Strategy, Secrecy, and External Support for Insurgent Groups

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Abstract

States support transnational insurgents in an important variety of ways, from highly public efforts to transform the status quo to covert backing with limited ambitions. In this paper we introduce a new theory to help explain variation in these strategies of external support. We argue that the offensive or defensive goals of state sponsors interact with their fears of escalation to shape how they support armed groups. Four strategies of state sponsorship emerge from different combinations of sponsor goals and escalation fears. We empirically investigate this argument with a unique medium-N study of Indian support and non-support for insurgents in South Asia. Based on fieldwork, primary sources, and specialized secondary literature we uncover a rich landscape of links between India and armed groups in its neighborhood. We show a systematic connection between the strategies of support that India chooses with its aims in supporting rebels and its fears of escalation from doing so. But there are mis-predictions between our theory and empirical reality that we use in the conclusion to suggest new directions for research.

Introduction

In the late 1980s, Pakistani intelligence aggressively backed a series of offensives by Afghan mujahideen fighters to capture the city of Jalalabad, part of a campaign intending to seize power in Kabul in the wake of the Soviet Union's withdrawal. A few years earlier, Thailand had begun providing sanctuary to Khmer Rouge forces as they fled a Vietnamese invasion. Both are cases of external support to transnational insurgents. Yet they are also strikingly different: the former was unabashedly public in pursuit of highly revisionist goals, while the latter support was murky and intended tcreate a buffer zone along a sensitive border. Research on external sponsorship for armed groups often lumps together forms of external backing for armed groups despite very different goals and levels of overtness. Yet these differences shape the risks that sponsors are willing to take, the consequences of sponsorship, and the reasons that sponsorship may come to an end.

In this paper we introduce a new theory to help explain this variation in *strategies* of external support. We argue that the offensive or defensive goals of state sponsors interact with their fears of escalation costs associated with sponsorship to shape the strategies through which they support armed groups. We identify four distinct strategies of external sponsorship: some sponsorship efforts are a low-cost, secretive effort at preserving the status quo, while others are highly ambitious, public efforts at fundamentally changing the politics of a neighboring state, and yet others blend aspects of these two extremes. These strategies of state sponsorship emerge from different combinations of sponsor goals and escalation fears.

We explore this argument with a unique medium-N study of Indian support and non-support for insurgents in South Asia. India, unlike its neighbor Pakistan, has received little attention for its links to insurgents. But using fieldwork, primary sources, and specialized secondary literature we uncover a rich landscape of links between New Delhi and armed

groups in the neighborhood. This research design examines variation by the same country, sometimes at the same time, introduces several cases that do not feature in existing datasets, and allows us to explore non-support cases. We show substantial support for our argument. There are, however, 'mis-predictions' between our theory and reality that we use to suggest new directions for research.

The paper has five sections. First, we introduce the literature and identify areas that demand more research. Second, we lay out our theory of strategies of external support, which explores the interaction between states' defensive or offensive goals with their concernsabout escalation costs. Third, we provide a medium-N overview of insurgent groups in India's neighborhood, code whether India supported them, and how it did so. Fourth, we compare Indian policy toward insurgent groups fighting the Burma/Myanmar state and toward Tamil militants fighting the Sri Lankan state. The paper concludes with implications for future research.

I. Research on State Sponsorship of Insurgents

This article identifies and explains variation in strategies of state sponsorship. In doing so, the article draws upon, but also departs from, a rich collection of valuable existing studies on the topic. The importance of state support for armed insurgent groups fighting outside that state's borders is widely accepted in work on civil wars (Salehyan 2009; Byman 2013; Byman et al. 2001). This literature can be divided into three broad categories. The first strand unpacks the causes of state support and sponsorship for insurgencies. The second strand, often drawing on principal-agent theory, builds on the first to offer group-level explanations for why specific insurgent groups, instead of entire conflicts, receive intervention. The third strand explores the politics of secrecy. We aim to pull together insights from across these distinct literatures

Why States Support Transnational Insurgents

Of the many domestic and external factors that lead a state to support insurgent groups beyond its borders, inter-state rivalry is most compelling (Grauer and Tierney 2018;

Byman 2005; Groh 2019). State support for insurgent groups allows relatively weaker states that are dissatisfied with the status quo to harass and weaken rivals (Maoz and San-Akca 2012; Bapat 2007; Carter 2012). A classic example of this is Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militants in Syria and Iraq, and factions of the Sunni Afghan Taliban (Ostovar 2019). Similarly, supporting insurgents is an attractive option for stronger states because it is cost-efficient and the risk of severe retaliation from a weaker adversary is low (Salehyan 2010). For bigger, hegemonic, powers seeking maintenance of status quo, supporting insurgents abroad helps obviate the rise of an adversary or a group of adversaries.

A substitute for high-cost wars, delegation of armed action to rebel groups allows scope for deniability and enables covert/overt messaging between states (Carson 2018; Salehyan 2009). The intensity of the inter-state strategic rivalry impacts the probability of state-sponsorship (Sozer 2016). The presence of ethnic kin in the target-state is an equally powerful motivation that can compel state-sponsorship, variation across time and space notwithstanding (Cederman et al. 2009; Cederman et al. 2007). The likelihood of conflict in state dyads with transnational ethnic links is high if there is unequal treatment of ethnic communities by the two states, or if members of a transnational ethnic alliance are politically mobilized in one of the states (Davis and Moore 1997, Cederman et al. 2009, 432; supplemental appendix III). The nature and character of state sponsorship to cross-border ethno-nationalist insurgencies is deeply linked to the domestic politics of the host state (Saideman 1997, 722).

Similarly, shared ideology or similar organizational characteristics between the state and insurgents can drive sponsorship (Byman et al. 2001; Sanin and Wood 2014). Akin to the role of cross-border ethnic links, the causal power of ideology to initiate state support may depend on the power balance among the actors (Haas and Yarhi-Milo, 2021). Powers caught in prolonged ideological and strategic rivalries, such as the Soviet Union and the US during the Cold War, India and Pakistan in South Asia, or Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East also assess the political value and ascribe (high or low) operational weight to rebel groups

depending on their own ideological visions and organizational cultures (Staniland 2015, Westad, 2005). Such state-sponsorship, whether ideologically driven or otherwise, risks reducing incentive for the insurgents to 'win hearts and minds' of civilians because of the former's lack of reliance on the latter for resources (Salehyan et al. 2014).

Sponsor-Insurgent Relations

The next strand of literature explores states' preferences for some groups over others, the insurgent's selection patterns of patrons, and how both sides develop leverage over each other have productively pushed scholarship towards group-specific explanations based on principal-agent dynamics (Hawkins et al. 2006, Boutton and Dolan, 2021). This strand of literature argues that state sponsorship is less likely when insurgent groups are too strong or too weak. It further argues that transnational (ethnic) linkage and interstate rivalries are enablers of such support in the first place (Salehyan et al. 2011; Saideman 2002; Ives 2019), and that the simultaneous heightening of internal and external threats increases the probability of a state sponsoring insurgents. Such sponsorship reduces the risk of war in a rivalry context, compared to open warfare, allowing optimisation of scarce resources that are better applied against domestic threats (San-Akca 2016, 150-2; Biberman 2019, 11-12). Lischer (2005) explores how these dynamics can influence the militarization of cross-national refugee populations.

In contrast, insurgents may prefer (outwardly) strong states and democracies when seeking external support. This is because the "institutional structures of democracies, and individual freedoms and liberties embedded in their foundation, make them vulnerable to exploitation by rebel groups" (San-Acka 2016, 152). Quantitative studies demonstrate that conflicts where counterinsurgents have outside support are more likely to generate external support for the insurgents as well (Salehyan et al. 2011). To make sense of these correlations it is important to note that the principal-agent relationship is neither static, nor a one-way affair where the principal wields total control over the agent. Both parties invariably give up certain degrees of autonomy when entering a relationship, which often causes friction

(Byman and Kreps 2010, 6-9; Thaler 2021; appendix IV).

Politics of Secrecy

The third strand explains why states pursue secrecy in their foreign policies (Gibbs 1995; Carnegie and Carson, 2020; Downes & Lilley, 2010). Among other factors, it argues that cost considerations, domestic politics, and escalation risks can shape state decisions on covert action (Carson, 2018, 14-15). If the risk of escalation is high, both the intervening and the target states are likely to prioritise escalation control. Covert action offers the option to de-escalate (Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 2017), and helps reducing domestic audience costs (Saunders, 2009; Schultz, 2001; Fearon, 1994). In contrast, lower risk of escalation can trigger limited or large overt interventions. Similarly, covert action is cost effective relative to overt interventions (O'Rourke, 2018, 8-9). Even if the chance of success using covert means is low (Cormac, Walton, van Puyvelde, 2021), the accruing costs of overt military interventions makes it less attractive (O'Rourke, 2018, 8-9).

This literature agrees that covert action is unsustainable on a large scale given the likelihood of exposure. For an operation to remain secret, it must in some way be limited in scope (Treverton, 1987). Such exposure risks undermining attempts at plausible deniability, even if it serves the purpose of inter-state signaling (Poznansky, 2020a). Pakistan's covert support for the Taliban since 2001, which led to the collapse of the US-led government in Kabul, fits this category. Officially, Islamabad did not support the Taliban. But unofficially, it revived the Taliban after its military ouster in 2001 after the 9/11 attacks (Gall, 2014, 4-8; Fair 2014, 103-135). Overt intervention, in contrast, is unfettered by the logistics of secrecy and affords more latitude for military and diplomatic action.

Other works argue that international law and credibility costs, instead of financial and other material costs, better explains use of covert action (Poznansky, 2020b, 4-6). Lack of publicity helps intervening state retain credibility as an abider of international norms and treaty obligations among both domestic and international audiences (Ibid, 4). But such an explanation depends on the regime type and the intervening state's view of the existing world

order. It may work for developed democracies that benefit from existing international rules but is unlikely to hold for autocracies or revisionist states (Smith, 2019, 685-707).

This article is in dialogue with all these strands of literature. But we scope the argument below to the specific case of strategies of state sponsorship, which limits the context on both the intent and nature of support. As such, we do not seek to offer a general argument about covert support writ large, such as backing coups or assassinating foreign leaders. Instead, state sponsorship, whether overt or covert, is distinctive in its aim, execution, and logistical needs. This limits the domain of the study, avoiding a need to offer sweeping theoretical claims across heterogeneous empirical phenomena. At the same time, state sponsorship is common and important in world politics, so this limiting of the project still grapples with a major topic. As we discuss more below, the article also departs from empirical reliance on the US that informs an overwhelming amount of theory-building on the topic (O'Rourke, 2018; Poznansky, 2020; Carson 2018).

II. Theorizing Strategies of External Support

We argue that the offensive/defensive goals of states and their fears of escalation arising from sponsorship influence the strategy of the support that sponsors provide. Table 1 summarizes the argument about the causes of different strategies of state sponsorship, with empirical examples of each type. None of the examples are drawn from our work on India, suggesting broader applicability of the framework: these strategies and the mechanisms leading to them can be found in a wide array of cases.

Our argument rests on the balancing act that sponsoring governments must pursue between their ambitions, on the one hand, and the likelihood that pursuing these goals will trigger a set of escalatory risks that could prove excessively costly, on the other. We argue that we should expect more offensively ambitious goals to generate greater overtness as a general starting point, but that this can sometimes be overcome by the escalatory risk that a government faces. This combination of variables generates differing strategies of sponsorship as states try to achieve their goals without opening themselves up to excessive

risk.

We conceptualize four distinct strategies of support: covert revisionism, overt revisionism, covert deterrence, and overt deterrence. We use the terms deterrence and revisionism to indicate the defensive and offensive intent of the sponsoring state – does it seek to substantially shift the status quo, or to prevent adverse shifts in the status quo? These strategies can differ in their publicity, goals, and the scale and specific type of aid that is provided by the sponsor. While these are simplifying ideal types, we show that they can be measured and compared across and within cases.

Table 1. Types of State Support

	High Escalation Fears	Low Escalation Fears
Offensive Goals - Revisionist territorial position - Assessment that domestic politics of neighbor need fundamental change to be secure	**Covert Revisionism** Plausible denial backing for offensive groups, but with limited extent and scope of support; formal deniability even if an 'open secret' *Pakistan & Lashkar-e-Taiba*	**Overt Revisionism** Unconcealed backing for groups launching offensive military operations; high levels of military support for offensive operations *China & Communist Party of Burma*
Defensive Goals	**Covert Deterrence**	**Overt Deterrence**
- Status quo territorial Position - Assessment that domestic politics of neighbor do not need fundamental change to be secure	Plausibly denial backing for groups operating along borders with limited aims; limited material supports compatible with low ambitions and secrecy *Thailand & Khmer Rouge*	Open backing for groups operating along borders with limited aims; little effort at denial; substantial support *Thailand & Karen National Union*

Offensive and Defensive Goals

We begin by distinguishing between offensive and defensive goals. Undoubtedly governments often pursue a blend of these objectives, but a simple dichotomy is a useful analytical starting point. In the subsequent section we will then explore when and how the strategies associated with these goals can become complicated by concerns over escalation risks. *Defensive* support seeks to prevent a negative shift in the political-military status quo by backing insurgent groups whose primary goal is within a different state. Such defensive goals might include building a buffer zone or trying to maintain influence in border areas. The goal is not to impose a major shift in behavior on the part of the counterinsurgent state

being contested, but instead to limit its reach and forestall future adverse shifts in power without pursuing regime change or major changes in the territorial balance of control. To return to an example that opened this paper, Thailand's support for the Khmer Rouge after their retreat inthe face of the 1979 Vietnamese invasion was mainly intended to hold the Vietnamese and their Cambodian allies at bay and to build a buffer zone along the border (Buszynski 1994; Mertha 2014; Lee 2020). This was a limited aims strategy.

Offensive support is more ambitious – it seeks to coerce a target government, compelling it to change policy behavior or even to overthrow it (Bapat 2012, O'Rourke 2018). China's support for the Communist Party of Burma at the height of the Cultural Revolution is an example of external backing with this aim: huge inflows of conventional weaponry, extensive monetary support, and a massively porous border afforded the CPB sanctuary, recruits, fighting power, and ideological succor with the explicit goal of a communist takeover of Burma (Lintner 1990).

Measuring state goals as offensive/defensive *ex ante* is obviously challenging, and in some cases, there are mixed motives. In general, however, we believe that two observable variables can be measured distinct from, and prior to, actual sponsorship decisions. First, a sponsor which has revisionist interests in a territorial dispute is likely to be interested in some form of offensive goals, seeking to coerce a change in the status quo in its favor. Such disputes tend to be visible and long-standing since territorial conflict is one of the most important causes ofinterstate conflict. The Iran-Iraq rivalry of the 1970s-2003 had this characteristic and involved both states often seeking to sponsor militant groups on the other's soil (though with important variation over time).

Second, a state is likely to have offensive goals when it assesses that its security interests can only be protected by a major shift within a neighboring regime's *domestic* politics (O'Rourke 2018). American, Turkish, Saudi, and Qatari backing for anti-Assad rebels in the early yearsof the Syrian civil war would be an example of such a revisionist strategy: all believed for at least a period of time that Assad must go, whether through direct overthrow

or a reshuffle within the ruling elite, and thus supported ambitious rebels.

By contrast, defensive goals should be associated with states that have status quo territorial goals and/or that do not view changing the domestic politics of a neighboring state as crucial to security policy. For instance, Thai support for groups like the Karen National Union during the Cold War was aimed at keeping both Burmese forces and Communism away from the Thai-Burmese border, rather than seeking to topple the Burmese military. The Malayan position in the *Konfrontasi* with Sukarno's Indonesia was similarly aimed at maintaining the status quo, and thus avoided highly ambitious efforts to build up robust insurgent groups operating inside Indonesia.

Such goals can change in either direction. Miscalculating the target state's capabilities and intent to defend, and then being forced to recalibrate, is a common mechanism for change. Shifts in domestic regimes and international political contexts can also alter state goals. We look for evidence of variation over time in either the nature of international territorial disputes or assessments of other states' domestic politics as a starting point for measuring change.

How do goals map onto secrecy? There are obviously several possible relationships between the two. However, we argue that, as a broad starting point, offensive goals should be more likely to involve higher levels of publicity. There are two reasons for this. The primary one is functional: offensive support tends to be more logistically involved and includes serious military resources and exhaustive training as part of militarily-demanding operations. In contrast, defensive operations tend to be more limited, with sanctuary and a low-level supply of guns, training, and/or money being sufficient to achievethe goals.

This argument faces an important objection - can we distinguish defensive/offensive aims from the difference between strategic and tactical goals? We contend that the distinctions between offensive and defensive goals, overt and covert means, and the inter-related aspect of strategy and tactics, are broadly distinguishable, both conceptually and empirically. The revisionist versus status quo distinction is one that has long been used in international relations literature (Schweller 1994), and is related to the desire to either

modify the status quo to one's benefit as opposed to preventing adverse shifts in the status quo. O'Rourke (2018, pp. 4-5) adopts a broadly similar approach in her study of covert regime change operations. By contrast, the strategic and tactical levels of war (as well as the operational) are distinguished by their level of analysis and scale, not their relationship with the status quo – military offensives involve both tactics and strategy, as do military defensive operations. Different goals are not reducible to the difference between tactics and strategies.

Escalation Risks and Strategic Choice

These goals provide a starting point for explaining the overtness or covertness of the support provided. However, escalation risks can vary in important ways that complicate our analytical starting point (Gleditsch et al. 2008, Butt 2017), and can lead to "off-diagonal" overt defensive and covert revisionist strategies. By escalation risks we refer to undesirable externally-imposed costs, of a variety of sorts, that could result from external support.

Such escalation risks can most directly involve a weaker sponsoring state worried about conventional military retaliation from an external target state. This is not the only form of escalation risk, however (Lee 2020, 55-56). Backing cross-border militancy can run afoul of international norms and sanctions around terrorism, raise domestic questions about a sponsor's behavior, and generate a reputation for destabilization, all of which can generate potential, escalating costs beyond direct retaliation by the target state. These can attenuate the simple relationship between the ambition of goals and the overtness of external support. Conventionally weaker states are likely to be especially concerned about retaliation, but so too could be governments that vulnerable to sanctions, dependent on external allies who would disapprove of sponsorship, concerned about domestic opposition to sponsorship, or that are trying to cultivate a reputation for "responsible" behavior that would be endangered by publicity around sponsorship. Below we weave together these two variables to explain how they can generate strategies of support.

We start with the simplest case in which a state is concerned about escalation risks

and has defensive goals. Such sponsoring states should try to keep these relatively secretive in a *covert deterrence* strategy. The target government may know about the intervention, and thus a deterrent signal can still be sent, butthe limited goals of the supporting state mean that there is little reason to attracting further international opprobrium, domestic criticism, or increased pressure on the targeted government by pursuing overt, declared support. The costs of publicity –whether in terms of escalation risk, hands-tying, or potential loss of credibility– are not necessary to absorb since the ambitions of a defensive intervention are low. Moreover, since defensive support tends tobe comparatively simple in military/logistical terms, keeping an insurgent alive to destabilizea border zone or act as leverage against a neighbor may be low-cost. This strategy aligns withthe conventional approach to transnational support in the field: support for rebels "is often difficult to gauge since it may be conducted in relative secrecy and governments may have anincentive to hide acts of foreign aggression from international as well as domestic audiences"(Salehyan et al. 2011, 713).

Yet there may be rarer conditions under which defensive operations are pursued publicly, despite the costs involved. One simple exception is when the support cannot be hidden; a well-known rebel leader or army fleeing into a democratic state would be hard to suppress. More politically important are situations in which a supporting state is not concerned about escalation risks. This can occur when the supporter is the stronger neighbor in a dyad, backed by its own powerful patron, or domestically invulnerable to external pressure, and so there is little need to hide its activities. Here the costs of publicity are limited, and there may be benefits, whether operational or political, leading to less-common cases of *overt deterrence*.

Offensive operations are different. Coercion is very difficult, both operationally and politically. Military support and aid on the scale necessary to support offensive operations may be impossible to hide. Furthermore, the supporting state may have political reasons to openly proclaim support: it signals resolve, makes clear just how committed to the objective the supporting state is, and may be used to try to coordinate with other states to support the

favored client armed group. Given the difficulty of coercion and the logistical-military challenges of revisionist support for armed insurgents, *overt revisionism* emerges as a state strategy. In agreement with emerging literature on covert action (Carson 2018) we suggest that publicity is integral to strategies of support under some political circumstances.

Yet there are still potential costs of overtness even in situations where a state is pursuing an offensive goal. These costs should be most worrisome when there would be serious escalatory costs of overt, acknowledged support that would put the supporting state in an untenable geopolitical situation (Schultz 2010). In these cases, offensive support may be pursued covertly. This limits escalation risks, even as it also likely limits the effectiveness of the aid (Carson 2018, 44-7). This is the inverse of the case of overt deterrence. Here a weaker player pursues *covert revisionism* as a strategy of external support, trying to balance coercive support for an armed group with formal deniability.

The US ran into this problem in Syria. During periods of the anti-Assad revolt, it backed a set of rebel groups but was unwilling to commit to them publicly and unconditionally for fear of getting sucked into an escalating proxy war (Krieg 2016). Similarly, Pakistani support for anti-Indian militants has been pursued amidst denials, cultivated ambiguity, and efforts to limit journalists' access to staging areas in Pakistani Kashmir. Even if everyone believes that Pakistan is aiding the militants, formal deniability has remained a high priority to limit retaliation (Fair 2014, 238-50). Therefore, while we expect to see publicity broadly follow state goals for intervention, escalation fears can complicate a simple relationship between goals and strategies of state support.

Avoiding Tautology

An important issue at this point is the risk of tautology. Is it possible to distinguish the outcome from the causal variables? We can in fact see misfires. For instance, a country that we code as being status quo-oriented may nevertheless pursue covert revisionist policies in which we see highly visible, large-scale military support for offensive operations pursuing regime change. Such mispredictions are particularly likely when there are not armed

groups that are willing and able to pursue a sponsor's goals. This could occur if the only group available to a state sponsor is powerful and autonomous enough to pursue its own goals, forcing the sponsor to follow its lead rather than vice versa. For instance, there have been allegations that Russia and Iran have provided some degree of support to the Taliban (Giustozzi 2021). Despite both primarily having defensive interests in Afghanistan, the dominant armed groupavailable was the highly revisionist Taliban, and so lowest-common-denominator alignments emerged.

Conversely, there may not be groups available that can pursue an offensive revisionist strategy. The introduction of this paper used the 1989 Jalalabad offensive as an example of such a strategy. But the offensive failed, and Pakistan was forced to muddy along for the next three years with underachieving proxies unable to achieve its goals (until the Taliban's emergence in 1994). The success or failure of support strategies, then, is determined by the specifics of patron-client relationship. It is also possible that support is covert in some domains (military, finance, and logistics) and overt in others (political, diplomatic, and moral). Pakistan's support for Kashmiri militants has such dual characteristics (Fair, 2014, 154-173). In such instances, our typology focuses on military, financial, and logistical support that enables an insurgent outfit. Political, diplomatic, and moral support, though important, may not energize violent insurgencies.

Can the nature, intent, and implications of state sponsorship be empirically observed? If support is overt, the challenge is usually not severe. The scale of support, type of insurgents being supported (i.e., those limited in political and territorial aims, or those seeking to overthrow the target state), and political signaling by the sponsor to domestic and international audiences will help observe whether the aim is offensive or defensive.

Covert support raises methodological difficulties, but these are surmountable. As elaborated in the data, sources, and inference section below, historical case studies of ebbing or resolved conflicts are easier to study. Relevant actors in such cases are either willing to divulge details in personal memoirs, or have enough emotional, temporal, and political

distance to declassify documents. Such sources help with process-tracing and triangulation, while enabling juxtaposition of publicly reported events with behind-the-scenes dynamics.

Even for recent or ongoing conflicts, one or more involved parties might leak information—selectively or wholesale—to expose the external sponsor, insurgents, or both. There are undoubtedly limits to information on covert operations and this raises legitimate concerns about 'missing-ness', making support intent and implications inscrutable or unspecified. When encountering such cases empirically, we are transparent about the lack of data and code these cases as 'low confidence' below.

Alternative Explanations

An obvious alternative explanation is that variation in support is a function of patron-client relations. If the political and military goals of the patron and client don't align, then limited covert support becomes attractive as opposed to large overt support. This is especially true if the insurgents are serial human rights offenders, subscribe to extreme politics, or indulge in mindless sectarian or mass violence, and the sponsor is wary of being associated with such groups for reasons of credibility. There is merit in this argument, as is visible in the mis-predictions above. But this explanation is insufficient to explain onset of support regardless of its intent and nature. The sponsor *needs* a political or military objective in relation to another *state* before it can determine the purpose and method of support. The patron-client relationship is pivotal in shaping the nature of support, but not its intent.

Other explanations based on domestic politics of the sponsoring state, its regime-type (democratic or authoritarian) and associated credibility concerns among internal and external audiences, and costs considerations —all considered in existing literature— offer insights into state behavior. But none of these explanations, in themselves, shed light on the interaction between the nature and intent of such support, and its impact on support strategies. They particularly struggle to explain within-country variation, which often holds constant regime and domestic-political variables.

III. Research Design and Data

We explore the plausibility of our argument with detailed comparative evidence from Indian policy toward insurgents in its region. While Pakistan has, understandably, received far more attention for its extensive support for armed groups, India is in some ways a more valuable setting for comparative research: surrounded by numerous insurgencies, it has avoided support in a variety of cases, and when it has engaged in support, this has been for multiple reasons and occurred in multiple ways. By studying the same country, we can hold constant a variety of broad structural variables, allowing us to focus more intently on the strategic goals and escalation fears variables of our theory. Such a design has obvious limits: it cannot falsify existing arguments or provide unambiguous "silver bullet' inferential evidence. The benefits of our choice include carefully exploiting variation within a shared setting, bringing new evidence to bear in a comparative framework, and measuring our independent variables and dependent variable in a detailed way.

The research has two layers. First, we construct and analyze a novel medium-N dataset of Indian relationships with a set of insurgent groups in the region. We explore which groups India did and did not support. Then we disaggregate cases of support to see whether our argument helps understand the forms that support took. Second, we examine two detailed case studies ofIndian policies toward cross-border insurgents in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, using these comparisons to measure variables and processes in a more fine-grained way. The medium-N comparison allows us to explore initial sources of support, the distribution of strategies, and the extent to which our theory broadly seems to correlate with actual outcomes (Lieberman 2005). Crucially, it allows us to transparently identify mis-predictions. The small-N work then moves to a process-tracing approach to explore whether there is evidence of our mechanisms (George and Bennett 2005).

We identify twenty-eight contexts in which New Delhi decided for or against supporting insurgents fighting neighbouring governments. This is a simplification of a larger number of groups – in some, we lump very similar groups together to avoid massively expanding the number of cases without gaining inferential leverage. This is mainly an issue in examining categories of groups that India did not support. We identify six cases of covert

deterrence, five cases of covert revisionism, one case of overt deterrence, and eight cases of overt revisionism. Defensive forms of external support were only truly overt in one case, that of Indian support for Tibetans in the late 1950s. There were cases of covert revisionism, and slightly more of overt revisionism.

We identify the existence of support, which strategy from our typology fits it most closely, and whether that type matches our theoretical expectations. The category of "confidence" assesses the availability of confirmable data for each case. High confidence implies that there is triangulated information confirming India's engagement with, avoidance of, or enmity with the mentioned group. Conversely, low confidence means that while there are prima facie indications of Indian support (or not) to the rebel group, the limited information at hand cannot be credibly determined. All the cases of overt revisionism and deterrence are high confidence, while two of the ten covert cases are low confidence (both involving alleged Indian support for armed groups in Pakistan). Our analysis focuses on cases of high confidence.

Table 2. Indian Support for Insurgents in Comparative Perspective

Target	Group	Support	Timing	State Goal	Secrecy	Termination	Confidence
Pakistan (East)	Mukti Bahini & Mujib Bahini	Yes	1971-72	Offensive	Overt	Goals achieved	High
Bangladesh	*Shanti Bahini/PCJSS	Yes	1975-77; 1980-97	Defensive	Covert	Goals achieved	High
Bangladesh	*Awami League	Yes	1975-81	Defensive	Covert	Goals achieved	High
Bangladesh	Banga Sena & Bir Banga Sena	Yes	~1997-~2000s	Defensive	Covert	State-to-State Rapprochement	Low
Myanmar	CNF	Yes	1988-1994	Defensive	Covert	State-to-State Rapprochement	High
Myanmar	NUPA/ AA1.0*	Yes	1994-98	Defensive	Covert	State-to-State Rapprochement	High
Myanmar	ABSDF*	Yes	1988-94	Offensive	Overt	State-to-State Rapprochement	High
Myanmar	*KIO/KIA	Yes	1989-94	Defensive	Covert	State-to-State Rapprochement &	High

Country	Group		Years				
						Ceasefire Agreement Signed	
Myanmar	*Communist Party of Burma	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High
Myanmar	*NSCN-K	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High
Myanmar	Other groups: *Karen, *Mon, *Shan, *Karenni, *Wa, and the *Ta'ang *Rakhine	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High
Nepal	National Congress	Yes	1960-62	Offensive	Overt	Group abandons violence	High
Nepal	*CPN-Maoist	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High
Sri Lanka	*JVP (I)	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High
Sri Lanka	*JVP (II)	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High
Sri Lanka	*LTTE	Yes	1983-87	Offensive	Overt	Breakdown in P-A relations	High
Sri Lanka	PLOTE	Yes	1983-88	Offensive	Overt	Military Marginalization	High
Sri Lanka	*EPRLF	Yes	1983-90	Offensive	Overt	Military Marginalization	High
Sri Lanka	*TELO	Yes	1983-90	Offensive	Overt	Military Marginalization	High
Sri Lanka	EROS	Yes	1983-87	Offensive	Overt	Divergence	High
Pakistan	*TTP	Yes	2007-14	Offensive	Covert	Military Marginalization	Low
Pakistan	*Baloch and *Pashtun rebels (I)	Yes	1972-74	Offensive	Covert	Military Marginalization	High
Pakistan	*Baloch rebels (II)	Yes	~2014	Offensive	Covert	Ongoing	High
Pakistan	*MQM	Yes		Offensive	Covert	Ongoing	Low
Pakistan	Other Jihadists (*LeT, HuM, *JeM, SSP, ASWJ, etc)	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High
China	Tibetan rebels	Yes	1959	Defensive	Overt	Deterred	High
Afghanistan	Northern Alliance	Yes	1994-2001	Offensive	Covert	Shift in context	High
Afghanistan	*Afghan Taliban	No	N/A	N/A	None	N/A	High

Note: Refer to supplemental appendix I for more details on this table. *These cases are listed in the UCDP dataset.

Sources and Data

Multiple primary and secondary sources inform this study. Official Indian archives that shed light on such support are at the top of the 'credibility' hierarchy. They are coupled with private papers political leaders, spies, and insurgents. Not meant for public consumption, such documents offer an insider's view of events. The Government of India has declassified many reports from the intelligence bureau, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Research &

Analysis Wing (R&AW), and the Cabinet Secretariat. These documents throw light on India's internal conflicts and approach towards neighbours.

Listed in the supplemental appendix, these documents helped creating Table 2. They are available at the National Archives of India in New Delhi, and some have been digitised. These official archives are enhanced by the private papers of former officials available at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. These documents are supplemented by unpublished diaries, minutes-of-meetings, and archives of insurgent organisations who received covert or overt Indian support. Diaries of senior Kachin Independence Organisation leaders, for example, help construct a fuller pictureof India's support for the KIO. Similarly, India's sponsorship of multiple Sri Lankan Tamil separatists during the 1980s is confirmed by sources on both sides.

Such material is cemented by a series of interviews with retired Indian officials, insurgent leaders, and officials from target states. Some such interviews were conducted off-the-record, and some on-the-record during 2016-2020. But the political situation in India and Myanmar (for which interview material is used in this article) is such that identities of these individuals cannot be divulged. The Indian government recently issued a draconian order preventing retired bureaucrats, especially from the security sector, to express their views in public. In Myanmar the situation is worse since the February 2021 coup. Specialist secondary literature by journalists and academics as well as multi-sourced newspaper reportage add further contextual value to these sources.

Information on covert operations, despite multiplicity of sources, may not be complete or accurate. To address this issue of missing-ness and the analytical biases that it may create, we adopted rigorous triangulation mechanisms, or inference methodology, to develop Table 2 and our case studies. This is relatively easy when support is overt. For covert support, we assessed whether all/most involved actors i.e., the sponsor, the insurgent, and the target state offer similar reading of conflict dynamics. In the case of India'ssupport for Sri Lankan Tamil separatists, for example, there is consensus between New Delhi, former insurgents, and

Colombo, that India did offer considerable covert support. Suchcases are coded as 'high' confidence in Table 2.

When there is disagreement over the occurrence or scale of support among involved actors, we observe overt signals and observable military and political trends to determine whether covert support was offered or not, and if it was, then to what extent and purpose. Pakistan's support for the Taliban, for example, remains un-acknowledged by Islamabad, even though there is ample evidence to suggest that it occurred. We are transparentabout difficult to observe cases and code them as "low confidence."

IV. Comparative Evidence from India

An initial finding is that India has largely avoided backing communist or most Islamist insurgent groups in the region. The Communist Party of Burma, both JVP revolts in Sri Lanka, and CPN-Maoist in Nepal, for instance, did not receive Indian backing. There are suggestive claims of Indian backing to the Pakistani Taliban, but we code this with low confidence. In general, and unsurprisingly, India has a hostile relationship with most ideological Islamist groups. There is far more evidence of Indian willingness to support separatist and autonomy-seeking groups in the region. This provides a baseline assessment of which groups India has backed. This leads to the more specific question of this paper: through what strategy is this support provided?

Patterns of Support

From the nineteen cases where India did support rebels, the overt revisionist and covert deterrence strategies support our theory linking secrecy to the offensive/defensive aims of an intervention. More complex are the covert revisionist and overt deterrence cases. We do not find support for our argument in two cases: Indian backing for the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) (re: Myanmar) and Tibetan rebels (re: China). We return to them in the conclusion when identifying future research directions.

Covert deterrence is exemplified by India's support to dissidents in Bangladesh and Myanmar: efforts to manage unstable border areas without seeking regime changes. In

Bangladesh, India covertly supported the Shanti Bahini, which was the armed wing of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), a political organization that was formed in 1972 to represent the Chakma communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). From August 1975, India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), offered military and political support to the PCJSS-Shanti Bahini to stem the flow of Chakma refugees into India. The goal was to pressure Bangladesh to stop the persecution against Chakmas, and to curb support for (and actively target) Mizo insurgents fighting India (Bhaumik 1996, 245-309; Prakash 2008, 552-5). As we would expect given the defensive nature of its support, India urged the PCJSS- Shanti Bahini to accept an autonomy package that Dhaka offered throughout the 1980s. It reduced support after the end of the Mizo insurgency in 1986. It was important for India to keep the support officially covert even though it was known to all parties that R&AW was supporting the Shanti Bahini (Hazarika 1989).

In Myanmar, India offered covert support to the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the Chin National Front (CNF), and the Arakan Army (AA) that was part of the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA). In all these instances, there is a link between India's defensive intent and covertness: anti-India insurgents operated out of Bangladesh and Myanmar, the border areas were porous, and India had no major territorial ambitions. Though Myanmar and Bangladesh knew that India was offering some support to these rebels, it was clear that this was not meant to overhaul the status quo. It was instead a quid-pro-quo for Bangladesh and Myanmar to stop hosting anti-India rebels on their soil.

Overt deterrence and covert revisionism are less straightforward. Overt deterrence was found in India's support for Tibetan exiles against China. This is a complicated case because overt support to the Dalai Lama in 1959 invited an equally overt military response by China in 1962, leading to India's humiliating defeat. New Delhi continued to host the Tibetan government-in-exile but its training of the Tibetan Khampa rebels in Mustang, Nepal, along with the CIA went covert (Conboy and Morrison 2011, 145-163). After the defeat of 1962, India created Establishment-22, a group of Tibetan fighters secretly trained by the Indian

intelligence and army to undertake covert operations inside China (Ibid, 176-187). In words of India's spymaster Kao, these units were to operate "as a clandestine resistance organisation, if the Chinese attacked again, and meantime, to counteract any espionage and subversive activities" (Haksar Papers, PMO, 1972, p.22). This force eventually transformed into the Special Service Bureau (SSB) and the Special Frontier Force (SFF), and became a central, if semi-official, part of India's military formations.

Still a covert unit, the SFF is commanded by an officer from the Indian army's paratroopers, and its commandoes are trained using the rhetoric of 'Free Tibet' (Interview 1). This army officer reports to the civilian chief of R&AW and not to the military leadership. The SFF has been used in theatres other than China, and its role in setting the stage for the 1971 military invasion of East Pakistan is well documented (Yadav 2014, 240-1). More recently, in August 2020, it was deployed to counter China during the ongoing military standoff in Ladakh. Unlike previous instances where its role was kept secret, New Delhi publicly acknowledged the SFF in helping the Indian army capture tactically important territory in Pangong-Tso.

If the SFF remains a covert offensive unit, why categorize India's support to the Tibetans as overt and defensive? There are two reasons for this. One, given India's public support for the Tibetans, the element of secrecy is limited to operational aspects. Despite official deniability of the SFF, its existence is publicly known. On balance, this case tilts more towards overtness on the overt-covert spectrum despite elements of operational secrecy. Two, India was effectively deterred from utilizing the SFF against China without US guarantees in the preceding years, and especially in the 1970s after the Sino-US rapprochement. Then, the only alignment that the SFF holds today vis-à-vis India's relations with China is defensive in nature.

Overt revisionism can be found in India's support to the Nepali Congress in the early 1960s, to the Sri Lankan Tamils after 1983, and the Bengali nationalists of East Pakistan from 1969 onwards (Narayan 1970, 94-5). In all these cases, New Delhi was determined to alter the ground realities in keeping with its own worldview and national security concerns.

The desire to compel Colombo into better accommodating the identity and interests of Tamil

minorities, and to create a situation for East Pakistani refugees to return required decisive military interventions.

There is some complexity caused by change over time. India began on the covert end of the spectrum in its support for the Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka and Bengali separatists in East Pakistan (Gunaratna 1993; Raghavan 2013). But it quickly shifted to overt domain and followed them up with conventional military interventions in 1971 Bangladesh and 1987 Sri Lanka. In contrast to the Tibetan case where India moved from overt to (quasi) covert support, these cases move from covertness to highly overt support.

This pattern underlines the importance of risks and costs of escalation. Unlike China, against whom India refused to deploy the Tibetan rebels, it did not shy away from doing so with the much-weaker Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and East Pakistan. In these latter cases, India was confident of using sponsorship without heavy costs and escalation fears were seen to be much lower (a miscalculation when it came to relations with the LTTE in Sri Lanka).

The fourth pattern of covert revisionism is witnessed vis-à-vis Pakistan and Afghanistan. India's support for Baloch insurgents and the 1990s anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan are acknowledged as 'open secrets', though they are formally covert operations (Paliwal 2017; Shah 1998; Jones 2015). India offered supportedfor dual reasons: to compel Pakistan into curbing its support for anti-India groups, and to inflict costs on Islamabad as part of a deep-rooted rivalry. Among our low-confidence cases,of some sort of Indian backing for the the Karachi-centric MQM and the TTP, both would fitin this category of strategy.

The decision to keep support covert, or at least officially deniable, in this context is rooted in two aspects. One, overt support is likely to escalate conflict between two nuclear armed rivals. Two, there would be international diplomatic costs for India if it was seen as openly supporting anti-Pakistan groups. India has enjoyed the image of not being an aggressor vis-à-vis Pakistan and used this as a crucial part of its narrative against Pakistan.

While we cannot do detailed case studies on each of these cases in this paper, the

pattern aligns with the basic claims of our argument. In different strategic situations, India has adopted radically different strategies. Covert revisionism has been primarily aimed at Pakistan and Afghanistan in recent decades. Overt revisionism has been a tool used against weaker regimes to create serious political changes, including Sri Lanka, Nepal, and 1971 Pakistan. Covert deterrence has been a counterinsurgency strategy, a tool for extracting concessions from neighboring states, and a strategy for building buffers on unstable borders.

IV. Comparative Cases: Indian Policy toward Myanmar and Sri Lanka

This section compares India's support for rebels targeting Myanmar and Sri Lanka. We explored broad differences in escalation fears above. Here we focus on differences in India's goals (defensive/offensive), even as they occurred in a broadly similar time and involved several overlapping Indian security organizations. They ended up taking wildly different trajectories despite these similarities.

Myanmar

Numerous armed insurgencies have existed in Myanmar since 1948. Of these, India has at one point or another, supported the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the Chin National Front (CNF), the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), and the ABSDF. Focused on ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) that operated along its border and linked to insurgents in Northeast India, Delhi has avoided support to other groups from the Ta'ang, Karen, Shan, Pao, Wa, Karenni, and Mon communities, even though R&AW developed covert contacts with most of them (Interviews 2 & 3). This case focuses on the KIO, which was the most powerful of the four EAOs mentioned above.

Defensive in nature, Indian support for the KIO generated useful intelligence on the illicit drug and arms routes of Northeastern rebels. It disincentivized the group from supporting India-centric insurgents and denied the latter space for military maneuver. On India's behest, the KIO also prevented the entry of Assamese and Naga insurgents into Myanmar's rebel coalition, the National Democratic Front, and the Democratic Alliance of Burma in late-1980s (Bhaumik 2006, 175). It further generated intelligence on China's

activitiesin Myanmar (Lintner 2015, 204-10; Smith 1991, 404-5).

We code Indian strategy as covert deterrence: New Delhi wanted to secure its Northeast by denying militants access to Myanmar and China. Support to the EAOs would help towards this end, as the Burmese military had failed to adequately act on the issue because of lack of intent and limited capabilities (Interview 5). Operations were carried out covertly and this support was later phased out amidst a state-to-state rapprochement and a 1994 KIO ceasefire the Myanmar junta.

Support Onset

Active in the Kachin and Shan states of Myanmar, KIO was established in 1960 and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), in 1961 (Sadan 2013). The KIA has traditionally supported Northeastern rebels (Interview 6). In its pursuit for foreign assistance, the KIA made multiple attempts in 1964-65 to seek Indian support but were rebuffed each time (Nanda Papers, JIC, 1966). China offered support (along with the CPB) in 1966 (Interview 6).

In 1983, when the KIO sent Gauri Zau Seng –a staff officer part of the 1965 outreach team and future Vice Chairman of KIO and a Lieutenant General in the KIA– as its representative to Chiang Mai, he reached out to the Indian R&AW-operated consulate (Ibid; Interview 7). For the next five years, Gauri Zau Seng and the Indian consul Rajinder Khanna developed a friendship "for the purpose of sharing information", even if support was limited (Interview 6).

Indian support to KIO emerged in 1988 after the outbreak of the democracy movement and New Delhi's heightened troubles in its Northeast, when KIO Chairman Maran Brang Seng visited Bangkok and met with the R&AW Chief-of-Station B B Nandy (Ibid). In December 1988, Brang Seng made his first of many visits to New Delhi, meeting with figures and securing Indian support. In 1990, the KIO was allowed to open an office in New Delhi and was promised arms, money, and political support. Keen to get university education and political training for its cadre in India, the KIO sent a batch of six officers in 1990 to

New Delhi (Kai Ma, 263; Interview 8). Soon after, India dropped between "700-900 assault rifles, light machine guns, carbines, grenades", assorted ammunition and daily ration for KIO (Bhaumik 2006, 175; Interview 6). Closely supporting these activities was a Burma-born Indian military intelligence officer Lt. Col. V S Grewal, who ensured that the arms were securely delivered to the right party at the right time (Ibid; Interview 6).

India's only request from Brang Seng was to stop supporting anti-India rebels (Interview 6; Kai Ma, 263-70; Lintner 2015, 204-8). Insurgent violence in Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur had heightened tremendously in 1990. For this reason, India deepened relations with the KIO during January 1990-91. In July 1990, the KIO announced an end to its decades-long relationship with the NSCN-IM (and a shorter one with ULFA) by halting training to their cadres and – "with a heavy heart" – asking them to leave (Kai Ma, 263). Though the Nagas quickly left, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) "was the last to leave in October 1990" (Kai Ma, 263). Enabled by KIO's denial of access and support to these rebels, in November 1990, the Indian army launched Operation *Bajrang* to target ULFA(Ahmed 1991).

Such was the value of KIO's support for India that Brang Seng was offered a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar on January 27, 1991 (Kai Mai, 270-2). Chandra Shekhar offered more support to Brang Seng and allowed the entire Democratic Alliance of Burma to open a liaison office in New Delhi (Ibid, 272). In February 1991, Brang Seng informed R&AW about KIO's intent to use India-supplied weapons for Operation *Zaibru Masing* (Operation Sand), wherein they intended to target two Burmese military outposts near the India border (Ibid). Even if India was averse to the use of these weapons (of Chinese or other makes) against the *Tatmadaw,* it did not stop short of delivering them. Nandy's response to Brang Seng was simply "it will take some time" (Ibid; Bhaumik 2006,175).

On September 15, 1991, India launched Operation *Rhino* in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh against ULFA. The KIO blocked ULFA's escape routes to China and did not allow its cadre to seek shelter in KIO-dominated territory. As quid-pro-quo, on January 04, 1992,

India promised to supply 6,000 "used arms" (Kai Ma, 289). These weapons were lifted from Calcutta's Dumdum Airport and subsequently helidropped at the KIO's camp. Brang Seng paid US$12,000 to the Government of India for the use of its helicopters. It launched the Operation *Zaibru Masing* as planned (Ibid).

Alternative explanations such as the nature of patron-client relations, or domestic Indian politics, as discussed earlier in the article, don't sufficiently explain India's covert support to the KIO. The KIO's political goal of independence was not aligned with India's limited counter-insurgency goals, and the latter's lack of desire to seek regime change in Yangon. Given strained India-Myanmar relations during this period, New Delhi viewed support for KIO as a thinkable partner, but didn't empower the rebels to an extent that they would threaten the central regime.

The nature of termination is supportive of this argument. It occurred in context of Operation *Zaibru Masing's* failure, a rapprochement between India and Myanmar in 1993, and a ceasefire between the Tatmadaw and the KIO in 1994. India had achieved its limited goals, and the KIO was taking a different trajectory, so there was no reason to continue support.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka experienced a civil war from the mid-1970s until 2009, pitting a set of Tamil insurgent groups against the Sri Lankan state. India became a major sponsor of all the key groups in the period 1984-1986. Yet by 1987 it ended support for the LTTE and become locked in a pitched war with the Tigers as part of India's "peacekeeping" mission in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. It continued to back some of the other rebels, especially the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), but abandoned sponsorship in 1990 when the Indian forces withdrew.

This context therefore provides both over-time and cross-group variation. We code the onset as reflecting a strategy of overt revisionism: Delhi wanted to coerce Colombo into a major devolution of powers in Tamil ethnic minority areas. This was an acceptable end point

for most of the Tamil insurgent groups, but not for LTTE, which was committed to full independence.

Support Onset

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict escalated into open insurgency by the early 1980s as the Sinhalese Buddhist government faced off against a set of ethnic minority Tamil militants. This conflict had a transnational component, with Tamil militants finding sanctuary and support in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The central government in Delhi took growing interest in the conflict in 1983, after increasing Tamil insurgent mobilization and bloody anti-Tamil riots. Delhi feared spillover into southern India, worried about the Sri Lankan government's potential tilt towards Western states, and sought to stabilize its periphery (Muni 1993).

It began actively supporting five major Tamil groups – the LTTE, EPRLF, Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), People's Liberation Army of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), and Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS). R&AW trained and armed these groups in Dehradun starting in September 1983 (Swamy 2006, 107).India publicly denied it, but "all three parties in the conflict – the Indian and Sri Lankan governments and the Tamil militants – knew the truth" (Swamy 2006, 111; see also Rao 1988, 426). Sanctuary was also provided in Tamil Nadu for militant camps (Swamy 2006, 111-112). The Tamil groups put increasing pressure on the Sri Lankan security forces, and violence in northern Sri Lanka escalated dramatically. Yet India's goal was not an independent Tamil Eelam, to avoid dangerous precedents for India's own ethnic minorities and to limit the involvement of other powers in the region (Rao 1988, 424). Instead, India saw the Tamil militants as a tool of leverage for a peace deal that would settle the ethnic question, demobilize the Tamil insurgency, and keep Sri Lanka in the Indian sphere of influence (Swamy 2006, 109).

As India backed the Tamils, it also pushed for negotiations. In the summerof 1985, India facilitated negotiations in Thimphu, Bhutan, between Tamil militants and the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). This fell apart over widely divergent demands between the two sides (Rao 1988, 427). The conflict continued to escalate in 1985 and 1986. The

GoSL continued a build-up of its own security forces, putting greater pressure on the Tamil militants. By the spring of 1987, the Sri Lankan Army was preparing for a major offensive into the Tiger-held Jaffna Peninsula that raised domestic pressure in India due to the specter of civilian casualties. Simultaneously, the Tigers began to target other Tamil militant groups, launching a bid for dominance within the broader movement (Staniland 2012).

India put direct coercive pressure, in addition to its backing for the militancy, on Sri Lanka in June 1987. The culmination of this campaign was the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 29, 1987, which sought to devolve power to the Tamil minority within a sovereign Sri Lankan state (Shastri 1992). The Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was intended to backstop this deal on the ground in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Most Tamil insurgents were willing to accept this deal. Late summer/early fall of 1987 thus marked the high point of Indian sponsorship of Tamil armed groups.

How should we assess this case? The Indian goal was revisionist – it sought a major shift in domestic governance in Sri Lanka. Devolution was deeply opposed by the country's Sinhalese-majority political parties; Rajiv Gandhi was attacked during an official visit to Colombo, and the anti-government JVP insurgency of 1987-1990 mobilized around opposition to the Accord (De Silva 2005). There was little Indian fear of retaliation or escalation given both India's dominant power position and Delhi's belief that it had solved the problem at hand. The extent of its desired changes required overt backing to Tamil armed groups to put sufficient pressure on Colombo to cut a deal.

Alternative explanations might explain this strategy through Indian domestic politics. There is no doubt that Tamil Nadu politicians supported Tamil militancy. However, Mrs. Gandhi and then her son were highly popular during the period of initial and then escalating Indian support, and not reliant on Tamil politicians. The primary military training to Tamil insurgents was carried out by national security institutions, not state-level police. Indeed, the earliest periods of support by Tamil state politicians were largely covert and low-level, rather than the highly nationalized, unambiguous strategy spearheaded from Delhi in the 1984-1987 period. Furthermore, there was an additional coercive goal of pushing the Jayewardene

administration away from a perceived tilt toward the West (Dixit 1998). While domestic politics are not irrelevant to the case, they do not offer much specificity about the nature of Indian backing.

V. Future Research Directions

Where was our argument wrong? India's support for the Tibetans and the ABSDF in Myanmar do not fit with our theory. India's overt support for the Dalai Lama was highly escalatory and led to its military defeat in 1962. India's hosting of the Tibetan diaspora communities and creation of the SFF continues to strain bilateral relations with China. According to our theory, such high escalation risks should have led to covert, not overt, deterrence. Though India's creation and sustenance of the Tibetan-dominated SFF is covert, the force's existence is not entirely secret. When viewed in conjunction with India's open hosting of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, this case stands at odds with our theoretical assumptions.

India's support for the ABSDF in Myanmar from 1988 onwards, though overt, and offensive in intent, was not sufficient to topple the Tatmadaw. Though the intent was revisionist, the nature and substance of support was incommensurate to meet India's aspirations. In fact, the insurgent group that could have indeed challenged the Tatmadaw militarily was the Communist Party of Burma, which received no Indian support at any point. Unlike what our theory predicts, India's overt revisionism in this case did not terminate either by a breakdown of principal-agent relations or the military victory of the rebelgroup.

Both these cases had in common miscalculation by the sponsoring state. India miscalculated the risk of escalation with China when supporting the Tibetans, much as it miscalculated the Tatmadaw's determination to remain in power. This suggests an important research question: when does miscalculation occur, and how does it affect external backing?

Other future research directions arise from this work. In the cases, we noticedseveral distinct pathways to termination of state support (Karlen 2019) that point toward the need for better understanding of when and how external support comes to an end. Covert deterrence largely ended because of state-to-state rapprochement (KIO, CNF, PJCSS, AwamiLeague),

whereas overt revisionism ended either with the decisive victory of the rebel group (Mukti Bahini) or a breakdown of principal-client relations (LTTE). Covert revisionism (Baloch, Pashtun, and Karachi-based rebels in Pakistan) ended with the marginalization of these groups or a change in the geopolitical context after 9/11 (Northern Alliance in Afghanistan). Better understanding termination is a crucial next step.

A final research direction centers on the "market" of available armed groups. We see in the Sri Lanka case how armed group agency thwarted the preferences of a state sponsor. Future work can explore when and how armed groups forge autonomy from sponsors, and when instead they operate as proxies (Tamm 2016, Marten 2012). For instance, social embeddedness may allow some groups to stand firm against external management (Arjona 2016, Staniland 2014). Similarly, groups may vary in their responsiveness to international law (Stanton 2016, Jo 2017). Our argument has focused on state sponsor incentives, but a clearer understanding of what groups themselves try to get out of sponsorship is important. This can force hard choices on sponsors, change the strategies they pursue, and alter principal-agent relations in fundamental ways.

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Supplemental Appendix

I. Interviews

Interview 1: Confidential interview with serving SFF personnel (2018); details of interview withheld on the interviewee's request

Interviews 2 and 3: Confidential interviews with former R&AW officers both of whom specialised on Northeast and were posted in Yangon during the 1990s. Details withheld on the interviewee's request

Interview 5: Former Indian official posted in Yangon during the peak of the 1988 movement, New Delhi, India, 21/05/2019.

Interview 6: Former senior KIO official, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 18/06/2019

Interview 7: Former R&AW official, via Telephone, 18/05/2019

Interview 8: Former senior KIO official, Myitkyina, Myanmar, 27/08/2018

Interview 9: Former senior Indian diplomat with experience in Myanmar, New Delhi, 28/05/2018

Interview 10: Former senior Indian diplomat with experience in Myanmar, New Delhi, 18/05/2018

Interview 11: Former senior Indian diplomat posted on the Bangladesh-Myanmar desk, New Delhi, 20/05/2019

Interview 12: Former Myanmar diplomat with experience in India, Yangon, 17/08/2018

Interviews 13, 14, and 15: Confidential interviews with serving Indian external and military intelligence officials in Manipur and New Delhi (India), Yangon (Myanmar), and Chiang Mai (Thailand), 2018-19

Interview 16: Serving KIA officer Myitkyina, 27/08/2018

II. India's support for Insurgents in Comparative Perspective
The following sections offer a brief background on India's support to different regional insurgent groups listed in Table 2 in the enclosed manuscript. Sources that have helped create this table and coding the material are also listed below. Cases coded as high confidence are those for which triangulated evidence is available. Low confidence cases are those that have been reported in the press, and sometimes in secondary literature, but for which the evidentiary basis is thin. Most active rebel groups mentioned in Table 2 are also listed in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Armed Conflict Dataset. All groups listed in the UCDP are highlighted in the Table with a (*).

Non-Support Cases
Of the twenty-eight listed cases, eight are those where India either treated the rebel group as an adversary or refused to support it regardless of whether the group sided/fought with the target state. There is some variation in the "intensity" of non-support: Pakistan-backed anti-India Islamists such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Hizbul Mujahideen, the Jaish-e-Mohammad, and the Afghan Taliban are expectedly treated as adversaries. So is the NSCN-K, which has been largely India-centric though its bases are across the border in Myanmar. Communist radicals in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar or those ethnic groups in Myanmar that do not operate close to India's borders (Karen, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Karenni, Ta'ang, and the Wa) were not offered support, though were also not treated as enemies (Pfaffenberger 1988; Moore 1993; Jha 2014; Smith 1991).

Bangladesh (and erstwhile East Pakistan):
Mukti Bahini and *Mujib Bahini:* There are four different instances and three different insurgent groups that India has supported in Bangladesh. In 1970-71, when the country was still part of Pakistan, India's external intelligence agency, the Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW), the Border Security Force (BSF), and the Indian army offered covert military, political, and financial support to the Mukti Bahini, which played a critical role in the Bangladesh Liberation War.

In addition to the Mukti Bahini, R&AW also helped create the Mujib Bahini, which was better trained and better equipped relative to the Mukti Bahini. Its sole function was to support and secure Mujibur Rahman from domestic opponents—including from within the Mukti Bahini—in the post-1971 context. India's covert support to the Mukti Bahini, eventually backed by overt military intervention by the Indian army, led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Shanti Bahini: The Shanti Bahini was founded in 1973 by indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It sought more autonomy within (or separation from, for some) Bangladesh given the distinct non-Bengali ethnic composition of the communities in the regions. India began to covertly support the Shanti Bahini in late-1975 after the assassination of Mujibur Rahman, and the rise of pro-Pakistan political figures such as Ziaur Rahman in Dhaka viewed as security threats by New Delhi.

Awami League: During the period of 1975-81, R&AW and BSF offered covert support to Awami League cadre and leaders near the border areas in north Bangladesh. This was meant to increase pressure on Dhaka and ensure that Pakistan and China's influence remains limited in Bangladesh. In 1981, the assassination of Ziaur Rahman and the rise of General Ershad, who was not viewed as antithetical to Indian security interests led to the scaling down of such support.

Banga Sena and *Bir Banga Sena*: These are the least researched about and understood insurgencies in Bangladesh. The Banga Sena and Bir Banga Sena sought to create a Hindu-state and declared an independent 'Hindu Republic of Bir Banga' in 2003 that covered most of south Bangladesh. Allegedly operating from West Bengal, they were accused of receiving covert support by India by Khaleda Zia's government in Dhaka, which itself was sheltering anti-India outfits. The movement was founded in 1973 but was active in the late-1990s and early-2000s.

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Burma/Myanmar:
India supported a host of Burmese ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and the democracy movement after the 1988 coup. This was a period when insurgent violence in Northeast India—especially in Nagaland and Assam—was at its peak, and many of these Indian insurgent groups sought support from their Burmese counterparts such as the Kachin Independence Army, the Chin Independence Army, and the National United Party of Arakan (of which the Arakan Army was a central unit). These EAOs, and the All-Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) received covert Indian support till early-1990s in lieu of cutting their ties with Assamese and Naga groups. Other Burmese insurgents such as the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), and those representing Karen, Shan, Karenni, Mon, Wa, and Ta'ang communities did not receive such support.

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Sri Lanka:

India began to support multiple Sri Lankan Tamil armed outfits after the deadly anti-Tamil riots of 1983. The R&AW trained and equipped various groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE; the most powerful group of all), the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS). The 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord that sought the demobilization of these armed groups and holding of provincial elections failed to deliver as the LTTE refused to surrender arms. This led to a failed Indian military intervention in Sri Lanka the same year.

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China:

India's support for Tibetan Khampa rebels before the 1962 war was limited, and largely coordinated with the United States's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). After the 1962 war, India supported the creation of the Special Frontier Force (SFF), a Tibetan-dominated covert unit that has been central to the Indian army's force postures ever since. It was used during the 1971 India-Pakistan war, and for various other operations afterwards, including during the 2020-21 Ladakh Standoff.

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Pakistan and Afghanistan:
In Pakistan, India has supported (to varying degrees, and for various reasons) multiple insurgent organisations. If one discounts the Mukti Bahini, which has been detailed in the Bangladesh section above, the insurgents that have allegedly received Indian support include Baloch and Pashtun rebels, especially in early and mid-1970s. The 'Mohajir' groups in Karachi have also allegedly received financial support from Indian intelligence agencies according to Pakistan. The most controversial, and least understood, case is of India's support for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which recently made a comeback in Pakistan's tribal regions despite years-long counter-insurgency operations by Pakistan's armed forces from 2014. India has also, allegedly, offered support to rebel groups in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

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Archives: Ministry of External Affairs, NAI; Cabinet Secretariat, NAI; P N Haksar Papers, NMML

Nepal:
India overtly supported the National Congress in the early 1960s. Despite allegations of India's political interference in Nepal's domestic affairs, New Delhi did not offer support to rebels, especially the communists in the 1990s and early 2000s, despite the latter's ability to operate out of Indian territory given porous borders and cross-rebel support from Indian Maoists.

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III. How Termination Occurs

As Table A1 demonstrates, there are multiple pathways to support termination. In the case of India at least six pathways can be identified: achievement of goals, state-to-state rapprochement, abandoning of violence by rebels, shift in geopolitical context, effective deterrence by target state, and the military marginalisation of rebels. Of theoretical interest here are the actual pathways of termination. Table 3 outlines how the supporting state could either drop rebels or rapidly terminate support; partially or fully co-opt the groups; phase out support over a period of time or could temporarily cease support with the option of restarting later.

The method of termination is determined by interplay between the intent of support, the degree of secrecy, and the cause for support termination. In situations where the alignment is offensive and the state overtly supports the rebels, the likelihood of rapid termination is high. This is because the supporting state would stop *only* if (a) its goals are achieved, (b) if the target state comprehensively defeats the rebels, or (c) if the principal-agent relationship breaks down. Evidence from India suggests that this was indeed the case.

Rapid Termination: In 1971, India's support to the Mukti Bahini ended with creation of Bangladesh. The rebels, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, formed the government. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, most groups (TELO, PLOTE, EPRLF, and EROS) either abandoned violence or became militarily insignificant. But LTTE, the most powerful group, declared war on India following a breakdown in P-A relationship. In the case of ABSDF as well, the Tatmadaw militarily overwhelmed the rebels before New Delhi's rapprochement with Naypyitaw.

Table A1: Methods of India's Termination of Support for Rebels

	Offensive	**Defensive**
Overt	*Rapid Termination* Mukti Bahini, Gano Bahini, LTTE, PLOTE, TELO, EROS, EPRLF, ABSDF	*Co-Opt?* Tibetans
Covert	*Temporary Caesura* Northern Alliance, BLA, BPLF, TTP, MQM	*Phase Out* KIA, CNF, NUPA (incl. AA), Shanti Bahini, Banga Sena, Bir Banga Sena

Co-optation: India co-opted the Tibetans by creating the SFF and allowing the GiE under the spiritual leadership of the Dalai Lama. The SFF is central to India's security capabilities, but is not officially recognized. Most of its soldiers have fought in different fronts for India, but not offered commendation. Such integration of Tibetan guerillas in India's covert forces coupled with overt political activities of the Tibetan GiE limits (if not obviate) the possibility of Tibetan rebels turning against their hosts akin to the LTTE. Such co-optation was enabled by the need to preserve the defensive alignment between India and exiled Tibetans vis-à-vis China, especially as the overt support for the Dalai Lama remains a fait accompli for New Delhi.

Phase Out: In contrast to the Tibetans, East Pakistan crisis, and Sri Lanka, India phased out (sometimes violently) support to rebels targeting Myanmar and Bangladesh. Instead of dropping them immediately, the India manipulated their behavior using a mix of threats and incentives. A change of government in Bangladesh in 2006 brought to power Sheikh Hasina. Friendly towards India, Hasina cracked down on anti-India rebels operating from Bangladesh. In return, India dried support for entities such as Banga Sena. As for the Shanti Bahini, once Mizo insurgency was resolved in 1986, India steadily reduced support for the Chakmas, leading the PCJSS to sign a ceasefire deal with Dhaka in 1996. Until this point, The only period India when did not support the PCJSS-Shanti Bahini was during the chaotic Janata government in 1977-1980 (Prakash 2008, 553).

Temporary Caesura: Termination is neither permanent nor pure when the two states are caught in a prolonged violent rivalry. The case of India's support to anti-Pakistan rebels, both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, lies within those parameters. In Afghanistan, India has traditionally supported anti-Pakistan coalitions both in the government and outside, a trend that intensified with the US-led NATO military intervention after 9/11. Especially in the late-1990s, India countered the Afghan Taliban by supporting the Northern Alliance. This support came to a temporary

halt after 9/11, and then shifted towards the Hamid Karzai government as the geopolitics of the region evolved. Similarly, India's support for Baloch, Mohajir, and Pashtun rebels (both of the Islamist and nationalist fold) has ebbed and flowed over the decades.

Certain themes that emerge from India's chosen methods of termination. First, overt and offensive support to a rebel group often means that the supporting state is determined to compel the target state into changing its policy or its regime. Such support is most likely to end with the supporting state achieving its goals, or being defeated in the process. Both situations are likely to impart a degree of finality to how the support is terminated. This is not the case when the balance of power is heavily tilted in favour of the target state, and the supporting state, at best, is supporting rebels for defensive purposes. Co-optation is a viable strategy to keep the rebel group active, and ensuring that it does not turn against the supporting state.

The decision to phase out support for rebels is complex. It most likely occurs because of state-to-state rapprochement, but can also happen if the cost of supporting one rebel group (over the other) is outweighing its benefits. Phasing out allows the supporting state to avoid a sudden breakdown in Principal-Agent relationship, which can turn violent, while also affording it time and space to assess whether its rapprochement is holding forth. Lastly, enduring state-on-state rivalries often lead to continuing support for rebels. In such situations, support termination is often temporary and basic contact between the rebels and the supporting state remains alive. This has not just been the case for India's support for anti-Pakistan rebels, but also vice-versa. Overall, the cases demonstrate that different methods and pathways of support termination are deeply linked to the nature of support onset itself.

IV. Causes and Consequences of State Support

On risks of escalation: In February 2019 Indian airstrikes targeted militant camps in Balakot, deep inside Pakistan, in response to a suicide bombing in Kashmir, that killed 40 Indian paramilitary personnel and allegedly carried out by Jaish-e-Mohammad (Tellis 2019). It was the first time since 1971 that India responded using conventional airpower in retaliation against an attack by non-state actors, leading to counterretaliation by the Pakistan Air Force (Ibid).

Tellis, Ashley J; 'A Smoldering Volcano: Pakistan and Terrorism after Balakot', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14/03/2019

On cross-border ethnic alliances: There are many examples of such ethnic linkages and their impact on civil wars and state sponsorship. The spread of Kurdish communities across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran; of Baloch communities across Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan; and of Tamil communities between India and Sri Lanka have generated complex principal-agent dynamics even if they are ultimately dependent on the "power balance in the primary conflict dyad" (Cederman et al. 2009; Cederman et al. 2007).

V. Sponsor-Insurgent Relations

On principal-agent power dynamics: Pakistan's management of different Afghan Mujahideen factions in the1970s/80s/early-90s, to the more recent factional fighting within the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban organizations offers insights into how ideological, strategic, and ethnic linkages act as a glue between the principal and the agent, how each party manages friction in the face of extreme counterinsurgency campaigns, and how different types of insurgent groups (integrated, fragmented, vanguard, and parochial) need different levels of sponsorship to maintain cohesion (Staniland 2014; Fair 2014; Fair 2018; Khan 2011; Nadiri 2014). Even in Kashmir, despite supporting the nationalist Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front in the early years of the insurgency, Pakistan switched support to the more hardline and tightly-knit Harkat-ul-Ansar and Lashkar-e-Taiba over whom it commanded higher degree of operational control (Bose 2003; Schofield 2000; Ganguly 2001; MacDonald 2016).

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