pakistan and, as Tankel shows, have had uneven success.

are with those of the agent, echoing Tankel's discussion of shared agreement on the severity of the threat and the extent to which the agent sees strategic value in the group producing the disturbance. Situations that Tankel classified as having high U.S. threat perceptions, low ally threat perceptions, and high ally utility for the terrorist group, are those that Berman and Lake would describe as having poor preference alignment between principal and agent. Cooperation is not impossible in such settings according to their argument, but securing it requires the principal to create strong incentives for the agent to comply with its demands. And it is in thinking about how to create such incentives, that the agency theory approach pays greatest dividends.

In Berman and Lake's formulation, interests can diverge when disturbances are more costly for the principal than the agent, when the proxy simply has higher priorities, or when reducing the disturbance is politically costly for the agent (as going after the Pakistan Taliban in the wake of the Abbottabad raid would have been for the Pakistani government, for example). When interests diverge a great deal, the principal will have to provide large rewards or significant punishments to make the agent comply. Simply providing capacity, however, will not help. Weapons and training can be diverted to address problems other than the disturbance the principal cares about (in the case Tankel studies, military aid provided to enhance Pakistan's ability to fight local insurgents was spent bolstering the country's defense against India). When interests diverge modestly, then, the great power can tailor punishments and rewards to get its proxy to deal with the threat to some extent, but capacity building will largely be a wasted investment. This prediction is consistent with the poor results of U.S. security force assistance in Iraq. It is only when interests are closely aligned that unconditional capacity building will work, or so Berman, Lake, and the other contributors to this volume argue. In practical terms, their argument implies that increased aid, military training, and other

forms of assistance should be used sparingly and only in cases such as postwar Europe, where the United States and (most of) its allies agreed on the nature of the Soviet threat.

This perspective finds much support in the examples discussed in *Proxy Wars*, though there are exceptions. Overall, the authors find that great powers have been overly sanguine about the potential for capacity building to help proxies manage disturbances and that explicit rewards and punishments are not used as often as one would think, despite their record of success. Stephen Biddle's closing chapter draws on that observation to identify key policy lessons, many of which mirror suggestions made by both Tankel and Ladwig, regarding the need for being realistic about the incentives facing state partners.

Not surprisingly, Berman and Lake's theoretical arguments are fully supported by the facts presented in Tankel's careful dissection of the U.S.-Pakistan proxy relationship. Capacity building for purposes of counterterrorism largely did not work. Meanwhile, without credible punishments, Pakistan routinely invested less than the United States would have liked in containing threats emanating from its territory and redirected military aid to its own purposes. And during periods when working with the United States was more politically costly for Pakistani politicians and military leaders, levels of cooperation went down across the board. What the agency theory approach brings to the table is a clear-eyed view of what would be required to gain that cooperation: a way to credibly threaten to punish the Pakistani state when groups that it sees as valuable — e.g. the Haqqani network — create costs for the United States. Absent that, Pakistan is likely to remain a partial cooperator at best.

Overall then, Tankel's *With Us and Against Us* is a valuable and welcome contribution to the literature on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. The book provides an essential history of counterterrorism cooperation in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Mali, Egypt, and Algeria. And it does more than any other book to illustrate how even the best allies can advance the United States' goals against some groups while working against them with regards to others. In this respect, *With Us and Against Us* makes a unique contribution to the growing set of books highlighting just how limited cooperation often is in this domain. It should be required reading for anyone in the executive branch considering a counterterrorism strategy that relies on local cooperation and for anyone in the legislative branch considering funding such strategies.

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