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Comparative proxy strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the role of strategy in proxy wars, with the goal of identifying relevant findings to proxy wars. Comparatively analyzing Russia and the U.S.'s proxy strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War is useful to this end – four major findings emerge. First, a state's proxy strategy is dependent on variables unique to that state, and those of the available proxy. Second, proxies – the actual individuals or groups – are not singular in their characteristics. A proxy's uniqueness contributes to the range of options it provides its principal. Third, proxy strategies are not fixed. The range of proxy strategy options available to a state reflects the combined uniqueness of the principal and the proxy. Lastly, in proxy wars, concerns of conflict escalation might be a thing of the past. These points make an additive contribution to both strategic and proxy war scholarship by providing a useful examination of comparative proxy strategies.

Introduction

A vast amount of contemporary proxy war scholarship focuses on rather vanilla subjects. A detailed perusal of the scholarship finds that it is heavily invested in examining who is (or is not) a proxy, what constitutes a proxy war, and how to categorize proxy war scholarship. International relations and proxy war scholarship certainly benefit from those research areas, but those focal points often fall short in helping make practical sense of proxy wars.

This work defines a proxy as any actor (Actor B) used by another actor (Actor A) to help accomplish Actor A's politically motivated military objectives. Scholars tend to refer to Actor A as the principal, or benefactor, whereas they refer to Actor B as the agent.[1] Proxies differ from alliances and coalitions primarily in the absence of treaty-obligated support relationships.[2] What's more, proxies differ from alliances and coalitions based on the degree of risk distribution – proxies do a majority of the warfighting in comparison to a principal – in principal-agent dyads.[3]

A proxy strategy results from Actor A integrating a proxy, or multiple proxies, into their larger military strategy. A proxy strategy can either be the main component of a military strategy, or a proxy strategy can be a supporting leg of a larger military strategy. For example, the US's support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War illustrates a proxy-centric military strategy anchored on the reliance of another state (i.e. Iraq) to

defeat a common threat (i.e. Iran).[4] During the conflict, the U.S. provided intelligence and military equipment, primarily funneled through Jordan, to Iraq to assist in its war against Iran.[5] On the other hand, Russia's initial strategy for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine focused on a lightning strike on Kyiv and Kharkiv to quickly defeat the Ukrainian military and unseat Ukraine's democratically elected government. The Kremlin's proxy strategy played a small supporting role to Moscow's larger blitzkrieg strategy. However, when Ukraine successfully thwarted Russia's initial operations, and the U.S. decided to provide Ukraine with sophisticated weaponry, money, and training, the Kremlin shifted to a strategy of attrition in which its Donbas and *Wagner Group* proxies maintained a central role.[6]

Further, a degree of cognitive bias clouds the understanding of proxy wars. A traditional view of proxy war holds that they are a distinct categorization of war. This belief, however, misses the reality that an intertwined array of terms and phrases characterizes nearly all armed conflict. To be sure, the term *civil war* carries the connotation of non-state actors waging an insurgency through irregular warfare against the state which it is attempting to undermine, a point noted by scholar Geraint Hughes. Hughes asserts that, "One problem with the language of 'insurgency' and 'civil wars' is that we can develop a fixed understanding of the character of the combatants."[7] The U.S. Civil War – a conventional, large-scale war of attrition – as one example, obviates the idea that civil wars are something inherently linked to non-state actors, irregular warfare, or insurgencies.

Descriptive terms like civil war, or war of attrition, are just that – descriptive. The adjective used to describe a conflict is often representative of who is analyzing the war, what their bias is, the purpose behind their analysis, and what that individual or institution is attempting to gain from their analysis. The same holds true for proxy war – the word "'proxy" is just one of many adjectives that an analyst, scholar, or practitioner might use to describe a conflict in which an actor (or actors) implements a proxy strategy. Based on this logic, and depending on the analytical lens through which one wants to examine the war, it is sensible to classify the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War as a proxy war. Nevertheless, the Russo-Ukrainian War can also be easily categorized as a war of attrition, a Russian-sponsored civil war, a drone war, or any other number of ways.

Moreover, within a conflict, actors use strategy to advance toward their political objectives – this is nothing new. Yet, a degree of cognitive bias interferes with the understanding of strategy. A general strategy articulates goals and how to accomplish those goals within the constraining power of resources and risk. This is the basic ends-ways-means and risk heuristic which looms large in most military schools of strategy.[8] Nonetheless, as scholar Hew Strachan notes, strategy is not unilateral, but it possesses many "'arms."'[9] By that, strategy possesses a central line of logic, but within that theme, sub-set lines of logic also exist. For instance, an actor's strategy might focus on the restoration of its international borders. Yet, as a subcomponent of that strategy, the actor might also have enemy focused strategies to military and economically defeat their enemy, while simultaneously striving to politically isolate the opponent through a vigorous information operations strategy.[10]

Within each of those strategies, supporting and intertwined sub-stratagems also exist. An actor might have a general military strategy that focuses on territorial

acquisition and crippling its opponent's military. Yet, within that larger plan, a proxy sub-stratagem can be a central or supporting leg of an actor's general strategy. Moreover, strategies – at least those that hope to succeed – are not linear but evolve as the competitive situation changes.[11]

Take Russia's strategy in Ukraine, for instance. Russia's strategy – denationalizing Ukraine through territorial conquest and regicide – was underpinned by a lighting strike by conventional Russia forces, with proxies playing a small auxiliary role. As Russia's initial strategy died on the tarmac of Hostomel Airport, it gradually evolved one of grinding attrition. Russia's strategy of attrition shifted the burden of fighting from regular Russian forces to auxiliary proxy forces. Yevgeny Prigozhin's recruitment of 40,000 prisoners, or roughly four army division's worth of personnel, and Russia's reliance on the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Armies to carry the brunt of combat in the Donbas, clearly points to this shift in strategy.[12]

Examining comparative proxy strategies is one aspect of proxy war studies that is under-represented in the literature today. Comparative proxy strategy analysis can, however, help address the concern of linking proxy war scholarship with the praxis of proxy strategy. As a result, comparative proxy strategy analysis is a field of proxy war study and comparative strategy analysis ripe for detailed examination.

The Russo-Ukrainian War provides a unique and data-rich opportunity for scholars to compare competing proxy war strategies. It is important to note that this paper considers the Russo-Ukrainian War as one continuous conflict which began in the spring of 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and continues to today. On one side resides the Russian proxy strategy, and on the other, the United States' (US) proxy war strategy. Each strategy is entirely different from the other. Yet in the irony that often accompanies war, each strategy feeds off the other, having transformed the conflict into a grinding war of attrition. The characterization of the conflict as a war of attrition gained increasing traction as the casualties, destruction, and collateral damage have reached proportions not seen since World War II.[13]

Further, each strategy thumbs its nose at four traditional beliefs held sacred in proxy war scholarship. First, contemporary proxy war scholarship holds sacred the idea that strategic actors use proxy strategies to indirectly participate in existing conflicts.[14] Second, modern proxy war thinking is buoyed by the belief that strategic actors use proxy strategies because they provide that actor with plausible deniability regarding its participation within a conflict.[15] Third, proxy strategies are de-escalatory.[16] Fourth, proxy war literature posits that strategic actors use proxy strategies because they offset the casualties and resource loss associated with the use of their own forces, but generally fail to make the connection between proxy strategies and wars of attrition.[17] In every instance, the Russo-Ukrainian War turns these canons of modern proxy war scholarship on their head. This situation arises because of a problem of framing and scoping.

Most contemporary proxy war literature, sometimes stylized as *Framer* and *Reformer* scholarship, is inextricably associated with post-9/11 wars in the Middle East and Africa, and as a result, the scholarship emphasizes proxy war's place in civil wars, the centrality of non-state actors, and the utility of irregular warfare.[18] The *Framer* and *Reformer* concept is a recent taxonomy developed by scholar Vladimir Rauta to batch proxy war scholarship into a set of useful tranches. According to Rauta, the *Framers*

emerged in the aftermath of 9/11, and that their scholarship focused on post-9/11 armed conflict in which states sought to limit their boots on the ground and thus elected to operate indirectly through proxy forces. Further, Framers posited that deniability and the avoidance of direct intervention was a key element of proxy war.[19] The *Reformers*, on the other hand, continued the *Framer's* work by wedding proxy wars to a large array of defense and security challenges.[20] However, *Reformers* have also focused a good amount of attention to making sense of support to proxies, control of proxy forces, and the moral and ethical considerations pertaining to proxy force employment.[21]

Yet, in widening the aperture through which to view proxy strategy, the observer can generate a more reasoned understanding of proxy war which more accurately reflects competing logics in proxy war. In doing so, the observer is better able to appreciate the need to dispossess the post-9/11 prejudice in proxy war scholarship and be better able to interpret and analyze the needs of contemporary conflict analysis.

The goal of this paper is to answer the question of how competing proxy strategies shape the character of a given conflict. In the case of this paper, that conflict is the Russo-Ukrainian War. The paper addresses this question in the following structure. First, the paper examines Russian proxy strategy in the conflict. Next, the paper examines the US proxy strategy in the war. Third, the paper then compares those two strategies, and states how the competing strategies shape the war's character, at both the combatant and national levels. In doing so, this paper examines why *Framer* and *Reformer* scholarship is not quite up to the task of addressing proxy strategy considerations in the age of mature social media practice.

This paper arrives at four major findings. First, state actors use proxy strategies to take advantage of temporal opportunity and strategic flexibility, whereas indirect participation and obfuscation are relatively outmoded strategic considerations. Second, social media, passive monitoring, open-source intelligence, and theater-level intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) have made it nearly impossible for a state actor to obfuscate his support to, and participation alongside, a proxy. This dynamic has helped accelerate the shift of proxy strategies from deniability and indirect participation to a focus on taking advantage of temporal opportunities and maintain strategic flexibility. Third, because state actors are no longer interested keeping their involvement in a proxy war hidden, proxy strategies are escalation-neutral, that is, neither helping to de-escalate or escalate state actor intervention. Fourth, because strategic flexibility is rooted in pragmatically operating to maintain the ability to compete in a given conflict, proxy wars rapidly take the shape of wars of attrition.

This paper concludes by providing a number of recommendations for breathing fresh life into proxy war scholarship. These recommendations include taking a broader examination of both proxy and proxy wars, to see the true range of strategies. Doing so will not only provide improved scholarship on the subject, but also provide a powerful analytical tool for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners alike. Moreover, proxy war scholars must move beyond the anchoring of post-9/11 bias, equating proxy wars with civil wars, and accept the truth that proxy wars occur on battlefields well beyond the Middle East and Africa. The failure to expand the aperture through which scholars view proxy wars, albeit with a mind toward not expanding so that everything is a proxy war, could lead to the gradual descension into irrelevance.

Russian proxy strategy

Visualizing Russia's proxy strategy as a traditional model which is reliant on the collaboration between a state actor (Russia) and non-state actors is a useful tool for helping understand Russia's evolving strategy throughout the conflict.[22] Russian proxy strategy at the outset of the Russo-Ukrainian War relied on speed and obfuscation to spring a fait accompli to take control of Crimea on 27 February 2014.[23] Russia's strategy used advance intelligence operations to prepare the environment for annexation – intelligence officers sought sympathetic military personnel and government administrators to turn in favor of Moscow's policy aims, and make the fait accompli a relatively simple task. Russia used contractual proxies *Wagner Group*, coupled with conventional Russian military units in unmarked uniforms, often stylized as "'Little Green Men,'" to conduct the fait accompli.[24] Crimea fell to Russia with little struggle. By mid-March, Crimea's new government, a blatant Russian proxy, put forth a referendum of independence from Ukraine, becoming the Republic of Crimea, and was subsequently absorbed into the Russian Federation.[25]

Despite most Western states not formally recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea, many Western companies seemed unfazed by the annexation. Few things better represent this than technology giant *Apple's* response to the annexation. In 2019, *Apple* modified all its map applications to show Crimea's political affiliation belonging to Russia.[26] This explicit acknowledgement of Moscow's hegemony over the peninsula lasted until shortly after Russia's February 2022 re-invasion, at which time *Apple* quietly changed Crimea's political affiliation back to Ukraine.[27]

Nevertheless, in April 2014, the Kremlin relied on a similar proxy strategy to that of Crimea to unofficially annex significant portions of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The goal was to take control of Ukrainian territory in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts before Ukraine, or the international community, could comprehend the situation. Temporal advantage underpinned the Kremlin's strategy.[28] The Kremlin sought to move quicker than Kyiv could counter and consolidate military forces on territorial acquisitions before a lax international community could respond.[29]

In this instance, however, Moscow quietly built a proxy army to spearhead the fait accompli. Moscow supplemented its new proxy army with Russian military officers, and select leaders from its contractual proxy, *Wagner,* to command many of the elements within the Donetsk and Luhansk proxy armies. Official reports, scholarship, and open-source intelligence refer to these forces as the Donetsk People's Army (DPA) and the Luhansk People's Army (LPA).[30] The DPA and LPA are also referred to as the 1st Army Corps and 2nd Army Corps, respectively.[31]

During the opening phase of the Donbas campaign the DPA and LPA fit the definition of exploited proxy. By that, the DPA and LPA was a composite force created by the Russian military to fulfill combat duty that would have otherwise been filled by Russian armed forces.[32] Because of the high agency costs associated with using an exploited proxy, Russian officers led or at least paralleled, the leaders of the DPA and LPA forces.[33]

At the outset of the Donbas campaign, the Kremlin's proxy strategy sought to keep Russian forces in the shadows. Nevertheless, several factors, such as social media, cell phone signal forensics, theater ISR, and open-source intelligence work, conspired to

unmask Russia's hidden hand.[34] To be sure, not long after Russia dispatched conventional army forces to Luhansk Airport and Ilovaisk in August 2014 to assist its faltering proxy army, it became evident that the conflict was not merely the result of a band of erstwhile separatists from the state's eastern reaches conspiring against Kyiv. Instead, it became quite clear that the conflict was a concerted Russian foreign policy gambit seeking to both undermine Kyiv and take sovereign Ukrainian territory.

At this point, contemporary *Framer* and *Reformer* scholarship would lead the onlooked to believe that Russia's proxy war was over because the Kremlin's forces no longer retained plausible deniability, nor was Russia an indirect participant in the conflict. Yet this is not the case. Russia's proxy strategy did not end, but it instead evolved. Although Vladimir Putin and his acolytes still played lip service to the idea that the situation in the Donbas was a separatist movement, the Kremlin doubled down on their conventional force employment. The subsequent battles for Donetsk Airport and Debal'tseve, which triggered the Minsk Protocol and Minsk II agreements, respectively, witnessed the full-throated commitment of Russian land forces to the war in Ukraine.[35]

Russia's proxy strategy evolved from one that emphasized providing a veneer of cover to its involvement in the conflict, to a strategy buoyed on the use of proxies as an auxiliary arm to take the sting off biting combat losses and provide to policymakers more strategic flexibility. To be sure, from August 2014 forward, Russia did next to nothing to hide its involvement in the conflict. Instead, the Kremlin used its proxy army as a *coup de tête*, and millstone, while army as a holding force and to deliver the *coup de grâce*, when applicable.

In both cases, Russia's proxy strategy was underpinned by the importance of time. Obfuscation provided Moscow with the time it needed to execute its faits accompli in Crimea and the Donbas. Using the DPA, LPA, and *Wagner* as auxiliaries, on the other hand, creates military and political time by jettisoning many of the risks associated with warfighting.[36] Additionally, the use of proxies as an auxiliary increases time because of a simple arithmetic idea. Every proxy killed or wounded in action, equates to one less Russian regular killed or wounded in action. In turn, this exchange dynamic (i.e. a proxy instead of a regular soldier) helps preserve the army, while still accounting for aggressive, goal-seeking foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Russia's transition from a proxy strategy oriented on hiding its involvement to one that used its proxies as auxiliary land forces, foreshadowed its proxy strategy in the wake of its February 2022 re-invasion of Ukraine. In the interim, Russia used the DPR and LPR to govern the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk that it de facto annexed, while it used the DPA and LPA to provide a credible deterrent to hold the contact line.[37] This arrangement largely remained fixed from the signing of Minsk II to February 2022.

Concurrently, however, the DPA and LPA evolved from an exploited proxy to a cultural proxy. Cultural proxies are those that share a cultural bond with their principal, and therefore possess few agency costs, have high autonomy, and are trusted with more challenging operations.[38] Based on the absence of primary source information on the subject, this change presumably reflected, in part, because of the burgeoning trust between the proxies and the Kremlin. Despite coming up short while fighting independently at Donetsk Airport, Luhansk Airport, and Ilovaisk, it is not a stretch to assume that the Kremlin began to see the DPA and LPA as a steadfast surrogate for Russian military forces in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the evolution of the DPA and LPA, from exploited proxy to cultural surrogate, was not entirely an acknowledgement of brotherhood. Rather, the evolution reflected a cynical and calculated move by the Kremlin to fleece the DPR and LPR into being a culpable partner in a future invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin sought to Russify the DPR and LPR, and outlying areas in eastern and southern Ukraine, by weaponizing the ethnic and linguistic symmetries between eastern Ukrainians and Russians.[39] The Kremlin also attempted to fuze these symmetries during the period between Minsk II and February 2022 by doling out Russian citizenship, work visas, and passports throughout the occupied regions. The goal of this line of effort was to erode Kyiv's political capital in Donetsk and Luhansk, and replace it with that of Moscow, in hopes of making both oblasts amenable to future Russian annexation.[40]

Russifying both the proxy armies and the proxy governments, by extension, would further accelerate the population of Donetsk and Luhansk's oblasts toward future annexation. Moreover, given the premium placed on land forces if, and when, a large operation to denationalize Ukraine came the DPA and LPA would have to be trusted to operate independently. Indications of the DPA and LPA's Russification included providing them a Russian uniformed appearance, and allocating them the respectable monikers, 1st and 2nd Army Corps, respectively.[41]

Once Russia reinvaded Ukraine in February 2022, both *Wagner* and the DPA and LPA took on distinct roles. *Wagner*, seen as a trustworthy proxy because of its contractual bond with the Kremlin, was afforded significant latitude to operate as independently, working alongside the Russian Army, but not necessarily working for it.[42] Additionally, *Wagner's* status as a private company afforded it the opportunity to recruit and hire personnel differently than the Russian Army's process. *Wagner* was able to quickly hire and train contractors, which could then be rapidly sent to the front to reinforce, or augment, existing military operations. To be sure, during the summer of 2022, *Wagner* reported drew up 40,000 contractors, largely recruited from Russian prisons, while the Russian Army had to depend on Russia's bi-annual conscription process.[43]

The ability for *Wagner* to rapidly grow, operate on a different growth plan than the slower army process, and operate independently, readily fit with Moscow's need for flexibility. *Wagner's* employment allowed the Kremlin to sidestep culmination because their existence brought an additive effect – *Wagner's* presence increased the time available for Russian forces to achieve the Kremlin's policy aims in Ukraine. *Wagner's* additive effect on time results from two conditions.

First, a basic correlation exists between available military forces available (e.g. on-hand, surrogates, or those to be mobilized) and the duration of a conflict. A small force, especially in wars of attrition, provides less time, whereas a larger force provides more time. *Wagner* provided the Kremlin with 50,000 trustworthy surrogates, thereby providing Russian policymakers more temporal opportunities than it would have otherwise had.

Second, *Wagner* fits with a traditional, and insightful, Russian view on attrition's utility in warfare. Russian military strategist Alexander Svechin writes that when a quick, decisive strike is out of the question, "geographical objectives and secondary operations" become strategic imperatives.[44] More specifically, Svechin asserts that:

> The weary path of a strategy of attrition, which leads to the expenditure of much greater resources than a short destructive strike aimed at the heart of the enemy, is in general,

chosen only when a war cannot be ended by a single blow. The operations of a strategy of attrition are not so much direct stages toward the achievement of an ultimate goal as they are stages in the deployment of material superiority, which would ultimately deprive the enemy of the means for successful resistance.[45]

Taken in context of Russia's failure to quickly topple Kyiv and control Kharkiv in late February 2022, *Wagner's* use in places such as Mariupol and Bakhmut makes a lot more sense. Russia failed to win the conflict with a quick, decisive strike on Kyiv, and thus, the Kremlin then likely reasoned that the best strategy to defeat Ukraine resided in out-resourcing Ukraine and exhausting its manpower reserves. *Wagner* facilitated that shift in strategy, and likely contributes to its increased importance after the Russian military's early failures around Kyiv and Kharkiv.

By Russia's invasion, the DPA and LPA, a more trusted cultural proxy, was given a set of tasks similar to those of *Wagner* in Mariupol and Bakhmut.[46] The DPA and LPA were also a bite-and-hold force, used primarily to consume Kyiv's personnel and equipment in large attritional affairs in the Donbas.

Wagner, the DPA, and the LPA use as attritional battering rams and operational distractions, provided the Kremlin the strategic flexibility for Russian army forces and Russian naval infantry to capture territory along the Sea of Azov's coastline and create the long-coveted land bridge to Crimea. Moreover, in keeping with Svechin's postulate on attrition operations, Russia's proxy army has provided a covering force for Russia to further invest its position along the Sea of Azov's coastline, while Russian proxies fought notable bite-and-hold battles with the Ukrainian armed forces in Donetsk, Mariupol, and Bakhmut meant to exhaust Ukrainian personnel and equipment.[47]

What's more, high-end weaponry, like High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) and other precision munitions, are expensive, exist in limited quantities, and are not being produced in a way befitting the requirements of industrial, large-scale warfare.[48] Again, keeping Svechin's thoughts on attrition in mind, it is therefore not a stretch to assume that Russian military strategy intentionally paired slow, grinding combat with the Ukrainian's reliance on US (and other Western partners) high-end weaponry in an effort to exhaust those stockpiles. Once those stockpiles are exhausted, or are no longer able to generate battlefield parity, Russian forces will likely move from a positional strategy to one of mobility and acquiring whatever territorial gains best align with the Kremlin's revised policy ambitions. Keep in mind, Russia's doing this under the dark cloud of exhausting their own resources.[49]

Nevertheless, the Kremlin's strategy does not appear as haphazard, or inherently inefficient as a lot of reporting suggests. Russia's proxy strategy appears intent on somewhat protecting its regular army, while using its proxy army – the DPA, LPA, and *Wagner Group* – as an offset mechanism to Ukraine's stalwart defense of its homeland, underpinned by a vigorous US proxy strategy. The Russian proxy strategy operates aligned with historic Russian military thinking, as noted by writing of Svechin. It remains to be seen, however, which proxy strategy will bear the most fruit.

US proxy strategy

The U.S. proxy strategy is vastly different than that of Moscow. When examining the U.S. proxy strategy, it is important to remember that a proxy is simply an actor (Actor B) who

a principal (Actor A) relies on as an intermediary operator, an *in-lieu of actor*, to advance its political-military purposes. Moreover, when examining proxy strategy, it is important to remember that they are not accompanied by fixed ways of fighting, nor inextricably linked to a single type of conflict. Rather, proxy strategies are pragmatic philosophies of risk management which seek to create temporal advantages to generate strategic flexibility so that the principal actor can pursue his political-military objectives. If Russia's proxy strategy is a traditional model that pairs a state actor with non-state actors, then the U.S. strategy can be described as a technology diffusion model between state actors.[50] The U.S. technology diffusion strategy rests on the idea of transactional proxy relationships.

A transactional proxy relationship, in effect, represents a business deal between two strategic actors – Actor A (the principal) and Actor B (the proxy, or the agent).[51] In a transactional relationship, Actor A takes a backseat role and does not participate in the conflict through the use of his own armed forces.[52] Instead, Actor A participates in the conflict by sharing intelligence with Actor B, equipping and training Actor B's forces, and providing Actor B's government with significant financial support.[53] Moreover, by virtue of the outward recognition of a transactional principal's participation in a conflict, the relevance of direct or indirect involvement to proxy war is moot.

Transactional proxy relationships, in some instances, look like coalitions or alliances, but they are not. Risk and agency are prime discriminators between proxy relationships and coalitions and alliances.[54] The structure of alliances and coalitions more equitably distributes risk between partners, based on each member's respective capabilities and political caveats.[55] Unlike coalitions and alliances, however, in proxy relationships the principal (i.e. Actor A) unlades the majority of tactical risk to Actor B.[56] Tactical risk includes the human and materiel costs of warfighting.[57] By offloading the variables of human and materiel costs to Actor B, Actor A thus neutralizes the potential domestic and political unrest that accompanies the death and destruction of his own forces.[58] With no soldiers coming home in body bags, Actor A generates time and strategic flexibility to create, and manipulate, a pragmatic proxy strategy to advance his proxy strategy in a third-party conflict.[59] The U.S. proxy strategy in Ukraine fits nicely with the transactional proxy relationship model and illustrates a view of proxy war which diverges from most *Reformer* proxy war scholarship.

The period of providing resources and training Ukrainian forces prior to February 2022 cannot be classified as a proxy war. During the period between the Minsk II agreement and February 2022, the United States (and its Western partners) provided security assistance and security force assistance to Ukraine as part of a larger strategy of deterrence. Yet, when Russia did reinvade Ukraine, the U.S. policy rapidly evolved from deterrence to defeating Russia on the battlefield, albeit with Ukrainian forces doing the fighting and dying. The public record, however, does not reflect this assertion. This is likely for a couple reasons. The term "'proxy,'" for instance, carries a negative connotation of blatant exploitation for self-interested gain. This understanding of proxy is an abrogation, helped along by insufficient literature that both defines proxies and the range of proxy strategies. As a result, transactional proxies are often dressed in the language of partnership and mutual interest or supporting sovereignty and the existing international system.[60]

What are the indicators that the United States is attempting to defeat Russia in Ukraine? Three primary factors demonstrate that the United States is openly pursuing

Russia's defeat in Ukraine. First, the United States appears to be thumbing its nose at worries of escalation.[61] Since the conflicts reignition in February 2022, the United States has not given agency to any of the threats of redlines and escalation emanating out of the Kremlin. Instead, the United States openly pushes ahead with intelligence sharing, arming, and training Ukrainian forces.

Second, the United States is providing Ukraine with high-end equipment, extremely limited and expensive equipment, enormously valuable intelligence, and important training.[62] The gifting of HIMARS and High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missiles (HARM), for instance, demonstrates a degree of resolve and goals which are orders of magnitude greater than equipment transfers focused on equipment like helmets, body armor, and small arms ammunition.[63]

Third, the United States military established a task force in Germany, *Task Force Dragon*, to support its proxy strategy in Ukraine. *Task Force Dragon* was a hasty ad hoc command, liaison, and equipping element drawn from the headquarters of the US Army's XVIII Airborne Corps to help supervise the U.S. proxy strategy in Ukraine.[64] A brigadier general led *Task Force Dragon*, despite the task force being under nominal command of the XVIII Airborne Corps' lieutenant general. *Task Force Dragon* returned to the US in October 2022, but was subsequently replaced by a new formation – the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine (SAG-U).[65] SAG-U, led by a U.S. Army lieutenant general, provides a robust, and institutional, solution to advance the U.S. proxy strategy in Ukraine in ways that *Task Force Dragon* was ill-equipped to do. A lieutenant general, or a three-star in military vernacular, carries a significantly greater degree of power, influence, and authority than that of a brigadier (one-star general). The establishment of SAG-U, at the expense of *Task Force Dragon*, and the elevation of the command from brigadier general to lieutenant general, demonstrates the emphasis, and priority, that the United States has placed on its effort to share intelligence with the Ukrainians, and help equip and train Kyiv's military forces.

Findings

As became apparent during the examination of each proxy strategy, the Russia and United States models are vastly different. The Kremlin relies on a traditional proxy strategy in which a state actor utilizes non-state actors to serve as a bludgeoning force to offset material costs, political risk, and generate time and strategic flexibility. On the other hand, the United States relies on a technology diffusion effort as the handrail to its proxy strategy. When taking a comparative analysis of each actor's proxy strategy in Ukraine three primary findings are worth noting.

Proxies – a range of options, not a fixed relationship

First, "'proxies as 'auxiliaries'" are generally an overlooked aspect in *Framer* and *Reformer* proxy war scholarship. To be sure, aside from a few little-known works, such as Sibylle Scheipers' *Irregular Auxiliaries after 1945*, the "'proxies as 'auxiliaries'" idea receives almost no recognition in modern proxy scholarship, a point of which scholar Vladimir Rauta highlights.[66] The absence of this idea represents a lacuna in modern proxy war

scholarship. Although attribution is hard to discern, the lacuna likely surfaces from the emphasis *Framers* and *Reformers* place in their research on the proxy wars emanating out of the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and the associated proxy wars in the Middle East and Africa.

What's more, the lacuna likely deepened as a result of the scholarship not applying a sufficiently critical eye to government primary source information, which, as already noted, skirted around the idea of proxies and proxy strategy, in its publicly released information. The use of a handful of terms and phrases are indicative of the clever use of language to hide proxy strategies. For instance, "'partner,'" "'partnered security force,'" and "'by, with, and through,'" are some of the more common phrases that governments use today to throw the conflict scholar off the trail of a proxy strategy.

Further, the lacuna also is likely the result of insufficient field research. A survey of *Framer* and *Reformer* literature finds that much of the source material is insular and repetitive. While scourging the archives and open-source information, a vast amount of primary source information relating to field research remains untapped. Proxy war scholarship would benefit greatly, and likely expand to better account for the praxis of proxy strategy, by putting down the journals and venturing out to interview policymakers, strategists, and real-world practitioners to gain insight from the field to fill in the gaps that existing scholarship currently misses.

Proxy strategies are not linear, but pragmatic and adaptive

Second, it appears that Russia adapted its general strategy, and its proxy strategy in particular, to account for the U.S. technology diffusion proxy strategy. In the initial phase of Presidential Drawdowns, the U.S. support was primarily financial, but contained a small number of meaningful armaments.[67] However, by mid-March 2022, the Presidential Drawdowns came with a degree of high-impact weapon systems, which could (and did) push the conflict toward operational and tactical level parity. This included 600 Stinger anti-air missile systems, 2,600 Javelin anti-tank rocket systems, 40 million rounds of small arms ammunition, and 1 million artillery rounds, grenades, and mortars.[68] As the conflict continued, the United States provided increasing lethal aid packages, which eventually resulted in the transfer of HIMARS and lesser artillery systems. By the summer of 2022, these aid packages allowed Kyiv to turn the tables on Moscow.[69] The Ukrainian armed forces were inflicting a devastating number of casualties on Russian forces.

Taking into consideration the time lag between receiving the Presidential Drawdown packages, the time it took to briefly train on that equipment, and then getting it into the field, by the early summer of 2022, Ukraine's forces were generating a withering number of casualties on the Russian military. Open-source reporting indicates that Russia had suffered upwards of 75,000 casualties by this point in the conflict.[70].

Likely alarmed by the staggering number of casualties, Russian general officer deaths, and the U.S. continued willingness to provide useful military equipment to Ukraine, the Kremlin appears to have shifted its proxy strategy to account for the introduction of U.S. weaponry. By all measures, it appears that Russia's proxy strategy shifted to offset the Ukrainian advantage in firepower through mass – that is, throwing more

soldiers at the problem than weapons stockpiles can withstand over time. The *Wagner Group's* authorization to recruit personnel from the Russian prison system is perhaps the most notable example of the Kremlin's strategy shift regarding its proxy strategy.[71] Yegveny Prigozhin, the wily owner of the *Wagner Group*, and his authorization to "'enlist" approximately 40,000 prisoners to augment *Wagner's* 10,000 contract fighters, provide the Russian Army with approximately four additional division's worth of disposal proxy manpower.[72] That infusion of manpower has likely allowed Russia to compensate for the significant amount of casualties that the U.S. proxy strategy, vigorously executed by the Ukrainian armed forces, has inflicted on the Russian military (to include its proxy armies).

Escalation might be a thing of the past

Third, the concerns of escalation and de-escalation might be a thing of the past. Fears of Russian escalation to the point of using chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons was a concern early in the conflict. Yet, as the United States (and other Western partners) pushed forward with incrementally outfitting the Ukrainian military with more potent weapons, the Kremlin never followed through with any significant weapons of mass destruction (WMD) related escalation. Moreover, the openness in which the United States discusses SAG-U, which is openly responsible for weapons transfers to the Ukrainian armed forces, demonstrates that the U.S. proxy strategy is not concerned with indirect intervention, plausible deniability, or de-escalation.[73] *Task Force Dragon* and SAG-U provide policymakers in Washington, DC the required strategic flexibility to orchestrate a proxy strategy from Germany, against Russia, in Ukraine, relying on Kyiv's armed forces.

At the same time, Russia's wonton destruction of civilian infrastructure, the intentional killing of civilians, and general attempt to denationalize Ukraine, in spite of the conventions governing the rules-based international order show another type of disregard for the potential of escalation.

Conclusion

Moving forward, proxy war scholarship, and the international relations community at large, would be better served by a broader appreciation of proxies and proxy strategies. As it currently stands, the proxy war scholarship provides limited utility by its fixed beliefs on ideas such as indirect intervention, plausible deniability, and who is (and is not) a proxy. A broader appreciation of proxies and proxy strategy, on the other hand will find that both Russia and the United States are using proxy strategies in Ukraine, albeit from extremely opposite ends of the proxy strategy spectrum.

The Russian strategy, which shifted after open-source, and theater level, intelligence outed their support for their Donbas proxies in August 2014, reflects the intention to create time and strategic flexibility so that the Russian armed forces can outlast Ukraine's stalwart defense, which is propped up by U.S. (and other Western partners) weapons donations. The U.S. proxy strategy, by contrast, seeks to defeat Russia in Ukraine by arming and training the Ukrainian armed forces, while also providing

intelligence that Kyiv has used to devastating effect. However, given contemporary *Framer* and *Reformer* thinking on proxy war, this comparative strategy exercise would not be possible. Nor would be the potential to make the connection between proxy strategies and the reality that they often lead to wars of attrition.

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