



Contribution ID: 95

Type: **Paper Abstract (Closed Panels)**

The Russian Invasion and the Changing Character of Proxy War: Toward a Comprehensive Framework

Thursday, 29 June 2023 14:15 (20 minutes)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has triggered a contentious debate among policymakers and scholars about whether the external support provided to the Ukrainian armed forces amounts to a proxy war between Russia and the West. Instead of engaging in tedious arguments about whether or not the armed conflict in Ukraine can or should be classified as an instance of proxy war ("proxy war as an event"), this paper examines to which extent "proxy war as an idea" adds analytical value to our understanding of the ongoing Russian aggression and, specifically, external support by Ukraine's Western backers.

To that end, it offers a conceptual reflection on how the notion of proxy war has evolved over the past decades. It then presents a novel framework by adopting a level of analysis approach, which conceptualizes proxy wars as a *logic*, a *relationship*, and a *process* –thus enabling a comprehensive understanding that builds upon previous, at times competing, perspectives. Applying this framework to the war in Ukraine, the paper's findings indicate that a proxy war framework can help illuminate some of the most pressing dynamics of the conflict including the interplay of interest and risks as well as the interactions between Ukraine, its external backers, and Russia. Conversely, the case study also finds a need to reconsider several generally accepted characteristics such as actor types and actor pairings, the notion of indirectness, and the role of airpower in proxy warfare.

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Yes

What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?

Strategic Studies/Security Studies

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No, I am submitting a Closed Panel abstract

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Session Classification: Closed Panels

Track Classification: Closed Panels: Military Interventions