Proxy Wars, Part 1: War Through Local Agents in Africa

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SPEAKERS

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Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 00:04
My experience in Africa was that building partnership capacity or those activities were virtually all wasted. They were Free chicken, so to speak to the host nation where you would go provide training for some unit that was going nowhere near the enemy that we cared about and never was going to.

Dr. Eli Berman 00:26
Even though we had figured out something that we felt confident recommending this doctrine for local ally in those fights, and when the US gets in these fights now it's always with a local ally, and usually most of, the most of the fighting is done by the local ally. But local ally wasn't on board with this doctrine.

Kyle Atwell 00:44
Welcome to episode six of the Irregular Warfare Podcast. Your hosts today are myself Kyle Atwell, and my co-host, Shawna Sinnot. Today's episode is the first installment of a two-part discussion on fighting irregular warfare through proxy forces.

Shawna Sinnot 00:59
In today's discussion, our guests consider how the use of local allies can position the United States and others to address security threats across Africa. They discuss the objectives of proxy and partner warfare, the tools that we can use to influence local allies, and whether the US should increase or decrease its military and diplomatic footprint across Africa in an era of renewed great power competition.

Kyle Atwell 01:21
Retired Major General Marc Hicks served as the commander of Special Operations Command Africa from 2017 to 2019, where he was responsible for all Special Operations Forces across the continent. Before that, he was the Chief of Staff and Director of Operations at SOCOM headquarters, and a career AC-130 pilot.

Shawna Sinnot 01:41
Dr. Eli Berman is a professor at UC San Diego, and co-editor of the book "Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents". Before entering academia, Eli was a member of the Israeli Defense Force, where he participated in the 1982 Lebanon War.

Kyle Atwell 01:56
You're listening to the Irregular Warfare Podcast, a joint production of the Princeton Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, and the Modern War Institute at West Point. Dedicated to bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners to support the community of irregular warfare professionals. Here's our conversation with Marc and Eli. Mark and Eli, welcome to the Irregular Warfare Podcast. And thanks for joining us today.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 02:24
Pleasure to be here.

Dr. Eli Berman 02:25
It's great to be with you. This is a wonderful initiative. I'm very excited about it.

Kyle Atwell 02:29
Thank you, Eli. So I'd like to start the conversation by asking what motivated you to publish a book on proxy warfare.

Dr. Eli Berman 02:37
We'd written this previous book on how to do counterinsurgency correctly and humanely by integrating a development strategy into it. And we were very proud of it. And we went from place to place and told people that we'd figured this thing out. And usually, politely, folks would say, well, if you guys are so smart, why are y'all losing all the time? And we felt as academics and as public policy folks that maybe we should answer that question. And the answer that we came up with, which I think is very interesting, is that even though we had figured out something that we felt confident recommending this doctrine, for local ally, in those fights, and when the US gets in these fights, now, it's, it's always with a local ally. And usually most of the, most of the fighting is done by the local ally, the local ally wasn't on board with this doctrine. And then the question was, is it possible to incentivize a local ally, the Afghan government, the Iraqi government, the Colombian government, in the case of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the South Lebanese army, is it possible to incentivize those folks to do the things that the senior ally in the partnership wants? Or should you just give up and go home?

Shawna Sinnot 03:52
And those questions are especially relevant when we consider the US role in Africa today, so Mark, what's the risk of not having this level of influence? And how do we balance that with all of our other competing defense priorities?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 04:03
If you look at Africa, in particular, you know, here in a period where we're trying to disengage from the longest wars in the history of the Republic, and trying to shift strategy toward great state competition, in all of which suggests that a lack of political will for further boots on the ground in places that are poorly understood and far from home with tangential connections to American interests, you know, we're going to have to do things by, with, and through local partners, the political will, and frankly, the capacity to just to do it with US Forces just isn't there. And, and that's probably fine. I think our role in Africa should be to work with local governments to address areas of mutual interests, of which there are many. We have tremendous interests across Africa, or the fastest growing continent, the youngest continent. And is, you know, will be increasingly important in the future, even if only as a safe haven for terrorists, because we've left places like the Sahel as a poorly governed space, and we're Al-Qaeda is currently seeing great expansion of their franchises across the area. So if we fail to figure out how to work well, with partners, in the absence of the ability and will to do it ourselves, then those things that are in our interests won't get done.

Kyle Atwell 05:38
Eli, do you think that proxy and partner warfare is going to play an increasing role in the future of US national security policy?

Dr. Eli Berman 05:45
Yeah, I think it's inevitable. I think if, take a look at the national defense strategy. I mean, if bluntly, it says we were, we have less resources to work with than we used to, and we have increasing problems in the great power rivalry's competitions with China and Russia. And so the Special Forces are gonna have to find a low cost way of solving these relatively small problems in the, in the, in the scope of things. And the only low-cost way we know of, is to work with proxies and partners. Is that, Marc is that about, right?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 06:26
Yeah, I absolutely agree. I hope it's inevitable that we will expand our more enlightened use of partners and proxies, but it's certainly, in my opinion, the way forward.

Shawna Sinnot 06:41
The term proxy even seems a little bit controversial. Can we define from your perspective, what we're talking about? And is that the same thing as working with partner forces?

Dr. Eli Berman 06:51
I think ally is the diplomatic term. And it certainly makes feel, people feel better about it. But the danger when saying ally, is that ally sounds like equal footing. And proxy sounds like more like the agent in what an economist would call a principal agent problem. Strictly speaking, an agent is somebody who could, who can only influence the principal by not doing the job. Whereas a principal can influence the agents in lots of different ways. And so, but ally is a coined diplomatic term. And it's, it's harmless, as long as everybody understand what's, understands what's going on.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 07:34
For practical purposes, we should think of partners expansively. And what I mean by that is, if you look at Africa, we would partner not only with African nations and their militaries, but also with other interested parties who are involved in various conflicts, particularly the French in operation Barkhane, which we support, and should support and could probably do more to influence. But also, there's a lot of untapped resources in some of the UN missions, and particularly MINUSMA, in Northern Mali, that has enormous capacity, but very little capability. And with a little bit of thoughtful training and, and incentivization of certain units from donor nations, we could actually make that a very capable force.

Kyle Atwell 08:26
So that's interesting. So you're saying that when you look at the landscape of Africa, and different threats we face there, that it's not just the indigenous governments we look at, but there's all kinds of other Western powers, multinational powers, the whole landscape of people, and with each of them, we just can kind of calculate, hey, if we provide some support, will they be able to accomplish our objectives?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 08:48
Well, if we think expansively about what a partner might be, we should partner with NGOs. In much of Africa, I would argue that you should probably use the military to support the security of development programs to get at the root causes of instability. And that chasing bad guys is a, you know, it's a losing proposition for a variety of reasons. And those organizations can, can not only do those things that matter to us for a small investment on our part, but it can be a synergistic relationship with our military activities as well, which I think we tried very hard to do in South Africa, with some success. But back to the proxy issue. There is a bit of a fine point on what constitutes a proxy. And again, there's a very legal specific issue about if you have command and control of the force, but there's a bit of a continuum in the partners with whom you would coordinate and try to deconflict as a minimum and try to make sure you know, or that you're at least aware of where the NGOs are is the low end of it to the high end version of partnering with a proxy force which you actually assess, select, train, equip, and then command and control and have full incentive authority over those forces by your ability to pay them and fire them if they fail to achieve your mission objectives.

Shawna Sinnot 10:16
So there's more of an inherent power dynamic to that where someone has more influence than the other.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 10:21
Yeah, absolutely. I mean, true proxy forces are ones that we, you know, we assess, select, train, and equip, and then operate as proxies of, of our force.

Kyle Atwell 10:32
Yeah, so there's a legal definition of what a proxy is. And I guess what I'm interested in Eli is, for the theoretical framework of your book, where would you draw that line on that spectrum of what are proxy forces?

Dr. Eli Berman 10:45
Well, you know, like all academics, we like to simplify, to make it a problem that we can actually solve. Marc, and you all have to deal with the real world, which is much more complicated. I only now realize that proxy was a very poor choice of describing what we thought of as the agent in a principal agent relationship.

Kyle Atwell 11:06
I'm sorry.

Dr. Eli Berman 11:09
No, no, it's fine. But because the title of the book is "Proxy Wars", but, maybe the title of the book should be "Local Ally Who We Have a Lot of Influence Over Wars". For the purposes of this discussion, maybe local ally, or without what, by which we mean local, subordinate ally. Yeah, I should also, this isn't the first time that we realized that it was a mistake. But one of the adventures that one of the authors had, was with a former prime minister of a country that we were describing, as a proxy. And he took it a little personally. So it's not it's not the most diplomatic of terms, but it's in the title of the book. And we're kind of stuck with it now.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 12:01
You bring up a good point. And there's a political dynamic here with respect to the, you know, the host nation, who we may consider a willing or partially willing partner, or proxy of the US, but you know, that can very quickly ruin a relationship by suggesting that they should do our bidding. These are autonomous countries that typically want to be treated as sovereign governments as well they should be. And, you know, we have to respect their interests, and not treat them as clients or junior partners in a relationship if we can avoid it. And that's a tough challenge.

Shawna Sinnot 12:41
And I think that gets to the internal and external messaging aspect of this. So how do we characterize these relationships? Are these open acknowledge superior subordinate relationships? Or is it important to be more discreet about the nature of the dynamic?

Dr. Eli Berman 12:54
May I take a shot at this? Because I think it gets at the single biggest mistake that we discovered in the research. But on the one hand, the senior partner, the United States, in his case, works really hard not to be arrogant in its treatment of a political ally. And so we say things like, shoulder to shoulder, shared objectives, be respectful. And arrogance is always a mistake. And falls into the trap of being naive about what the true objectives of the, of the partner are. And that's, that's a lack of discipline. And it's a lack of thoughtfulness. And unfortunately, it was enshrined in the doctrine up till very recently.

Kyle Atwell 13:37
I'd like to switch to the findings of your research Eli, which is can the US influence proxies and partners to do what we want?

Dr. Eli Berman 13:45
So the answer is, yes, yes, the partner can be, when incentives are applied, the partners comply. That's not gonna work everywhere and always because some partners aren't even in the scope of being willing to comply in the first place. You might think that the US-Pakistan relationship as one like that, where there is no amount of incentives that will induce the Pakistanis to give up the nuclear weapons, and there may not be enough incentives to induce Pakistan to give up the support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. And, nevertheless, within the scope of relationships, where it's possible incentives work, incentives plus capacity building work much better. But within the scope of those relationships, what we found in the research, is that the ones where the incentives weren't working, were US-Yemen, US-Afghanistan, US-Iraq, there were periods in which when incentivized, the local ally, did in fact, comply. What surprised me about the cases is that the incentives weren't applied in a consistent way. And when for reasons that are really hard for us to explain, the United States knocked off of incentives to the Afghan government, to the Iraqi government, to the Yemeni government, that the proxies cheated. And so in an, in a nutshell, when not incentivized proxies always cheat

Shawna Sinnot 15:11
How do you know they're cheating?

Dr. Eli Berman 15:13
Because the outcomes look so bad. It's a fantastic question. But one of the implications of this of this model, of this approach are that some of the intelligence gathering has to be aimed at the local ally, rather than at the enemy, in order to understand what the local ally is doing.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 15:33
Tell you this this to jump in. I absolutely agree with your, your findings regarding the need for incentives to get partners to do what you want, I think it's consistent at the national leadership level, all the way down to the small unit that needs to be properly incentivized, with either conditional support or whatever other mechanisms, we can find. But, you know, my experience in Africa was that building partnership capacity or those activities, usually through a theater security cooperation, events were virtually all wasted. With, with exceptions, I can think of in one case, they were free chicken, so to speak to the host nation where you would go provide training for some unit that was going nowhere near the enemy, that we cared about, and never was going to and that unit then broke up and moved on to other places. And it really achieved nothing as far as building capability and capacity of the host nation. But it made us feel good politically. So to your earlier point, that if the first mistake, I understood you correctly, the first mistake that you're, you see that was we go into these things naively, absolutely. Not understanding the situation on the ground, not understanding what the partners real objectives are, or what a would-be partner's real objectives are, make it very hard to incentivize them to do what we want. And I think it's easier at the tactical level, to incentivize military age males by pay, and training to do what we want than it is, at least in my experience, here, we're getting governments, whether it's regional governments or national governments to do the right thing, both militarily and development wise, because they're typically gaining from the situation as it exists, either the status quo or some variant of it, it's not consistent with our, our desire.

Kyle Atwell 17:32
And Marc, I would really like to know from your perspective, as the SOC Africa Commander, did you have challenges with interests' alignment? Was that something you actively thought about when determining where to allocate resources to partner forces? And what were the other things you thought about when determining where the US should dedicate more or less resources to different governments?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 17:52
So I was always aware of alignment of priorities and interests. And, you know, not, hopefully not as naive as we tend to be normally. And we worked at the tactical level, to incentivize our partner forces, to behave in ways that were consistent with our interests as well as their own. And I think that was the most successful part, the broader question of where to put resources became a larger conversation. And, you know, the, the idea of who's making these decisions becomes a question that because we don't, that may not be gone the best way either. You got, you know, State Department, the ambassador, you know, Africa, as well as the services. So in conducting operations in providing resources, it's a multi-player, multi-stakeholder discussion. And in the absence of a coherent strategy, it was very difficult to get anything done.

Shawna Sinnot 18:53
What happens when those interests, those desired end states of all those different stakeholders are, I don't want to say irreconcilable, but when they're at odds, wins out.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 19:03
Yeah well, you know, the divergent interest is not only a phenomenon of our partner forces, right, it's within our own organizations. So the services were incentivized not to spend money in Africa on things that weren't their projects, or things of that which they weren't interested in. And that made it hard to do new starts on anything. And ironically, it made it hard to stop things because it was also costing money to shut down operations. So the short answer was when you get into this bureaucratic stalemate, nothing happens. The status quo persists. And I found it sometimes is equally as difficult to close out a mission that I didn't consider productive or that had run its course you know, it had become a cash cow for the force provider who got the same captains there to get their combat time and they didn't want to quit doing that, even though you know, it was no longer really supporting what we needed and again, the policy implication, I think for that is that we to Eli's point, we need to work very hard and deliberately at not being naive, we have a long way to go, in that regard. I think our, you know we need to retool the way we understand what's going on. Retool the way we educate practitioners, both in State Department and in the military, with regard to dealing with partners who have their own interests that they're going to pursue, regardless of what we want them to do.

Kyle Atwell 20:30
Nigeria is a good case study, I think, for both Eli's model, and then also for what you're discussing, which is that, you know, arguably Nigeria is an important country as far as demographics go, size of the economy, and there is an insurgent threat there. But they, it sounds like our interests were not necessarily aligned with them. So how do you balance both theoretically, Eli and then also, from your

practical experience, a country that might be an important place for the US to maintain a partnership with interest misalignment?

Dr. Eli Berman 21:04
So I think this is one of the- I'm glad you asked. This is, this is one of the sobering points that came out of the research, which is that there is some part, if you take a capacity building approach to everything, then you could win with any partner, all you have to do is build their capacity. If you take an interest alignment approach to everything, then there's a continuum. There are some partners, potential partners with whom interests are so aligned that you don't have to do anything, Canada, right, there are some for whom interests are so misaligned, that it's hopeless. That might be the case with Pakistan, in many kinds of lines of effort. And so you have to kind of figure out who are in the sweet spot where there's something that you can do, which is productive, and if they slip out of that sweet spot, then as Marc's saying, it's time to go home. And if they slip back into the sweet spot, then it's time to engage.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 22:03
Well, I kinda agree with you that Nigeria is a really good example of a country that does not have interests' alignment with us, it's an important country, it's the, any given day, it's the largest economy in Africa and largest population in Africa. And it has multiple competing problems: the Nigerian government has shown a lack of will by action to really go in and provide governance and assistance in a reasonable counterinsurgency approach. In fact, they pursued a counterterrorism effort in Borno state that's made the situation worse, and arguably, really created the conditions for Boko-Haram to develop in the first place. So I think the approach we took, again, it enabled, ironically, by optimization was to terminate the partnership is unworkable. Now, whether that's ever going to provide the incentive for them to behave differently, so they will come back or whether that's going to drive them in the direction of the Chinese remains to be seen. But this was certainly not just a military decision. The embassy, the ambassador, the country team, and AFRICOM, and everybody else needed to, you know, needed to be involved in the decisions we're making with regard to removing resources, because they're not pursuing the interests that we've asked them to pursue. And I would hope that after we pull out the, you know, the embassy would be empowered to use the hope of returning US military assistance as a way to get them to behave differently.

Shawna Sinnot 23:41
Yep. Something that we'd like to also get into is what are the tools that we actually have to leverage when we're talking about incentives with our partners.

Dr. Eli Berman 23:52
So we have awesome tools at our disposal, if you look at what the embassy and military attaches are doing, you know, it's not just the military assistance that matters. In a capacity building model, it would be, but if you want to leverage, then you've got the military assistance, you've got the economic assistance, USAID, that's coming from, directly from the US government. You've got whatever the State Department can give in terms of diplomatic help, you've got the bully pulpit that the United States has, which is just unrivaled anywhere in terms of expressions of support, or especially for individuals within the government. And then you've got the, our leverage within the international organizations, which are usually very happy to help, you know what Marc was speaking of partners, but the IMF, and the World

Bank, in extreme cases, the WTO these are all massive levers of support. Remember, we're talking about countries who no matter how nefarious you might think the local leadership is in the partner, they all want to grow their economies, and they all think that the way to do that is through modernization and trade with the rest of the world and we with the Europeans, increasingly with the Chinese as well control the spigots to allow that to happen.

Shawna Sinnot 25:05
Yeah, and I appreciate you alluding to what can be an obscure nuance, at least for me about who's really responsible for enforcing each lever, does the state take the bigger role or the military? Who's in charge of making those incentives work?

Dr. Eli Berman 25:18
So that's a wonderful question. Because you know, one of the things that's very frustrating when you ask, when does the senior partner fail? It's because they, they, it's when they fail to kind of take a whole of government approach to leverage, right. So in principle, the ambassador controls everything. So the ambassador, can speak to the military, can speak to the World Bank, can speak to all these things and kind of coordinate it all. The ambassador doesn't always have a whole of government model. And the ambassador might not have the influences necessary.

Kyle Atwell 25:49
Well, that requires a lot of bureaucratic coordination too, I imagine.

Dr. Eli Berman 25:54
It requires a ton of bureaucratic coordination. Because, remember, a lot of, and technically, it's difficult or administratively, it's difficult, because many of the levers of assistance are treaties, and treaties, are government to government agreements, or contracts with the USAIDs contractor. And those are long term contracts, they're three, five-year contracts, which if you stop that contract, because you think that conditionality is important, you might be in violation of some agreement with an American firm. And so building that whole system in a way that allows spigots to be opened and closed is is not an easy things to do.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 26:36
Yeah, Eli, tell you this: the notion that programs need to be architected from the beginning to be adjustable and conditional, I think is an absolutely critical point. One of the most frustrating aspects for me was the lack of whole of government approach to almost anything in Africa. We as a government are challenged to take a long-term view of strategy, in part because of the nature of our electoral cycle. You've dealt primarily with Afghanistan and Iraq, areas with massive resourcing particularly in human capital and oversight, and, you know, all the way from the field through Congress, whereas the dearth of those resources is part of the plague of Africa. And what I mean by that is, you know, you might have an OSC chief and an embassy, who is a newly turned foreign area officer from some other career field, who parachutes into an embassy that has had that position gap for the last 18 months. Only to find that she's completely occupied by figuring out the paperwork of whatever ambassadors, two ago signed up for, and they just lack the capacity to come up with a coherent plan for what they might do, you know, as well as the experience in capability of understanding what, you know, what's possible in those

countries. And we're getting better, I think, having Africa on and assuming the role of helping manage those processes. But the lack of diplomatic footprint on the ground makes it really hard to take a long-term view of how are things. And to monitor the progress of the countries in such a way that we can move the levers of conditionality to ensure that our partners or proxies are doing what we want them to do at the national and regional level.

Dr. Eli Berman 28:29
Yeah if I could add, a local ally does what makes sense for them, which is to take their most talented people and put them at the interface with their senior ally. And so they've got someone whose career is being built on figuring out what the senior ally is capable of, which parts of the US government to go to for what, what the restrictions are on the contracts, and where the State Department's and maybe AFRICOM aren't communicating so well, to exploit those cracks in order to get the best possible deal for their government. And they're not rotating out of that job. They stick with it for quite a long time. And so you tend to see very talented people locally, who are managing this relationship, bearing in mind the great resources that the United States brings to bear and credit, the flaws and the lack of a whole of government approach from the point of view of the principal.

Kyle Atwell 29:24
This leads to a broader question I have for both of you, which is what are our objectives when trying to work through proxy or partner forces in these regions? And I can frame that by stating that I feel some people believe our objectives with a group like Boko-Haram or with Al-Shabaab in Somalia, is complete victory over the group and other people have argued it's more limited objectives.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 29:50
I tell you that, you know, coming back to Eli's observation about don't be naive. We need to figure out what we're trying to do. And my experience is that we have not had a consistent understanding of simply what's in the art of the possible. In the case of Boko-Haram, we ruffled back and forth between containment and serious degrading, or potentially a defeat mechanism that would include a more expansive counterinsurgency program and demobilization efforts and things like that, you know, we have to understand what the partners are willing to do. And be clear-eyed about what aid we're going to provide, and what incentives we're going to use to pursue those that are US interests, but not necessarily the primary interests of the host nation.

Dr. Eli Berman 30:38
Let me try to give a more general answer. I think that the political leadership is faced with a challenge that we have to recognize, which is that the public doesn't want to see long, drawn out interventions. And so there's an incentive to kind of misrepresent things as black and white, they're bad guys, we'll go get them, it's going to take a little while, and then the troops are going to come home. Where in fact, we tend to get involved in these relationships, when there's a local ally, who's flawed, whose governance is flawed in such a way that the root causes of insurrection are going to be there for a while. The Islamist aren't there just because they have good, they've got a good story. They're there because the government is not providing the needs of the local population in kind of a hearts and minds coin sense. And that's not going to change anytime soon. And so that would lead you to believe that US forces are

there in order to prevent an outbreak of terrorism, or of insurgency that might spill into, spill over and destabilize other allies.

Kyle Atwell 31:43
So it's like a containment objective, then, it's we want to contain threat.

Dr. Eli Berman 31:47
Exactly but containment is by its nature, almost surely a very long-term deployment with an uncertain duration. And that's very difficult for the politicians to sell to, to the electorate. And so they've told this other story often.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 32:06
And that other story is, while maybe compelling, often gets us in trouble when we fail to attain objectives that were so black and white and so easy. Because you're right. I, it used to be a bit of a running joke with us that we wouldn't be in the countries if they were, if they were well governed and in good shape. So yes, by definition, almost every place we are has flawed partners.

Kyle Atwell 32:32
And one other objective I wonder about is, there's, our effect on the enemy, which is they're destroyed or they're contained. But when we send small teams to some of these countries, you know, it could be 10 to 20 people, are there other objectives that we're trying to pursue, or is it almost always enemy based?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 32:51
That's a great question. And worth noting that, when we send US forces to a country, whether it's a theater security cooperation event, which is kind of the classic peacetime engagement activity, you know, there's a political piece of that. But you know, from the special ops world, you know, when we send a force to a country, there are multiple reasons why we might choose to do that. And in the case of Africa, you know, if we're looking at great power competition, one of the places that that competition is going to play out as it did during the Cold War, is the developing world. And Africa is a huge stage for that right now, where the barrier to entry is very low. China, in particular, is active across the continent. And the good news is they've made Ugly American, a no longer pejorative term. But, you know, we're not competing effectively, in the ways that the Chinese are in many parts of Africa. And we've also seen a great deal of Russian adventurism in various places, Central African Republic, and of course, Libya, in particular. So we may choose as a government to send training or advisory forces simply to be there, and, and to be part of the partnership that competes with the Chinese. Don't know how many times I heard that you guys are the partners of choice. We want to work with you, but you're not here.

Kyle Atwell 34:16
You heard that from the partner forces, saying we want you here?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 34:20
Yes, from countries all across Africa, and it was a constant refrain, not only to myself, but for diplomatic force as well.

Shawna Sinnot 34:31
Is that an appropriate strategic objective? I mean, to explicitly say we're there to displace our competitors to provide an alternative to countries relying on China.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 34:41
Depending on the cost, you know, the size of the force and what we're trying to achieve, I think being a partner of choice is a legitimate strategic objective. Now, and that's certainly debatable, but I would prefer it to be a tangential objective. Militarily, we would want to be somewhere because we have military objectives that are that are aligned, at least somewhat, and for the, some reason we partner with our European partners, we should partner with our African military partners, because we have security objectives and mutual interests, we're all seeking to reduce the influence of Islamist Extremism across the continent. So why wouldn't we help those countries that need it. And oh, by the way, by being there, we can help monitor what they're up to, what's happening on the ground in those countries, which is extremely difficult to know, and sometimes unknowable through normal diplomatic channels because of their lack of access to some of the conflict region. So it doesn't need to be the only reason we would go. But I think it should be explicitly considered as part of why we would consider sending a force is to, is to maintain a partnership that may be valuable someday, and to displace other powers that may seek to exploit the vacuum that we kind of leave across Africa.

Dr. Eli Berman 35:58
This place might be a strong word, China feels that it has interests in Africa, China now feels that it has interest just about everywhere. And it's a rising power, its share of a world GDP has just passed that of the United States, and it's going to keep arising. So I think, you know, a failing of the research we've done so far that we've noticed, is that to think about one principal and one proxy is very narrow. Often we're in multiple principal, single proxy relationships. And the proxy does the rational thing, or the local ally does the rational thing, which is to play off the big powers against each other. And if you know, Marc wants to teach folks to shoot straight and put bandages on, right, but that's conditional on some kind of human rights rules that come with his legal mandate. But somebody else is willing to give the same instruction without the conditionality, then they might go to the other, at least for that part of the trading. And we've seen that repeatedly.

Kyle Atwell 36:56
Yeah, we have this image that if we provide train and equip package that China or Russia or anybody else is not going to do it. But I can't imagine that a state in Africa feels like they have to exclusively go with one, you know, principle, I think in your terms, ally or donor, you know, they can essentially take everything that everybody wants to offer. And I think that almost puts us as donors at a disadvantage in these types of relationships, if we're doing it from a great power competition lens.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 37:28
Well it certainly makes it harder. My experience is that our partners in Africa do accept support from multiple fronts. And that's not always a bad thing. I recall our artillery captain in Niger had been trained by the Chinese and I was just happy that he'd been trained. So you know, there, there are opportunities where we make contact, either directly or indirectly with the Chinese and Africa, where we could

actually cooperate and let some of the, some of the air out of the relationship too, and that doesn't have to be straight competition.

Shawna Sinnot 38:02
Has any sort of lateral alignment like that happened yet? Or is there a way you envision that could actually look in the future?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 38:09
It is, to the extent that it's happened, I think, probably the counter piracy operations in the off coasts or off the east coast of Africa, are probably the best example, albeit imperfect. But, and I think policy wise, we've been constrained from looking for good ways to cooperate with the Chinese. But I can certainly envision a way that we could, if we could influence the way the Chinese provide aid or conduct business, and actually help them do things better, I don't think that would be a bad thing. You know, incentivizing, and we're rewarding the Chinese for behaving well, is it doesn't have to be a zero-sum game, that might be a good idea.

Dr. Eli Berman 38:50
So that's, that's an interesting insight, because, you know, in the NDS there's this contrast between the great power rivalry, part of the business, and suppressing coin part of the business. But now we're, you're talking about cooperating with the Chinese on shared objectives in Africa?

Shawna Sinnot 39:08
Yeah and Eli, from a theoretical standpoint, what is the typical life cycle of a proxy relationship? How do we know we've reached the culminating point of what we can do with that proxy? And when we should terminate the relationship or maintain the relationship? How do we know what right looks like there?

Dr. Eli Berman 39:23
The relationship with South Korea is in some sense, ongoing, right? US troops are still stationed there because of a strategic interest in the model even in a capacity building model, but in this embellished model that has agency and capacity, then the idea is the local ally wins, and is now so secure, that they stop misbehaving. When they stop misbehaving, the potential for rebellion or terrorism that might spill over into other places is finished with and the principal can go home. That the hope, and there were cases in which this ended really well. But not all the cases go well.

Kyle Atwell 40:05
Yeah. And I guess the same question for Marc then, which is, when you looked at a partnership with a country in Africa, was there a, was it desired that there would be an end state to it, or was kind of the goal to maintain continuous engagement?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 40:21
It depends on the viewpoint as to whether it's desirable to have an end state or maintain relationship. And, you know, there's a minor challenge we had with tactical forces who always fell in love with the missions they had and, and it was hard to get them to want to give up a relationship with, you know, with the ground force, because it had developed so well. And, you know, strategically we have to look

at, you know, what the future looks like. And I'm pointedly not saying end state here, because I think that's a frankly naive concept, the evolution of a partner relationship, in my mind, the perfect version is that you go in and militarily, you provide the security necessary to contain and then defeat whatever insurgent activities you're dealing with, and then that you continue that relationship with the host government until they can become a net exporter of security.

Dr. Eli Berman 41:16
So can I ask a follow up here, Marc, in the 1990s world, where the NATO allies were the great power. And we thought that if we just helped countries out, they would eventually become liberal democracies, and join the team, then that "we're going to fix it and go home" attitude kind of made sense. But in the world of great power rivalries, the current, if you thought that that the Chinese were going to maintain a presence in an African country, does it really, is it really credible that we and the Europeans would both go home ever?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 41:53
I don't know why we would want to, we haven't left Europe or Asia since World War Two. So, you know, my sense is, again, I kind of reject the concept of end states. It's naive and short sighted, you know, our evolution of cooperative military relationships with Africa, it should look more like what we're seeing in Europe. In fact, I would argue that AFRICOM should sort of drop the notion that its an engagement command and act like a combatant command, like any other that has military cooperative activities with the regional countries, and we should seek to partner with them to provide stability, not only across Africa, but ultimately exporting it off of the African continent to other areas, likely the Middle East, which is not showing signs of stability anytime soon, I think we should seek to expand those relationships strategically, and not look at them as transactional activities where we go and try to defeat somebody with a proxy force and then afterward about how to be mobilized that force. You know, that force should become the, the small units we trained today should become the cadre and the professional military that stays behind tomorrow.

Dr. Eli Berman 43:04
So that's the way that Pacific commands, it's more like the way that Pacific Command sees their role.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 43:09
I think that's very consistent. I have some time in PACOM, as well. And the relationships there were very clearly in part to maintain a connectivity between the host nation and the United States, to provide real capability to developing countries that typically had some pretty good capability with a very clear intent to keep them on our team and to reassure them that we're not going to abandon them in a, you know, Asia Pacific, where China would choose to deal bilaterally with each country, but we're trying to keep more coalition's together.

Kyle Atwell 43:47
An interesting perspective you have is that you were working as the SOC Africa Commander at a period when we were transferring or transitioning from counterterrorism to great power competition. The NDS had kind of come out, I think, in that period. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on how that

transition from counterterrorism focus to great power competition went and what the kind of day to day looked like during that.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 44:16
You know, it was, it was certainly an interesting time. The shift to great power competition, from my perspective, it's like Africa, right? Suddenly everybody lost interest in something they weren't paying attention to, to begin with. But, you know, ultimately, we ended up with the optimization drill of reducing force structure, particularly soft forces, which, you know, was it was an interesting exercise for a variety of reasons.

Shawna Sinnot 44:47
Can you just provide us a little more background on what optimization is and what the debate is?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 44:52
Sure, optimization in Africa was a, an effort directed by the chairman to reduce our force structure by 25 and 50%, over 18, 36 months, respectively, you know, I was successful, at least on a SOC side of reducing scenarios that were either nearing completion, that is they had achieved the goals that they were in place for the partner was sufficiently capable that we can leave a little bit ahead of schedule, and it was going to be okay. Or in some cases, it allowed me to pull forces out of nonproductive missions that the force provider was, you know, not interested in quitting. And that actually turned out to be beneficial.

Kyle Atwell 45:36
So what you're saying is that you had missions where a service wanted to pursue it, because they had their own interests. But from your kind of strategic perspective, you saw, it wasn't the best investment for US resources in Africa.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 45:46
That's, that's very accurate, yes. And, you know, because all the decision-making is, involves, SOCOM is the force provider, and AFRICOM and the services as providers of services, it's not as easy to get anything done as one might think. So even on pulling forces out, it was often difficult if the force provider had a mission that was lucrative for their career development, or for whatever reason. So optimization, oddly enough, provided an opportunity to close out a couple of those missions, and to reduce force structure in places where it would hurt the least. And then we ended up really drawn down heavily around Lake Chad, which was consistent with what we needed to do at the time, because the Nigerians were not being cooperative partners at that point. So pulling out of that relationship, and I think, consistent with Eli's notion of conditionality, made sense at the time, and I don't think we would have been able to do it absent the enforcing function of optimization, because the force provider was not going to want to leave the mission that they were trying to pursue.

Shawna Sinnot 47:00
Should we increase or decrease our presence in Africa or maintain what we have now to achieve those objectives?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 47:06
Well, I was never a fan of decreasing our presence in Africa. I thought that was ill conceived, because as I mentioned earlier, that you were never going to get enough resources out of Africa to make a difference, you know in resetting the force for some global competition, that's ultimately statecraft anyway. And I think the return on investment for small unit deployments to Africa, and I don't mean theater security cooperation events, because as Eli points out, training, building capacity to increase your scorecard as having built capacity doesn't do anything meaningful. But meaningful, well thought out pointed missions across Africa can have an outsize impact by allowing small units to provide their own security. You look at places like Niger and Burkina Faso now that are at great risk of what's happened to Mali, we have an opportunity to help stabilize Africa, which I think would be an unambiguous good for the world, and also to maintain and develop relationships, which in the future may pay off great. So I think it would be a fool's errand to depart Africa at this point. In fact, I would consider targeted investments as part of a coherent strategy to build partners where they, where it makes sense. And I think to Eli's point with conditionality baked into that equation.

Dr. Eli Berman 48:12
So I'm so glad you came back to this because we spoke earlier about containment. Containment is a really big deal. Right? So preventing some country from going bad like Mali is yes, is unambiguously good for Africa and good for American interests. Right? Because we know that international terrorism can spill over. So I guess the question to you, Marc is which arguments have traction when you argue for resources?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 48:55
It depends who you're arguing with, right? This administration is pretty set on short term economic return on investment, which I think is a very poor model. And you look at Africa, there has been a lot of discussion about, you know, what economic activities do we have in Africa, and what I found to be fairly consistent is there is a lot of potential economic activity that is not occurring because of the poor security and poor infrastructure situation. So, you know, if we took a enlightened self-interest long term view of this, I think it would make sense to invest in Africa, frankly not unlike the Chinese are, to help them develop the markets that we would need to have the economic activity that we see.

Dr. Eli Berman 49:41
My next question. So do you see the Chinese taking a longer view? Is that explicitly, to build the infrastructure in order to create a market that we're going to trade with?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 49:52
While you know their execution may leave some maybe wanting, they're doing a very good job of taking a long-term view of securing partnerships and relationships that will benefit them in the future. Primarily now they're in the extractive business of getting rare earth metals and other things out of Africa, you know, that everybody's going to want the market that Africa will provide in the future.

Kyle Atwell 50:15
I wanted to ask both of you, were talking about sending investments to Africa, which is kind of a peripheral concern, I think, in modern national security. Do you think that the American public is willing to tolerate the risks when they bubble up? Of investing greater in Africa versus the rewards we get?

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 50:37
Kyle that's a great question. I'm glad you brought it up. You know, we had tragic loss of life of four soldiers in Niger that was very poorly handled politically, in part because the American people were not fully informed and invested in what they were doing. And you juxtapose that with a loss in Somalia, which really caused not even a ripple in the political fabric, because both Congress and the American people are generally aware of what we're doing in Somalia, I think kind of helps answer that question for me, is that the American people need to be informed and have to have buy in to what we're doing. I think the story to tell about what's happening in the Sahel, and why we're in Niger, and why we should be in Burkina Faso more than we are is a very easy and compelling narrative. It's just not being told.

Dr. Eli Berman 51:26
So that's a great question. I'm really glad Marc went first. I agree with all that, I'd say, I might say it a little differently. I'd say that if this is presented the way that Jim Mattis would present it to the American people, there would be a lot of understanding, if it's presented as the old story about, oh, we're there to fight terrorists who might come, who might show up in Florida, then it's not gonna land. Can you elaborate on that difference? What does that particular communication strategy look like? Exactly. So if we, if one were to say, listen, we're engaged in a great power rivalry, that's going to be the story of the world for the next generation, those of us who are old enough, then just remember the Cold War. Well, this is something like that, but it's a rivalry, where the Chinese are in Africa, they've got their values, and they were clear about what they're going to do there, we should be there too. We should be expanding the influence of our values and our markets by pursuing alliances with people who share values, including humanitarian values. Suppressing violent jihad is one of those. But it's not the only one. We believe in open markets, we believe in democracy, we believe in human rights, we would like those things to spread to parts of the world, where there's just not enough of that already. And it's going to be good for us, because we, the American economy thrive in that environment, the more trade the better. That was kind of the story that we were telling during the Cold War, because the Soviets were totally the opposite. But I think we'd want to go back to defining what the national interest is in Africa along those lines. We're pursuing alliances with people that share our values. And at the same time, we're pursuing markets for our economy. And that's a long-term strategy. And I think if it were explained in those terms, which is really what the NDS says, of this economy, that would land well, but neither of the major political parties is doing that right now.

Kyle Atwell 53:21
So I'm going to stop the conversation here. But I want to thank both of you for joining us today. This has been a great conversation on irregular warfare.

Dr. Eli Berman 53:29
Thank you, for delivering so many years to us. It's really a pleasure.

Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks 53:34
Thanks Kyle. Thanks, Shawna, and Eli I really appreciate the discussion. It's great to be here.

Kyle Atwell 53:42
Thanks again for listening to episode six of the Irregular Warfare Podcast. Please be sure to subscribe to the Irregular Warfare Podcast so you don't miss an episode. You can also follow and engage with us on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn.

Shawna Sinnot 53:46
We release a new episode every two weeks. In our next episode, Dr. Eli Berman will join us again to continue the conversation on proxy warfare, this time focused on the Middle East. Our second guest for the episode will be Ambassador Ryan Crocker. After that, Nick and I will have a conversation with August Cole and P.W. Singer, authors of the books "Ghostly" and "Burn In" about the future of irregular warfare. One last note, what you hear in this episode are the views of the participants and do not represent those of West Point, the army, or any other agency of the US government.

Kyle Atwell 54:28
Thanks again for listening and we will see you next time.