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Washington Puts Its Money on Proxy War

By Tom Engelhardt

August 9, 2012

Only in America: It turns out that we're the sole country on the planet where a majority of people (62%) are [sunnily in favor](#) of sending drones across the globe (and [across the borders](#) of other countries) to take out terrorists. According to Pew Research's latest polling, that includes 74% of Republicans, 60% of independents, and 58% of Democrats. Nowhere else is such sentiment to be found. In France, 63% disapprove; in Mexico, 73%; in Turkey, 81%; in Egypt, 89%; and in Pakistan, where [drone strikes](#) are a constant, 97% of those who know about them are [opposed](#). Whatever the world may think — and in the U.S., there are liberals ready to argue [vigorously](#) for the "morality" of drones — the Air Force (and the CIA) are [plunging ahead](#) training pilots and expanding their drone fleets. In fact, the Air Force is [already training](#) more drone pilots than bomber and fighter pilots combined.

After a decade-plus of in-person, in-your-face disaster on the Eurasian mainland, high-tech, remote-controlled war in which American pilots are thousands of miles away from those they attack is increasingly seen as the way of the imperial future. Drones, in fact, give the idea of remote-controlled war a distinctly post-modern, [sci-fi gloss](#). The thought of victory at next to no human cost (to us) couldn't, it turns out, be more appealing in the "homeland." But don't be fooled: drones are just the latest twist in such a war strategy. Conceptually, remote-controlled war is, if not as old as Adam, then certainly as old as empire.

Or put another way, the urge of great powers to have the locals do most, if not all, of the dying for them is anything but new (even if replacing indigenous troops with machines has a distinctly modern, [outsourced](#) twist to it). After all, nineteenth century European powers regularly fought their colonial wars with tiny elites of white officers commanding large contingents of native proxy forces, trained, armed, and ready to enforce imperial interests. As part of his

TomDispatch series on the "[changing face of empire](#)," Nick Turse has been tracking the [sci-fi frontiers](#) of remote-controlled war, American-style (and some of that work can be found in the new book he's co-authored, [Terminator Planet: The First History of Drone Warfare, 2001-2050](#)). Now, he turns to machine-less proxy war, as Washington ensures that the oldest form of outsourcing of life and death once again has its grim (and unpredictable) day in the sun. *Tom*

Washington Puts Its Money on Proxy War

The Election Year Outsourcing that No One's Talking About

By [Nick Turse](#)

In the 1980s, the U.S. government began funneling aid to mujahedeen rebels in Afghanistan as part of an American [proxy war](#) against the Soviet Union. It was, in the minds of America's Cold War leaders, a rare chance to bloody the Soviets, to give them a taste of the sort of defeat the Vietnamese, with Soviet help, had inflicted on Washington the decade before. In 1989, after years of bloody combat, the Red Army did indeed limp out of Afghanistan in defeat. Since late 2001, the United States has been fighting its former Afghan proxies and their progeny. Now, after years of bloody combat, it's the U.S. that's looking to withdraw the bulk of its forces and once again employ proxies to secure its interests there.

From Asia and Africa to the Middle East and the Americas, the Obama administration is increasingly embracing a multifaceted, light-footprint brand of warfare. [Gone](#), for the moment at least, are the days of full-scale invasions of the Eurasian mainland. Instead, Washington is now planning to rely ever more heavily on drones and special operations forces to fight scattered global enemies on the cheap. A centerpiece of this new [American way of war](#) is the outsourcing of fighting duties to local proxies around the world.

While the United States is currently engaged in just one outright proxy war, backing a multi-nation African force to battle Islamist militants in Somalia, it's laying the groundwork for the extensive use of surrogate forces in the future, training "native" troops to carry out missions — up to and including outright warfare. With this in mind and under the auspices of the Pentagon and the State Department, U.S. military personnel now take part in near-constant joint exercises and training missions around the world aimed at fostering alliances, building coalitions, and whipping surrogate forces into shape to support U.S. national security objectives.

While using slightly different methods in different regions, the basic strategy is a global one in which the U.S. will train, equip, and advise indigenous forces — generally from poor, underdeveloped nations — to do the fighting (and dying) it doesn't want to do. In the process, as small an American force as possible, including special forces operatives and air support, will be brought to bear to aid those surrogates. Like drones, proxy warfare appears to offer an easy solution to complex problems. But as Washington's 30-year debacle in Afghanistan indicates, the ultimate costs may prove both unimaginable and unimaginably high.

Start with Afghanistan itself. For more than a decade, the U.S. and its coalition partners have been training Afghan security forces in the hopes that they would take over the war there, defending U.S. and allied interests as the American-led international force draws down. Yet despite an expenditure of **almost \$50 billion** on bringing it up to speed, the Afghan National Army and other security forces have drastically **underperformed** any and all expectations, year after year.

One track of the U.S. plan has been a little-talked-about proxy army run by the CIA. For years, the Agency has trained and employed **six clandestine militias** that operate near the cities of Kandahar, Kabul, and Jalalabad as well as in Khost, Kunar, and Paktika provinces. Working with U.S. Special Forces and **controlled** by Americans, these "Counterterror Pursuit Teams" evidently operate free of any Afghan governmental supervision and have reportedly carried out **cross-border raids** into Pakistan, offering their American patrons a classic benefit of proxy warfare: plausible deniability.

This clandestine effort has also been supplemented by the creation of a massive, conventional indigenous security force. While officially under Afghan government control, these military and police forces are almost entirely dependent on the financial support of the U.S. and allied governments for their continued existence.

Today, the Afghan National Security Forces officially number more than 343,000, but only **7% of its army units** and 9% of its police units are rated at the highest level of effectiveness. By contrast, even after more than a decade of large-scale Western aid, 95% of its recruits are still **functionally illiterate**.

Not surprisingly, this massive force, trained by high-priced private contractors, Western European militaries, and the United States, and backed by U.S. and coalition forces and their advanced weapons systems, has been unable to stamp out a lightly-armed, modest-sized, less-than-popular, rag-tag insurgency. One of the few tasks this proxy force seems skilled at is shooting American and allied forces, quite often their own trainers, in increasingly common **"green-on-blue"** attacks.

Adding insult to injury, this poor-performing, **coalition-killing** force is **expensive**. Bought and paid for by the United States and its coalition partners, it costs between \$10 billion and \$12 billion each year to sustain in a country whose gross domestic product is just **\$18 billion**. Over the long term, such a situation is untenable.

Back to the Future

Utilizing foreign surrogates is nothing new. Since ancient times, empires and nation-states have **employed** foreign troops and indigenous forces to wage war or have backed them when it suited their policy aims. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the tactic had become *de rigueur* for colonial powers like the French who employed Senegalese, Moroccans, and other African forces in Indochina and elsewhere, and the British who regularly used Nepalese Gurkhas to wage counterinsurgencies in places ranging from Iraq and Malaya to Borneo.

By the time the United States began backing the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, it already had significant experience with proxy warfare and its perils. After World War II, the U.S. eagerly embraced foreign surrogates, generally in poor and underdeveloped countries, in the name of the Cold War. These efforts included the attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro via a proxy Cuban force that crashed and burned at the Bay of Pigs; the building of a Hmong army in Laos which ultimately lost to Communist forces there; and the bankrolling of a French war in Vietnam that failed in 1954 and then the creation of a massive army in South Vietnam that crumbled in 1975, to name just a few unsuccessful efforts.

A more recent proxy failure occurred in Iraq. For years after the 2003 invasion, American policy-makers uttered a standard [mantra](#): "As Iraqis stand up, we will stand down." Last year, those Iraqis basically walked off.

Between 2003 and 2011, the United States pumped tens of billions of dollars into "reconstructing" the country with around \$20 billion of it going to build the [Iraqi security forces](#). This mega-force of [hundreds of thousands](#) of soldiers and police was created from scratch to prop up the successors to the government that the United States overthrew. It was trained by and fought with the Americans and their coalition partners, but that all came to an end in December 2011.

Despite Obama administration efforts to base thousands or tens of thousands of troops in Iraq for years to come, the Iraqi government spurned Washington's overtures and sent the U.S. military packing. Today, the Iraqi government [supports](#) the Assad regime in Syria, and has a warm and increasingly close relationship with long-time U.S. enemy [Iran](#). [According](#) to Iran's semiofficial Fars News Agency, the two countries have even discussed expanding their [military ties](#).

African Shadow Wars

Despite a history of sinking billions into proxy armies that collapsed, walked away, or morphed into enemies, Washington is currently pursuing plans for proxy warfare across the globe, perhaps nowhere more aggressively than in Africa.

Under President Obama, operations in Africa have accelerated far [beyond](#) the more [limited interventions](#) of the [Bush years](#). These include last year's war in Libya; the expansion of a [growing network](#) of supply depots, small camps, and airfields; a regional [drone campaign](#) with missions run out of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and the Indian Ocean archipelago nation of Seychelles; a flotilla of [30 ships](#) in that ocean supporting regional operations; a massive influx of cash for counterterrorism operations across East Africa; a possible [old-fashioned air war](#), carried out on the sly in the region using manned aircraft; and a [special ops expeditionary force](#) (bolstered by [State Department experts](#)) dispatched to help capture or kill Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony and his senior commanders. (This mission against Kony is seen by some [experts](#) as a cover for a developing proxy war between the U.S. and the Islamist government of Sudan — which is accused of helping to support the LRA — and Islamists more generally.) And this only begins to scratch the surface of Washington's fast-expanding plans and activities in the region.

In Somalia, Washington has already involved itself in a multi-pronged military and CIA campaign against Islamist al-Shabaab militants that includes [intelligence operations](#), training for Somali agents, [a secret prison](#), [helicopter attacks](#), and [commando raids](#). Now, it is also backing a classic proxy war using African surrogates. The United States has become, as the *Los Angeles Times* [put it](#) recently, "the driving force behind the fighting in Somalia," as it trains and equips African foot soldiers to battle Shabaab militants, so U.S. forces won't have to. In a country where more than 90 Americans were killed and wounded in a 1993 debacle now known by the shorthand "[Black Hawk Down](#)," today's fighting and dying has been outsourced to African soldiers.

Earlier this year, for example, elite Force Recon Marines from the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force 12 (or, as a mouthful of an acronym, SPMAGTF-12) trained soldiers from the Uganda People's Defense Force. It, in turn, supplies the majority of the troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) currently protecting the U.S.-supported government in that country's capital, Mogadishu.

This spring, Marines from SPMAGTF-12 also trained soldiers from the Burundi National Defense Force (BNDF), the second-largest contingent in Somalia. In April and May, members of Task Force Raptor, 3rd Squadron, 124th Cavalry Regiment of the Texas National Guard, took part in a separate training mission with the BNDF in Mudubugu, Burundi. SPMAGTF-12 has also sent its trainers to Djibouti, another nation involved in the Somali mission, to work with an elite army unit there.

At the same time, U.S. Army troops have taken part in training members of Sierra Leone's military in preparation for their deployment to Somalia [later this year](#). In June, U.S. Army Africa commander Major General David Hogg spoke encouragingly of the future of Sierra Leone's forces in conjunction with another U.S. ally, Kenya, which invaded Somalia [last fall](#) (and just [recently joined](#) the African Union mission there). "You will join the Kenyan forces in southern Somalia to continue to push al Shabaab and other miscreants from Somalia so it can be free of tyranny and terrorism and all the evil that comes with it," he said. "We know that you are ready and trained. You will be equipped and you will accomplish this mission with honor and dignity."

Readying allied militaries for deployment to Somalia is, however, just a fraction of the story when it comes to training indigenous forces in Africa. This year, for example, Marines traveled to Liberia to focus on teaching riot-control techniques to that country's military as part of what is otherwise a State Department-directed effort to rebuild its security forces.

In fact, Colonel Tom Davis of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) [recently told TomDispatch](#) that his command has held or has planned 14 major joint training exercises for 2012 and a similar number are scheduled for 2013. This year's efforts include operations in Morocco, Cameroon, Gabon, Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho, Senegal, and Nigeria, including, for example, Western Accord 2012, a multilateral exercise involving the armed forces of Senegal, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Gambia, and France.

Even this, however, doesn't encompass the full breadth of U.S. training and advising missions in Africa. "We... conduct some type of military training or military-to-military engagement or activity with nearly every country on the African continent," wrote Davis.

Our American Proxies

Africa may, at present, be the prime location for the development of proxy warfare, American-style, but it's hardly the only locale where the United States is training indigenous forces to aid U.S. foreign policy aims. This year, the Pentagon has also ramped up operations in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean.

In Honduras, for example, small teams of U.S. troops are working with local forces to escalate the drug war there. Working out of Forward Operating Base Mocomon and other remote camps, the U.S. military is supporting Honduran operations by way of the methods it honed in Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. forces have also taken part in joint operations with Honduran troops as part of a training mission dubbed Beyond the Horizon 2012, while Green Berets have been assisting Honduran Special Operations forces in anti-smuggling operations. Additionally, an [increasingly militarized](#) Drug Enforcement Administration sent a Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team, originally created to disrupt the poppy trade in Afghanistan, to aid Honduras's Tactical Response Team, that country's elite counternarcotics unit.

The militarization and foreign deployment of U.S. law enforcement operatives was also evident in Tradewinds 2012, a training exercise held in Barbados in June. There, members of the U.S. military and civilian law enforcement agencies joined with counterparts from Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Canada, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Suriname, as well as Trinidad and Tobago, to improve cooperation for "complex multinational security operations."

Far less visible have been training efforts by U.S. Special Operations Forces in Guyana, Uruguay, and Paraguay. In June, special ops troops also took part in Fuerzas Comando, an eight-day "competition" in which the elite forces from 21 countries, including the Bahamas, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay, faced-off in tests of physical fitness, marksmanship, and tactical capabilities.

This year, the U.S. military has also conducted training exercises in Guatemala, sponsored "partnership-building" missions in the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Peru, and Panama, and reached an agreement to carry out 19 "activities" with the Colombian army over the next year, including joint military exercises.

The Proxy Pivot

Coverage of the Obama administration's much-publicized strategic "pivot" to Asia has focused on the creation of yet more [bases](#) and new [naval deployments](#) to the region. The military (which

has dropped the word pivot for "rebalancing") is, however, also planning and carrying out numerous exercises and training missions with regional allies. In fact, the Navy and Marines alone already reportedly engage in more than 170 bilateral and multilateral exercises with Asia-Pacific nations each year.

One of the largest of these efforts took place in and around the Hawaiian Islands from late June through early August. Dubbed RIMPAC 2012, the exercise brought together more than 40 ships and submarines, more than 200 aircraft, and 25,000 personnel from 22 nations, including Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Tonga.

Almost 7,000 American troops also joined around 3,400 Thai forces, as well as military personnel from Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea as part of Cobra Gold 2012. In addition, U.S. Marines took part in Hamel 2012, a multinational training exercise involving members of the Australian and New Zealand militaries, while other American troops joined the Armed Forces of the Philippines for Exercise Balikatan.

The effects of the "pivot" are also evident in the fact that once neutralist India now holds more than 50 military exercises with the United States each year — more than any other country in the world. "Our partnership with India is a key part of our rebalance to the Asia-Pacific and, we believe, to the broader security and prosperity of the 21st century," said Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter on a recent trip to the subcontinent. Just how broad is evident in the fact that India is taking part in America's proxy effort in Somalia. In recent years, the Indian Navy has emerged as an "important contributor" to the international counter-piracy effort off that African country's coast, according to Andrew Shapiro of the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs.

Peace by Proxy

India's neighbor Bangladesh offers a further window into U.S. efforts to build proxy forces to serve American interests.

Earlier this year, U.S. and Bangladeshi forces took part in an exercise focused on logistics, planning, and tactical training, codenamed Shanti Doot-3. The mission was notable in that it was part of a State Department program, supported and executed by the Pentagon, known as the [Global Peace Operations Initiative](#)(GPOI).

First implemented under George W. Bush, GPOI provides cash-strapped nations funds, equipment, logistical assistance and training to enable their militaries to become "peacekeepers" around the world. Under Bush, from the time the program was established in 2004 through 2008, more than \$374 million was spent to train and equip foreign troops. Under President Obama, Congress has funded the program to the tune of \$393 million, according to figures provided to TomDispatch by the State Department.

In a [speech](#) earlier this year, the State Department's Andrew Shapiro told a Washington, D.C., audience that "GPOI is particularly focusing a great deal of its efforts to support the training and

equipping of peacekeepers deploying to... Somalia" and had provided "tens of millions of dollars worth of equipment for countries deploying [there]." In a [blog post](#) he went into more detail, lauding U.S. efforts to train Djiboutian troops to serve as peacekeepers in Somalia and noting that the U.S. had also provided impoverished Djibouti with radar equipment and patrol boats for offshore activities. "Djibouti is also central to our efforts to combat piracy," he wrote, "as it is on the front line of maritime threats including piracy in the Gulf of Aden and surrounding waters."

Djibouti and Bangladesh are hardly unique. Under the auspices of the Global Peace Operations Initiative, the U.S. has partnered with 62 nations around the globe, according to statistics provided by the State Department. These proxies-in-training are, not surprisingly, some of the [poorest](#) nations in their respective regions, if not the entire planet. They include Benin, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Togo in Africa, Nepal and Pakistan in Asia, and Guatemala and Nicaragua in the Americas.

The Changing Face of Empire

With ongoing military operations in [Asia](#), [Africa](#), [the Middle East](#) and [Latin America](#), the Obama administration has embraced a six-point program for light-footprint warfare relying heavily on [special operations forces](#), [drones](#), [spies](#), [civilian partners](#), [cyber warfare](#), and proxy fighters. Of all the facets of this new way of war, the training and employment of proxies has generally been the least noticed, even though reliance on foreign forces is considered one of its prime selling points. As the State Department's Andrew Shapiro put it in a [speech](#) earlier this year: "[T]he importance of these missions to the security of the United States is often little appreciated... To put it clearly: When these peacekeepers deploy it means that U.S. forces are less likely to be called on to intervene." In other words, to put it even more clearly, more dead locals, fewer dead Americans.

The evidence for this conventional wisdom, however, is lacking. And failures to learn from history in this regard have been ruinous. The training, advising, and outfitting of a proxy force in Vietnam drew the United States deeper and deeper into that doomed conflict, leading to tens of thousands of dead Americans and millions of dead Vietnamese. Support for Afghan proxies during their decade-long battle against the Soviet Union led directly to the current disastrous decade-plus American War in Afghanistan.

Right now, the U.S. is once again training, advising, and conducting joint exercises all over the world with proxy war on its mind and the concept of "unintended consequences" nowhere in sight in Washington. Whether today's proxies end up working for or against Washington's interests or even become tomorrow's enemies remains to be seen. But with so much training going on in so many destabilized regions, and so many proxy forces being armed in so many places, the chances of blowback grow greater by the day.