

## External Support to Ukraine and the Changing Character of Proxy Warfare: Toward a Comprehensive Framework

Michel Wyss<sup>ab</sup>

**Abstract:** Military assistance to Ukraine has raised concerns about whether the West is involved in a proxy war with Russia, leading to a contentious public discourse. Instead of adding to an ultimately tedious debate, this paper makes the case for ‘proxy warfare’ as a useful analytical concept to attain a better understanding of some of the most pressing dynamics in contemporary armed conflict. Introducing a novel levels-of-analysis framework, it examines external support to Ukraine along the conceptual axes of logic, relationship, and process. Its findings indicate that whereas military assistance to Ukraine’s armed forces largely corresponds with proxy warfare’s enduring features, some observed variation may point toward changes in its character, such as its re-emergence in a conventional high-intensity war setting coupled with a focus on risk management and escalation avoidance.

### 1. Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is widely considered a turning point or – in the words of German chancellor Olaf Scholz – a “Zeitenwende” for European security, seemingly marking the return of conventional interstate war to the continent.<sup>1</sup> The scope of the Russian attack was matched by international reactions, in particular those in the Western hemisphere. Within days, the United States and the European Union implemented a strict sanctions regime although expectations of a swift demise of Russia’s economy quickly proved unfounded.<sup>2</sup> Aside from economic coercion, Western countries have provided military assistance

---

<sup>a</sup>Strategic Studies, Military Academy at ETH Zurich; <sup>b</sup>Institute for History, Leiden University  
Contact: [michel.wyss@milak.ethz.ch](mailto:michel.wyss@milak.ethz.ch)

<sup>1</sup> “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022,” Bundesregierung, February 27, 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356> (accessed June 19, 2023); “Russian Attack on Ukraine: A turning point for Euro-Atlantic security,” Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Berlin, March 3, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/russian-attack-on-ukraine-a-turning-point-for-euro-atlantic-security> (accessed June 19, 2023); “Speech by Commissioner Gentiloni hosted by the University of Oxford: Turning point: the implications of Putin's war for Europe's economic and political choices,” European Commission, March 22, 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_22\\_1969](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_22_1969) (accessed June 19, 2023); Christoph Heusgen “The War in Ukraine Will Be a Historic Turning Point,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/germany/2022-05-12/war-ukraine-will-be-historic-turning-point> (accessed June 19, 2023).

In fact, however, Moscow’s 2014/15 Donbas campaign had already featured fighting between conventional Russian and Ukrainian forces, see Amos C. Fox, “The donbas in flames: an operational level analysis of Russia’s 2014-2015 donbas campaign,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, doi:10.1080/09592318.2022.2111496, 10-15.

<sup>2</sup> Ingrid Melander and Gabriela Baczyńska, “EU targets Russian economy after 'deluded autocrat' Putin invades Ukraine,” *Reuters*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-launch-new-sanctions-against-russia-over-barbaric-attack-ukraine-2022-02-24/> (accessed June 19, 2023); “EU sanctions against Russia explained,”

at a speed and scale that is all but unprecedented – gradually moving from light shoulder-fired weapons to increasingly heavy and sophisticated crewed combat systems as well as aiding Ukraine with other crucial forms of support that include intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, reconnaissance (ISTAR), training, and operational planning.<sup>3</sup> In addition to military assistance by foreign governments, the Ukrainian armed forces have also received material assistance by commercial enterprise such as Starlink, with its mobile internet terminals proving critical for the former’s battlefield communications and control.<sup>4</sup>

There is little doubt that external support has proven a major, if not *the* major factor for Ukrainian defensive efforts. At the same time, it has raised concerns about the risk of escalation and the level of Western involvement. In particular, there has been a debate about whether or not NATO is engaged in a proxy war with Russia, as alleged by the latter’s foreign minister.<sup>5</sup> Former US Secretary of Defense and Director of the CIA Leon Panetta bluntly stated as much in a mid-March interview as did former SACEUR Gen. Philip Breedlove, and a number of scholars and commentators, among them Ukraine’s ambassador to Germany, have reached similar conclusions.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, both US government officials and other academics have emphatically

---

European Council/Council of the European Union, last reviewed August 16, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/> (accessed June 19, 2023); Natasha Bertrand and Kati Bo Lillies, “Russian sanctions slow to bite as US officials admit frustrations over pace of pain in Moscow,” *CNN*, September 16, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/16/politics/russia-sanctions-ukraine-slow-economic-pain/index.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); Averi Harper, Alisa Wiersema, and Brittany Shepherd, “If sanctions won’t stop Putin, what will,” *ABC News*, February 25, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/sanctions-wont-stop-putin-note/story?id=82963408> (accessed June 19, 2023); “Western sanctions won't sway Kremlin, says Russia's former president Medvedev,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-ex-president-says-western-sanctions-wont-sway-kremlin-2022-03-25/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Borrell, “Defending Ukraine in its hour of maximum need,” *European External Action*, March 1, 2022, [https://www.ecas.europa.eu/ecas/defending-ukraine-its-hour-maximum-need-0\\_en](https://www.ecas.europa.eu/ecas/defending-ukraine-its-hour-maximum-need-0_en) (accessed June 19, 2023); “U.S. Announces 'Unprecedented' New Weapons Aid To Ukraine,” *RFE/RL*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-ukraine-unprecedented-support-weapons/31756577.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); Rachel Stohl and Elias Yousif, “The Risks of U.S. Military Assistance to Ukraine,” *Stimson*, July 13, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/the-risks-of-u-s-military-assistance-to-ukraine/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Amritha Jayanti, “Starlink and the Russia-Ukraine War: A Case of Commercial Technology and Public Purpose,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/starlink-and-russia-ukraine-war-case-commercial-technology-and-public-purpose> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> “Russia’s Lavrov: Do not underestimate threat of nuclear war,” *Reuters*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-western-weapons-ukraine-legitimate-targets-russian-military-2022-04-25/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> “U.S. Is in a Proxy War with Russia: Panetta,” *Bloomberg*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2022-03-17/u-s-is-in-a-proxy-war-with-russia-panetta-video> (accessed

rejected the term, calling it “Kremlin talking points” and the “the ultimate insult to what the Ukrainians are doing.”<sup>7</sup>

In a sense, this dispute is hardly surprising. ‘Proxy war’ has long been a controversial label to denounce supposedly illegitimate external meddling and “used more often to criticize the foreign policies of a country than to describe a specific form of warfare.”<sup>8</sup> As such, it has been argued that this notion offers little value beyond being yet another politicized and contested term, akin to the Russian insistence on calling their actions in Ukraine a “special military operation” instead of a war.<sup>9</sup> It is also striking that whereas policy makers and military doctrine regularly emphasize how adversaries engage in proxy warfare, both are far more circumspect in using the term to describe their actions or those of their allies.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the US, for example, has used a range of different terminologies, from “foreign internal defense” and “security assistance” to the more recently coined “by-with-through.”<sup>11</sup>

---

June 19, 2023); The Argument, “Why Sanctions Won’t Stop Putin,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/opinion/why-russian-sanctions-wont-stop-putin.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); Michel Wyss, “Is Europe Prepared for a Proxy War with Russia,” *Lawfare*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/europe-prepared-proxy-war-russia> (accessed June 19, 2023); Eliot A. Cohen, “America’s Hesitation Is Heartbreaking,” *The Atlantic*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/ukraine-united-states-nato/627052/>; Sam Winter-Levy, “A Proxy War in Ukraine Is the Worst Possible Outcome – Except for All the Others,” *War on the Rocks*, March 28, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/a-proxy-war-in-ukraine-is-the-worst-possible-outcome-except-for-all-the-others/> (accessed June 19, 2023); Hal Brands, “Russia Is Right: The U.S. Is Waging a Proxy War in Ukraine,” *Bloomberg*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-05-10/russia-ukraine-war-putin-s-right-that-u-s-is-waging-a-proxy-war> (accessed June 19, 2023); Monica Duffy Toft, “The US isn’t at war with Russia, technically – but its support for Ukraine offers a classic case of a proxy war,” *The Conversation*, October 20, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/the-us-isnt-at-war-with-russia-technically-but-its-support-for-ukraine-offers-a-classic-case-of-a-proxy-war-192064> (accessed June 19, 2023); “Makeiev: ‘Deutsche Panzer überlebenswichtig,’” *ZDF heute*, January 15, 2023, <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/oleksii-makeiev-kampfpanzer-leopard-ukraine-krieg-russland-100.html> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Olivier Knox, “Why Ukraine Isn’t a Proxy War (Yet?),” *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/05/03/why-ukraine-isnt-proxy-war-yet/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Brendan Sozer, “Development of proxy relationships: a case study of the Lebanese Civil War,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2016), 643; Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, “Five Myths about Sponsor-Proxy Relationships,” *Lawfare*, December 16, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/five-myths-about-sponsor-proxy-relationships> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> “Special Military Operation,” Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, no date, [https://eng.mil.ru/en/special\\_operation.htm](https://eng.mil.ru/en/special_operation.htm) (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> “Statement from the National Security Advisor Ambassador John Bolton,” U.S. Department of State, May 5, 2019, <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2019/05/05/statement-from-the-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-bolton-2/index.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); “Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy 2020” (Washington D.C.: US Department of Defense, 2020), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Todd Greentree, “What Went Wrong in Afghanistan,” *Parameters*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2021), 14; Amos C. Fox, “In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare” (Land Warfare Paper 123, Arlington: Institute for Land Warfare, February 2019), 3-5; Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joined Forces Quarterly*, No. 89 (2018).

However, dismissing proxy wars as yet another pejorative label ignores a research program that has significantly grown over the last decades, particularly in the last ten years. This program has proven highly relevant for analyzing numerous major armed conflicts in recent memory and is poised to become even more crucial in an area of renewed great power competition.<sup>12</sup> As Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss have argued elsewhere,

“‘proxy war’ as an idea has followed ‘proxy war’ as an event, taking center stage in international security debates: the rapid expansion of the literature mapped onto the quick transformation of many contemporary conflicts into complex proxy wars, just as the term entered the lexicon of national security and defense strategies. This is unsurprising, for proxy wars have wide-ranging implications for international security and are therefore a critically important subject of inquiry. Existing studies have shown that the provision of external support to belligerents in civil wars, insurgencies, and other forms of political violence internationalizes these armed conflicts, raises their lethality rate, and increases the likelihood of conflict relapse.”<sup>13</sup>

This paper does not add to the – in its author’s view unhelpful – debate whether or not the war in Ukraine is a proxy war. Instead, it makes the case for proxy warfare as an analytical concept that can improve our understanding of some of the most pressing dynamics of the contemporary security environment and armed conflicts. To that end, the paper presents a novel level-of-analysis framework that conceptualizes proxy warfare as a *logic*, a *relationship*, and a *process*. Applying it to the Russo-Ukrainian war and comparing it to other cases of proxy warfare, the paper offers an in-depth analysis of military assistance to Ukraine along the framework’s three

---

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Rauta, “Framers, founders, and reformers: Three generations of proxy war research,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2021); Niklas Karlén et al., “Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2021); Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* (Routledge, 2023); Candace Rondeaux and David Sterman, “Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World” (Washington: New America, February 2019); Dominic Tierny, “The Future of Sino-U.S. Proxy War,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2021).

<sup>13</sup> Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss, “The Study of Proxy Wars,” in Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, 2.

conceptual axes. Its findings indicate that whereas the nature of proxy warfare remains constant, the war in Ukraine points to potential changes in its character, including its setting, its predominant causal logic, and its conduct.<sup>14</sup> While over the past two decades, Western countries have waged proxy warfare primarily with and against irregular forces following a logic of expediency, the war in Ukraine may be seen as a harbinger of its (re)emergence in a conventional high-intensity war setting that is primarily concerned with managing risk and avoiding escalation leading to a direct confrontation between major military powers.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The following section examines and refutes some of the main objections against the use of the “proxy warfare” label, both in general and in the specific context of the war in Ukraine, and briefly discusses how its theoretical and conceptual approaches have evolved in recent decades. The paper then presents the comprehensive level-of-analysis framework, before applying it to a case study of Western external support to Ukraine’s war efforts and contrasting it with other cases of proxy warfare. It concludes by briefly summarizing the case study’s findings while also discussing the study’s limitations.

## 2. Proxy Warfare: Analytical Framework or “Cold War Cliché” Redux?

Proxy warfare, preliminarily defined here as *the substitution of the direct use of force to attain strategic aims through the employment of third parties in exchange for tangible support*, is a controversial concept, and few if any of the armed conflicts of recent memory speak as clearly to its often politicized and contested nature as the war in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> Apart from the above-mentioned charges against ‘proxy

---

<sup>14</sup> This follows the purported Clausewitzian distinction between war’s nature and character, see Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89; Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers, “Introduction: The Changing Character of War,” in Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds.), *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11–12; Hew Strachan, “Strategy in the Twenty-First Century,” in Strachan and Scheipers, *The Changing Character of War*, 510-511, 518, 520. However, Echevarria has questioned the, in his view simplistic, dichotomy between war’s enduring nature and changing character, see Antulio J. Echevarria II, “War’s Changing Character and Varying Nature: A Closer Look at Clausewitz’s Trinity,” *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2017).

<sup>15</sup> I will primarily refer to *proxy warfare* rather than to *proxy war/proxy wars* (except for direct quotations). The reason for this is straightforward: proxy wars imply discrete events with spatial and temporal boundaries that can be distinguished from other armed conflicts that do not share the same attributes (i.e., what may be awkwardly called “non-proxy wars”). In fact, such bounds are not only fluid but also affected by considerable dynamics, with proxy

war’ on political grounds, some scholars have also questioned the label’s analytical value concerning the war in Ukraine.

In general, three arguments can be discerned. First, some scholars point out the alignment of aims between Ukraine and its external backers, thus noting that as long as the latter’s main goal is to support Ukraine in defending itself, their assistance cannot be considered an instance of a proxy war.<sup>16</sup> Second, others have scrutinized the nature of war’s principal actors, claiming that in a “classic proxy war [...] there are two proxies fighting each other [...] [t]here are two sides, where two big powers — who don’t want to fight each other — then use smaller groups to fight each other.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, some academics argue that the notion of proxy war is problematic because it denies Ukraine agency and “suggests that the Ukrainians are only fighting because Nato put them up to it.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, according to Lawrence Freedman, the very notion is misleading “because the indigenous forces always had their own objectives”, whereas “[proxy war] implies a simple hierarchy and so misses the elements of bargaining that are evident in all war-time coalitions.”<sup>19</sup> Many of these arguments regurgitated older accusations against proxy warfare. In the past years, critics have charged that the concept is a Cold War relic that offers only a “poor description” of the processes it seeks to explain, if at all; that it is atheoretical and only applied “descriptively to particular insurgencies”; and that the complex interactions of non-state armed groups with states cannot be reduced to a “state-centric view of proxy wars”, which supposedly treats the former

---

engagement leading to direct interventions, and in other instances, vice versa. Furthermore, proxy relationships occur and sometimes are formed outside of, or prior to, what the relevant scholarship as well as international law considers a state of armed conflict, and – in some instances – they even extend beyond a given conflict theater, both geographically as well as in terms of their duration. See also Christopher C. Harmon, *Warfare in Peacetime: Proxies and State Powers* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Knox, “Why Ukraine Isn’t a Proxy War”; Geraint Hughes, “Is the War in Ukraine a Proxy Conflict,” King’s College London, October 12, 2022, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/is-the-war-in-ukraine-a-proxy-conflict> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Knox, “Why Ukraine Isn’t a Proxy War.”

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Freedman, “Ukraine is not a proxy war,” *The New Statesman*, January 23, 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2023/01/ukraine-proxy-war-russia-vladimir-putin-nato> (accessed June 19, 2023). It is interesting to note that in a 2016 article, Freedman himself wrote that “[d]espite pressure from Congress and within government” the Obama administration refused to send lethal aid to Ukraine because “the White House was anxious to avoid a proxy war with Moscow.” See Lawrence Freedman, “Ukraine and the Art of Limited War,” *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (2016), 25. See also Hughes, “Is the War in Ukraine a Proxy Conflict.”

<sup>19</sup> Freedman, “Ukraine is not a proxy war.”

“as subordinate entities, with no autonomous decision-making capacity.”<sup>20</sup> A number of studies by scholars of proxy warfare themselves have reinforced such notions, claiming that early scholarly works on the subject in their “Cold War formulation” conceived of proxies as “little more than third-party tools of statecraft without any agency, intent, or, indeed, interests visibly separable from those of a well-resourced state sponsor.”<sup>21</sup> Tyrone L. Groh has even asserted that such clichés, in which “small states on the periphery were often viewed as pawns in a much greater game,” still dominate contemporary frameworks and thinking about the topic.<sup>22</sup>

In reality, these claims reveal more about the perfunctory reading of those making them than about the object of their criticism. The much maligned early Cold War scholarship on proxy warfare in fact offered far more sophisticated and complex arguments on sponsor-proxy interaction, diverging interests, and proxy agency than its detractors give it credit for.<sup>23</sup> For example, in the late 1950s, Herbert Dinerstein cautioned that even if external parties sought to keep the scope of a given military confrontation limited, their proxies may instead view it as an all-out conflict and “might, in extreme desperation, act so as to expand the war.”<sup>24</sup> Two decades later, Richard Bissell described Soviet support for Cuba’s intervention in Angola – the former of which he considered essential for the scale of the latter – as “an organic relationship [...] that made the accomplishment of each government’s goals dependent upon the actions of the other,” while pointing out that it was difficult to determine who initiated the Cuban engagement in the first place.<sup>25</sup> These arguments were later echoed in Janice Stein’s research. She notes that even if

---

<sup>20</sup> Stathis Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, “International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2010), 420; Idean Salehyan, “The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2010), 496; Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Michael A. Innes “Preface,” in Michael A. Innes (ed.) *Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates & the Use of Force* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2012), xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy Wars: The Least Bad Option* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 2. See also Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 5-6, 18; Rondeaux and Serman, “Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare,” 49-50.

<sup>23</sup> This is not to suggest that simplistic account did not exist, but they were in the minority. For a particularly egregious example, see Victor H. Krulak, “The Strategic Limits of Proxy War,” *Strategic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1974).

<sup>24</sup> Herbert S. Dinerstein, “The Soviet Employment of Military Strength for Political Purposes,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 318, No. 1 (1958), 108.

<sup>25</sup> Richard E. Bissell, “Soviet Use of Proxies in the Third World: The Case of Yemen,” *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1978), 88. Subsequent research argued that it was primarily the Cubans manipulating the Soviets into supporting

local hostilities were of little direct relevance to the superpowers,” proxies nonetheless managed to frequently mobilize their patrons’ resources due to “entangling commitments and indirect competition,” emphasizing “limits to the leverage of patrons” and concluding that “the relationship between patron and client proved to be far more nuanced and difficult than the nomenclature would suggest [...] that although patrons at times constrained their clients, client autonomy was considerable.”<sup>26</sup> Recent research has confirmed those insights, with a group of scholars arguing that “in some cases, the proxy will do the job of fighting with or without the principal, who eager to gain that influence in a conflict often must work with the available proxy on terms largely set by the proxy.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, contrary to indictments such as Freedman’s claim of simplistic hierarchies and overlooked bargaining, the study of proxy warfare has since its very inception paid close attention to the manifold tensions and dynamics between its principal actors and its particular context.<sup>28</sup> Freedman may not be entirely wrong when he argues that proxy warfare “lacks an agreed meaning and is used in different ways,” but such a diagnosis is hardly unprecedented within the social sciences and need not be overstated.<sup>29</sup>

### 2.1 *How the Study of Proxy War Has Evolved*

In fact, contrary to persistent claims that proxy warfare remains “understudied” or “under-theorized,” studies not only draw on several decades of research but also on a wide variety of theoretical frameworks (such as alliance theory, strategic interaction, Principal-Agent theory, strategic bargaining, or securitization theory to name only a few) and diverse methodological approaches ranging from archival research and comparative case studies to large N-datasets.<sup>30</sup>

---

their intervention, see Piero Gleijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2006).

<sup>26</sup> Janice G. Stein, “Proxy Wars - How Superpowers End Them: The Diplomacy of War Termination in the Middle East,” *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1980), 482, 515.

<sup>27</sup> Karlén et al., “Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars,” 2073.

<sup>28</sup> Freedman, “Ukraine is not a proxy war.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> For a cumulative assessment of the field, see Rauta, “Framers, Founders, and Reformers”; Karlén et al., “Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars”; Moghadam, Rauta and Wyss, *The Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*.



If anything, the field does not suffer from a state of “under-conceptualization” but the opposite, since the various conceptual approaches often coexist not only in parallel with each other but also in isolation from one another. This has been exacerbated by three interrelated tendencies. First, the study of proxy war has followed not only the changing geopolitical trends but also the broader development within IR research. Hence, while early works adopted a state-centric lens with a focus on great power competition between the US and USSR and their client states, civil wars and rebel or terrorist groups have been the main frames of reference for many newer studies.<sup>31</sup> Second, advancements in the study of civil wars and non-state armed groups have led to the emergence of similar research programs on topics such as conflict delegation, state-sponsored terrorism, or rebel patronage, which, although essentially describing the same phenomenon, have had little interaction amongst each other.<sup>32</sup> Finally, research on proxy war has focused on different lines of inquiry, with some studies paying closer attention to the causes and motivations of external actors to intervene indirectly whereas other works center on the relationship between sponsor and proxy, or they examine the various dynamics and consequences of specific proxy conflicts.

### 3. Toward a Holistic Understanding of Proxy Warfare

To account for these different approaches, Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss have proposed a novel analytical framework that bridges three key conceptualizations of proxy warfare as reflected in the literature and existing definitions. Empirical variation suggests that proxy warfare can be conceptualized along three axes, or levels of analysis, that are not mutually exclusive: as a *logic*, as a *relationship*, and as a *process*.<sup>33</sup> The proposed framework accepts the validity of all three

---

<sup>31</sup> Moghadam and Wyss, “Five Myths about Sponsor-Proxy Relationships”; Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, “The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2020); Rauta, “Framers, Founders, and Reformers.”

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Daniel Byman and Sarah E. Kreps, “Agents of Destruction? Applying Principal-Agent Analysis to State-Sponsored Terrorism,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2010); Salehyan, “The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations”; Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham, “Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups.”

<sup>33</sup> The framework is first introduced in Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss, “The Study of Proxy War,” 3-5.

conceptual axes and acknowledges the value of intellectual inquiry centering along each of these axes separately, while also emphasizing the need to offer a synthetic analysis. In other words, it adopts a level of analysis approach that enables incorporating insights from competing perspectives of proxy wars as seen through a lens of their logic, their constituent relationships, and the processes that shape and affect these conflicts. The framework and its three levels of analysis are summarized in Table 1.

As a *logic*, proxy warfare substitutes the direct use of force. It can thus be understood as a mode of indirect armed conflict between two or more actors in which at least one of them entrusts another party to fight on their behalf.<sup>34</sup> The external party is usually referred to as the sponsor/principal and it delegates military action to an agent that is typically referred to as a proxy/client. While some of their political and military ends may overlap, sponsors and proxies typically have distinct motivations for engaging in proxy warfare.

Table 1: Levels of Analysis Framework

Level of Analysis	Key Lines of Inquiry (non-exhaustive)
Logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation/aims of sponsor <i>and</i> proxy</li> <li>• Calculation of costs, benefits, and risks</li> </ul>
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Types of actors and relationship structure</li> <li>• Nature of interaction (degree of cooperation, coercion, dependence, etc.)</li> </ul>
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proxy war onset and termination</li> <li>• Degree of external support (qualitative and quantitative)</li> </ul>

Whereas sponsors seek to pursue their strategic interests while avoiding the various costs and risks associated with employing their regular armed forces, proxies are typically interested in augmenting their fighting power and/or their political influence. Proxy warfare is often considered a means for managing escalation that enables sponsors to avoid direct military

---

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Rauta, “A Structural-Relational Analysis of Party Dynamics in Proxy Wars,” *International Relations*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2018).

confrontations with their opponents. However, the historical record suggests that such supposed benefits are often overstated.

As a *relationship*, proxy warfare encompasses the range of political and military interactions between sponsors and proxies. While the literature identifies most sponsors as states, and most proxies as non-state actors, both sponsors and proxies can be either state or non-state actors.<sup>35</sup> At their core, proxy relationships consist of reciprocal exchange. The sponsor provides its proxy with some form – and in most instances, a combination – of military, economic, or diplomatic assistance. In return, the proxy engages in armed combat and carries out related military or security tasks that align – at least to some degree – with the sponsor’s desired end state in a given conflict theater. The relationship between sponsors and proxies exhibits similarities with other collaborative interactions, albeit with its own distinct properties. Proxy relationships are typically less formalized than military alliances and other security partnerships, and they do not encompass mutual rights and obligations – with the sponsor’s aims typically being superordinate to those of the proxy. However, and as previously discussed, this is not to imply that proxies function as mere extensions of their sponsors, devoid of any agency. Rather, the informal and often ambiguous nature of these relationships – sometimes the consequence of a sponsor’s desire to keep its involvement covert or even secret – offers proxies opportunities to manipulate the former’s perceptions, shirk commitments, and divert resources according to their own principal aims. Conversely, a sponsor can take various actions to discourage undesirable behavior by the proxy, or rein in such behavior where it is already occurring.<sup>36</sup> Such actions may consist of benevolent inducements, but in some instances entail coercive measures, up to and including the threat of abandonment. In essence, each proxy relationship occurs on a continuum between pure cooperation and pure coercion. To borrow from Michael Handel, it will exhibit “different degrees of intensity, dependence, and exploitation [...] from an almost symbiotic relationship to a

---

<sup>35</sup> Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, “The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2020).

<sup>36</sup> Sara Plana, “Controlling Proxies: An Analytical Framework”, in Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*.

situation of almost unilateral exploitation.”<sup>37</sup> Finally, it is worth considering that the prototypical sponsor-proxy dyad is an oversimplification. Proxy relations often consist of complex configurations, including intermediaries, multiple sponsors (at times with diverging interests) seeking to influence the same local proxy, collective sponsors, or several proxies in one conflict theater vying for support by the same sponsor.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, as a *process*, proxy warfare assesses the variation in the specific modalities in which it is conducted. The course, manifestations, consequences, and implications of proxy warfare are determined and affected by complex dynamics governing the interactions of not only its principal parties (i.e., sponsor, proxy, and the proxy’s adversary) but of a wide range of additional stakeholders. These can include, for example, external backers of other belligerents; the local population – or specific segments thereof – in the conflict theater; domestic audiences such as the sponsor’s electorate and political elites; as well as supranational institutions and the broader “international community,” to name only a few. Furthermore, this process is influenced by other factors such as cultural and legal norms, political and economic constraints, as well as considerations at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Simply put, most cases of proxy warfare will differ from one another, each exhibiting its particularities. In some instances, sponsors will exploit preexisting conditions, such as social tensions or ethnic cleavages, to establish a proxy that will serve their strategic ambitions prior to the onset of active hostilities. In other cases, however, states or non-state actors already engaged in armed conflict will be the ones reaching out to potential sponsors in hopes that receiving external assistance will help them turn the tide of war in their favor. Some sponsors put a premium on ‘plausible deniability’ and will go to great lengths to disguise, or at least obscure, their indirect involvement in an ongoing armed conflict.<sup>39</sup> In other instances, such concealment will be neither realistic nor desirable. Instead,

---

<sup>37</sup> Michael I. Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Frank Cass, 1990), 133.

<sup>38</sup> Karlén et al., “Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars,” 2058-2060; Niklas Karlén and Vladimir Rauta, “Dual Delegation: Intermediaries in Proxy Warfare,” *International Security* (forthcoming).

<sup>39</sup> For a critical discussion of the concept of plausible deniability, see Rory Cormac and Richard J. Aldrich, “Grey is the new black: covert action and implausible deniability,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (2018).

supplying its proxy with large quantities of increasingly sophisticated weapon systems may be understood as an attempt by the sponsor to signal resolve vis-à-vis their shared adversary. There is also considerable variation in the breadth and depth of the interactions between sponsor and proxy. Some proxies will have to make do with limited material assistance and training but will retain a relatively high degree of autonomous decision-making. In other cases, sponsors will deploy small teams of military advisors to assist in planning and executing military operations, give access to intelligence and targeting data, or even provide air support or indirect fires, with the proxy effectively becoming an extension of the sponsor’s military structure in all but name. In rare cases, the ties between sponsor and proxy extend beyond a specific conflict theater and endure over several decades. It is far more likely, however, that the sponsor will end its support upon attaining its desired ends or that either of the parties will choose to abandon, or defect from, the other if the probabilities of success prove increasingly unlikely. Conversely, a sponsor may also decide to double down and escalate from indirect to direct military intervention when faced with such prospects.

To summarize, the level-of-analysis framework not only lends itself to integrating different theoretical and methodological approaches, but it also enables students and scholars of proxy wars to examine the topic through different levels of analysis, all while building upon a unified conceptual foundation. As such, it may be equally applied to studying idiosyncratic, micro-level cases of proxy warfare at all levels as well as observing macro-level patterns along one specific axis.

#### 4. Case Study: External Support to Ukraine

The following section applies the previously introduced framework to the ongoing war in Ukraine, and specifically to the external support provided by Western countries to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The case study analyses military assistance along the three levels of analysis, comparing and contrasting them with both contemporary as well as historical proxy war dynamics. As such the analysis highlights the ways in which the case study corresponds with

proxy warfare’s enduring nature while also pointing out variation that may potentially indicate emerging changes in its character.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4.1 *Logic*

At the analytical level of proxy war as a logic, it is obvious that most of the key assumptions of the relevant literature hold. For Ukraine, external support by Western governments is a crucial component of its defensive efforts, especially considering the looming threat of a renewed Russian offensive in early 2023 that Ukrainian and Western officials have warned of repeatedly.<sup>41</sup> Although there is an ongoing debate on whether the material assistance provided is sufficient or not, there is no doubt that Ukraine has benefited from external support at both the tactical, operational as well as strategic level. In turn, this support has increased Ukraine’s capabilities and provided it with the means for not only withstanding the Russian assault but also launching several local counteroffensives. In addition, the unprecedented Western support likely lends Ukraine in general – and President Zelensky’s government in particular – additional political influence and legitimacy, although there is only limited supporting data available that does not yet yield conclusive results.<sup>42</sup>

As for Ukraine’s Western backers, the latter’s provision of military support is mostly a function of the interplay between interests, expected costs, and escalation risks. Simply put, because of the risk of a NATO-Russia war potentially leading to a nuclear exchange, a direct intervention (including the establishment of a no-fly zone as repeatedly demanded by Ukraine) has been out of the question from the war’s onset.<sup>43</sup> Nor do the West’s own interests (which are

---

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Mewett, “Understanding War’s Enduring Nature Alongside Its Changing Character,” *War on the Rocks*, January 21, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/01/understanding-wars-enduring-nature-alongside-its-changing-character/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Steven Erlanger, “U.S. and Allies to Decide on Sending Arms That Could Break Deadlock,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2023, A7.

<sup>42</sup> One potential data point may be found in comparing the number of public appearances such as key-note speeches, etc. both prior to and following the Russian invasion.

<sup>43</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), “Answering Four Hard Questions About Russia’s War in Ukraine” (Europe Briefing N°96, Kyiv/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 2022), 7-9; Olga Oliker, Michael Wahid Hanna and Brian Finucane, “No-Fly Zone in Ukraine: War with Russia by Another Name,” Crisis Group Commentary, March 7, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/no-fly-zone-ukraine-war-russia-another-name> (accessed June 19, 2023).

not fully congruent and vary from country to country), for a variety of reasons including credibility and reputational costs, allow for sitting back and doing nothing.<sup>44</sup> Instead, waging war by proxy offers a middle ground in which the sponsor’s interests are balanced against the expected risks and costs do neither justify direct military action nor permit inaction.<sup>45</sup> The question of what those interests exactly are is more complicated to answer. On the one hand, many Western and Ukrainian officials have repeatedly emphasized that supporting Ukraine is a matter of defending democracy, the “rules-based international order” as well as European “values” such as peace and security.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, some high-level officials such as US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin as well as some prominent think tank fellows have indicated that a strategic goal behind providing external support to Ukraine is to weaken Russia for the foreseeable future, and whereas Western decision-makers have demurred, some pundits have even raised the prospect of regime change in Moscow.<sup>47</sup>

Comparing the logic of indirect military assistance to Ukraine to other instances of proxy

---

<sup>44</sup> On the costs of inaction that can include losses in “relative power, international status, or prestige”, see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 3, 36. While Ukraine is not a formal member, NATO established a training mission following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in the Donbas. Furthermore, a number of countries had provided military assistance prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, see Alexander Lanoszka and Jordan Becker, “The art of partial commitment: the politics of military assistance to Ukraine,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, online first, (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2162758>.

<sup>45</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, “The Strategy of War by Proxy,” 267; Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, “Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups,” *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (2011), 714; Groh, *Proxy War*, 32-34.

<sup>46</sup> Kemal Derviş, “What are the West’s strategic goals in the Ukraine war,” Brookings, August 29, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-are-the-wests-strategic-goals-in-the-ukraine-war/> (accessed June 19, 2023); “Press statement by President von der Leyen on the Commission’s proposals regarding REPowerEU, defence investment gaps and the relief and reconstruction of Ukraine,” Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, May 18, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/press-statement-president-von-der-leyen-commissions-proposals-regarding\\_en?s=232](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/press-statement-president-von-der-leyen-commissions-proposals-regarding_en?s=232) (accessed June 19, 2023); Jim Garamone, “Austin: Nations Support Rules-Based Orders,” *DoD News*, November 23, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3227040/austin-nations-support-rules-based-orders/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Julian Borger, “Pentagon chief’s Russia remarks show shift in US’s declared aims in Ukraine,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/25/russia-weakedend-lloyd-austin-ukraine> (accessed June 19, 2023); Timothy Ash, “It’s Costing Peanuts for the US to Defeat Russia,” Center for European Policy Analysis, November 18, 2022, <https://cepa.org/article/its-costing-peanuts-for-the-us-to-defeat-russia/> (accessed June 19, 2023); Anthony H. Cordesman, “United States Aid to Ukraine: An Investment Whose Benefits Greatly Exceed its Cost,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 21, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-aid-ukraine-investment-whose-benefits-greatly-exceed-its-cost> (accessed June 19, 2023); William Courtney, “Regime Change in Russia,” *The RAND Blog*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/09/regime-change-in-russia.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); Max Bergmann, “What Could Come Next? Assessing the Putin Regime’s Stability and Western Policy Options,” January 20, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-could-come-next-assessing-putin-regimes-stability-and-western-policy-options> (accessed June 19, 2023).

war over the past decades, there are also obvious differences. Supporting local conflict parties such as anti-Taliban fighters at the onset of the intervention in Afghanistan or the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria was primarily a matter of expediency, designed to reduce the direct costs of deploying armed forces and domestic audience costs (e.g., political constraints on military action, casualty sensitivity, and general war weariness) and to leverage the proxy’s superior knowledge of the local terrain and population in terms of cost-effectiveness.<sup>48</sup>

While these motives may play a secondary role, the primary reason for assisting Ukraine indirectly is the avoidance of a direct confrontation with Russia due to the risk of nuclear war, which also explains the gradual and incremental approach that will be further discussed at the process-level.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, in terms of its causal logic, Western external support to Ukraine is closer to the “classic” Cold War-era dynamics of managing risk and avoiding escalation rather than their equivalent during the “Global War on Terror period.”<sup>50</sup>

#### 4.2 *Relationship*

At the relationship-level, external support to Ukraine offers several insights. First, both the nature of its principal actors as well as the relationship structure diverge from other recent examples. On the one hand, in the case of external support to Ukraine, both sponsors and proxy are sovereign states, whereas proxy warfare over the past two decades has consisted primarily of states providing non-state armed groups with military assistance.

More importantly, Ukraine’s external backer form what Karlén and Rauta describe as a “collective” sponsor, formalized in the so-called Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which was established at an international meeting at Ramstein air base in late April 2022 and is led by the United States.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Ukraine acts as the sole and unified proxy within the current conflict

---

<sup>48</sup> Moghadam and Wyss, “The Political Power of Proxies,” 126; Wyss, “Is Europe Prepared for a Proxy War?”

<sup>49</sup> ICG, “Answering Four Hard Questions About Russia’s War in Ukraine.”

<sup>50</sup> Compare Alexandra Stark, “The Historical Evolution of Proxy Wars: 1945-2022,” in Moghadam, Rauta, and Wyss (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*.

<sup>51</sup> Karlén et al., “Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars,” 2059-2060; Phil Stewart, “At defence talks in Germany, U.S. says world galvanized against Russia’s invasion,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-hosts-ukraine-talks-germany-war-enters-critical-phase-2022-04-25/> (accessed June 19, 2023).



theater. This configuration sets it apart from other cases such as the civil wars in Syria and Yemen where multiple external state backers pursued diverging, competing and contradictory aims, by way of militarily supporting different local non-state armed groups. The result of such meddling often consisted of further fragmentation and infighting.<sup>52</sup> In comparison, the “coalition proxy warfare” taking shape in Ukraine has proven remarkably cohesive, the challenges of coordinating such a complex effort and occasional internal disagreement over the provision of specific weapons systems notwithstanding.<sup>53</sup>

This has some more important implications, chiefly among them the breadth and depth of the military assistance provided that vastly exceeds other cases of external support. It stands to reason that the continued existence of the Zelensky government as well as the military chain of command has proven a crucial precondition for broadening the scope of aid, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Put differently, had the Ukrainian leadership chosen exile and organized resistance by Ukraine’s armed forces given way to fragmented insurgent movements, external support would have faced several strategic and ethical dilemmas, and Ukraine’s backers would likely have refrained from providing anything close to the current levels of assistance.<sup>54</sup> The relatively cohesive interaction between Ukraine and its international backers notwithstanding, several typical proxy relationship characteristics can be observed. For once, Ukraine has routinely emphasized its sovereignty and independence, and especially in the first months of the war exhibited a reluctance to share information and its strategic and operational plans with its external

---

<sup>52</sup> Geraint Alun Hughes, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2014); Olivier J. Walther and Patrick Steen Pedersen, “Rebel fragmentation in Syria’s civil war,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2020).

<sup>53</sup> Patricia A. Weitsman, “Wartime Alliances versus Coalition Warfare: How Institutional Structure Matters in the Multilateral Prosecution of Wars,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2010); Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” 45. Besides the recent tank controversy, another public spat concerned the transfer of Polish MiG-29 fighter jets that was ultimately canceled. See Ellen Ionaes, “Why the US scrapped Polish plans to give Ukraine fighter jets,” *VOX*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/2022/3/13/22975269/ukraine-poland-us-mig-fighter-jets-military-aid-escalation> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>54</sup> Wyss, “Is Europe Prepared for a Proxy War”; Vladimir Rauta and Alexandra Stark, “What Does Arming an Insurgency in Ukraine Mean,” *Lawfare*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-does-arming-insurgency-ukraine-mean> (accessed June 19, 2023).

sponsors.<sup>55</sup> Reportedly, information sharing improved over the summer and prior to Ukraine conducting its counteroffensives in the Kherson and Kharkiv regions.<sup>56</sup> Media reporting also indicates a significant US and NATO role in the planning for the long anticipated Ukrainian spring counteroffensive that began in late May/early June 2023 and is ongoing at the time of this writing.<sup>57</sup>

Conversely, the United States and other external backers have sought to set certain conditions on how the Ukrainian forces employ the provided weapons systems. For example, the US reportedly requested assurances that they will not be used against targets within Russia.<sup>58</sup> In addition, the Biden administration has also refrained from delivering specific platforms Ukraine has repeatedly demanded, including ATACMS tactical ballistic missiles that would give Ukrainian the means to reach deeper into Russian territory.<sup>59</sup> This is also indicative of the extent to which Ukraine is reliant on external support and, in consequence, its dependence on its international backers, first and foremost the United States. If Ukraine wants to attain its stated strategic aims of reclaiming all its pre-2014 territories (i.e., including Crimea) by military force, it will likely require additional military capabilities to match its ambitions. In other words, its external backers have a veto right on whether Ukraine’s armed forces receive the equipment that will, at least, in theory give them a realistic shot at achieving Kyiv’s desired military end state.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Lacks a Clear Picture of Kyiv’s Strategy in War, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2022, A7.

<sup>56</sup> Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, “Ukrainian Officials Drew On U.S. Intelligence to Plan Counteroffensive,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2022, A10.

<sup>57</sup> Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “New York edition with the headline: Pentagon Investigating Leak of Classified War Plans Circulating on Social Media,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2023, A9; W.J. Hennigan, “Inside the Race to Arm Ukraine Before Its Counteroffensive,” *TIME Magazine*, April 27, 2023, <https://time.com/6274688/arming-ukraine-counteroffensive/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>58</sup> David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt, and Julian E. Barnes, “The U.S. Is Sending Advanced Weapons to Kyiv. But Conditions Apply,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2022, A9.

<sup>59</sup> Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce, “U.S. military leaders are reluctant to provide longer-range missiles to Ukraine,” *NBC News*, September 17, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-military-leaders-are-reluctant-provide-longer-range-missiles-ukrain-rcna48072> (accessed June 19, 2023); Paul McLeary, Lara Seligman, and Alexander Ward, “U.S. tells Ukraine it won’t send long-range missiles because it has few to spare,” *Politico*, February 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/02/13/u-s-wont-send-long-range-missiles-ukraine-00082652> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>60</sup> As the author has argued elsewhere, war is inherently dialectical, and the effectiveness of given conflict party’s course of action depends upon whether and how the adversary can anticipate it and react accordingly. See Michel Wyss, “Die Grenzen der Unterstützung,” *Schweizer Monat*, No. 1105, (April 2023), 69.

Another potential area of friction lies in the fact that some Western-supplied weapons have been used in attacks against Russia such as in several cross-border raids by the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC), a paramilitary group led by Russian neo-Nazi Denis Kapustin, using armored vehicles provided by the US and Poland as well as Belgian small arms.<sup>61</sup> This raises questions as to the West’s ability to track weapon systems once delivered and has raised some concerns within the Biden administration.<sup>62</sup> While Ukraine denies direct involvement in those attacks, it is obvious that it uses the RVC as a deniable proxy, with Ukrainian military intelligence admitting that it cooperated with the group and Ukrainian military helicopters reportedly providing air support during one of the recent raids.<sup>63</sup>

#### 4.3 Process

Finally, at the process-level, a number of observations can be made. First, external support, in particular training and non-lethal material assistance, preceded Russia’s full-scale invasion. Following increasingly public warnings of an impending Russian attack by Western intelligence services, a number of states began ramping up the provision of lethal aid including man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) as well as small arms and ammunition.<sup>64</sup> Over the course of the war, Ukraine’s backer have incrementally expanded the scope of their support, moving from light weapons to increasingly complex crewed heavy weapons systems, including as self-propelled howitzers, main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, multiple launch rocket systems, and ground-based air defense systems such as Patriot,

---

<sup>61</sup> Vitalii Hnidy, “Leader of cross-border raid warns Russia to expect more incursions,” *Reuters*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/leader-cross-border-raid-warns-russia-expect-more-incursions-2023-05-24/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>62</sup> Shannon K. Crawford and Luis Martinez, “Are US arms sent to Ukraine being tracked so they can't be used for attacks in Russia?” *ABC News*, June 1, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-arms-ukraine-tracked-attack-russia/story?id=99744484> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Miller, Felicia Schwartz, and Polina Ivanova, “Militias used US armoured vehicles in attack over Russian border,” *Financial Times*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/0b57c31b-814d-4554-91d8-d49b066cea69> (accessed June 19, 2023); David Axe, “Ukrainian Helicopters Flew Overhead As Anti-Kremlin Paramilitaries Prepared To Capture A Tiny Slice Of Russia,” *Forbes*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2023/06/01/ukrainian-helicopters-flew-overhead-as-anti-kremlin-paramilitaries-prepared-to-capture-a-tiny-slice-of-russia/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>64</sup> Lanoszka and Becker, “The art of partial commitment”; “Arms Transfers to Ukraine – Timeline,” *Forum Arms Trade*, no date, <https://www.forumarmstrade.org/ukrainearms.html#Timeline> (accessed June 19, 2023).

IRIS-T, and NASAMS.<sup>65</sup> This gradual approach saw Ukraine’s sponsors overcoming several “self-imposed red lines,” including an initial reluctance to provide “offensive weapons,” a dubious distinction that has been scrutinized for decades.<sup>66</sup> Mostly recently, and following the arrival of Storm Shadow cruise missiles supplied by the United Kingdom, there is momentum building for the provision of US-made F-16 fighter jets even though the precise modalities remain unclear amid a host of challenges in terms of logistics, maintenance, training, and operations.<sup>67</sup>

Aside from material aid, Ukraine’s external backers have also increasingly provided training – the majority of it taking place abroad, although there were some reports of British special forces serving as instructors within Ukraine.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Ukraine has received extensive data from NATO ISR assets and in particular from US intelligence support, with media reports citing anonymous officials alleging that US-provided actionable intelligence helped destroy the Russian Black Sea Fleet’s flagship Moskva as well as eliminate several high-ranking Russian officers.<sup>69</sup> There is also evidence that small numbers of British and US special forces serve in a

---

<sup>65</sup> Andrew S. Bowen, “Ukrainian Military Performance and Outlook” (CRS In Focus IF12150, Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, June 2022); “Arms Transfers to Ukraine – Timeline.”

<sup>66</sup> Peter A. Wilson and William Courtney, “How the War in Ukraine Could End Sooner than Expected,” The RAND Blog, January 17, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/01/how-the-war-in-ukraine-could-end-sooner-than-expected.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); Linas Linkevičius, “Our Debt to Ukraine – Payback Time,” CEPA, January 19, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/ukraines-sacrifice-protects-nato-eu-and-democracy/> (accessed June 19, 2023). For a discussion of the offense/defense dichotomy, see Robert Jervis, “Realism, Game Theory, and Cooperation,” *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1988), 332; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1995), 672-674.

<sup>67</sup> Christ Partridge, “Jets to Ukraine: Crucial questions over supplying F-16s to Kyiv,” *BBC News*, May 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65656356> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>68</sup> Matthias von Hein, “Ukrainian troops get training in Germany,” *DW*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukrainian-troops-get-training-in-germany/a-61682712> (accessed June 19, 2023); Eric Albert, “Inside the UK’s training centers for Ukrainian recruits,” *Le Monde*, August 18, 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/18/inside-the-united-kingdom-s-training-centers-for-ukrainian-recruits\\_5993926\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/18/inside-the-united-kingdom-s-training-centers-for-ukrainian-recruits_5993926_4.html) (accessed June 19, 2023); Catherine Philp, “British special forces ‘are training local troops in Ukraine’,” *The Times*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sas-troops-are-training-local-forces-in-ukraine-32vs5bjzb> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>69</sup> Abraham Mashie, “US Air Force Discusses Tactics with Ukrainian Air Force as Russian Advance Stalls,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.airforcemag.com/us-air-force-discusses-tactics-with-ukrainian-air-force-as-russian-advance-stalls/> (accessed June 19, 2023); Tim Ripley, “The Role NATO ISR Aircraft Are Playing in Monitoring the War in Ukraine,” *Key.Aero*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.key.aero/article/role-nato-isr-aircraft-are-playing-monitoring-war-ukraine> (accessed June 19, 2023); Julian Borger, “US intelligence told to keep quiet over role in Ukraine military triumphs,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/07/us-spies-ukraine-russia-military-intelligence?msclkid=b17cc16dcf7a11eca17a0a5b5d7d9f88> (accessed June 19, 2023);

military advisory capacity within Ukraine and US officials have gone on record about helping Ukraine with operational planning through wargaming and other means.<sup>70</sup> While the verification of some of the Western involvement at a micro level remains difficult, it is reasonable to assume that Western governments have been willing to share increasingly sensitive and actionable intelligence over time in an incremental manner that mirrors the gradual expansion of arms deliveries.<sup>71</sup>

The manner in which international sponsors have provided military assistance to Ukraine is noteworthy in several respects. Even though the international assistance is widely publicized (thus precluding “plausible deniability”), Ukraine’s backers have been successful in keeping some of the most sensitive aspects of their support covert or having it become public knowledge only after the fact. An example of the latter was the delivery of HARM anti-radiation missiles (whose effect according to a recent RUSI study has been smaller than anticipated, however) as well as the provision of the aforementioned Storm Shadow cruise missiles.<sup>72</sup> This deliberate management of ambiguity has allowed Western governments to signal resolve and to incrementally expand their involvement while at the same time avoiding Russian retaliation such as targeting weapons shipments as it had threatened repeatedly in the beginning of the war.<sup>73</sup> It seems apparent that at

---

<sup>70</sup> Eric Schmitt, Julian E. Barnes, and Helene Cooper, “Allied Commandos in Ukraine Secretly Funnel Aid to Troops,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2022, A1; Tom Rogan, “Guided by British special forces, Ukraine is escalating the ‘deep battlespace’ fight against Russia,” *Washington Examiner*, August 19, 2022,

<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/guided-by-british-special-forces-ukraine-is-escalating-the-deep-battlespace-fight-against-russia> (accessed June 19, 2023); Barnes and Cooper, “Ukrainian Officials Drew On U.S. Intelligence to Plan Counteroffensive”; Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, and Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Eases Stance On Helping Kyiv To Target Crimea,” *The New York Times*, January 19, 2023, A1.

<sup>71</sup> Marko Milanovic, “The United States and Allies Sharing Intelligence with Ukraine,” *EJIL: Talk!*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-united-states-and-allies-sharing-intelligence-with-ukraine/> (accessed June 19, 2023); Barnes and Cooper, “Ukrainian Officials Drew On U.S. Intelligence to Plan Counteroffensive.”

<sup>72</sup> Sean Lyngaas, “US confirms military hackers have conducted cyber operations in support of Ukraine,” *CNN*, June 2, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/02/politics/us-hackers-ukraine-support/index.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); Oren Liebermann, “Pentagon acknowledges sending previously undisclosed anti-radar missiles to Ukraine,” *CNN*, August 9, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/08/politics/anti-radar-missiles-ukraine-russia-pentagon/index.html> (accessed June 19, 2023); Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi et al., “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022” (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2022), 59; Thomas Newdick, “Ukraine Situation Report: U.K. Confirms Combat Use Of Storm Shadow Missiles,” *The Drive*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/ukraine-situation-report-u-k-confirms-combat-use-of-storm-shadow-missiles> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>73</sup> Austin Carson and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signaling in Secret,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017); “Russia Says It Could Target Western Arms Supplies To Ukraine,” *RFE/RL*, March 12, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-western-military-aid-ukraine-target/31749659.html> (accessed June 19, 2023).

this point neither Russia nor Ukraine’s backers seek an escalation that could potentially lead to a direct confrontation, and that the war may have led to the emergence of some kind of informal understanding regarding the provision of external support. However, even if such an implicit understanding existed, it would likely remain precarious and prone to misperceptions and miscalculations.<sup>74</sup> For example, while the provision of Western fighter jets has long been considered off-limits, the lack of Russian response (aside from public denouncements) in the face of delivering heavy weapon apparently has prompted some NATO leaders to reconsider.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, the fact that Russia so far has not targeted Western weapons shipments does not conclusively predict that it will refrain from doing so in the future.<sup>76</sup> It is also worth noting, that potential Russian retaliation may not necessarily target Ukraine’s external backers directly but could instead express itself on the Ukrainian battlefield, as evidenced by Russia’s campaign against Ukraine’s critical infrastructure ramping up in early fall 2022.

The war in Ukraine also challenges two common assumptions about the conduct of proxy warfare. First, proxy wars are often conceptualized as “indirect interventions,” “indirect engagements,” or “indirect warfare.”<sup>77</sup> However, the extent of both Ukraine’s dependence on its international backers and the latter’s involvement in the ideal-typical targeting cycle raises the question whether such a perspective may overemphasize the role of force execution (i.e., the proverbial “pulling the trigger”) at the expense of other essential warfighting tasks including planning, ISTAR, and logistics. In this regard, it is worth noting that despite frequent assertions stating that military assistance to Ukraine does not meet the legal threshold of war participation, Russian assessments may extend beyond such narrow definitions of international law. Western

---

<sup>74</sup> Robert Jervis, “War and Misperception,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1988); Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2000).

<sup>75</sup> Tom Balmforth, “Ukraine sets sights on fighter jets after securing tank supplies,” *Reuters*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-sets-sights-fighter-jets-after-securing-tank-supplies-2023-01-25/> (accessed June 19, 2023). Mick Krever, “Tanks for Ukraine once seemed unthinkable. Could fighter jets be next,” *CNN*, January 27, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/26/europe/ukraine-tanks-fighter-jets-intl/index.html> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>76</sup> Brian Frederick et al., “Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War,” PE-A1971-1 (Santa Monica: RAND, 2022).

<sup>77</sup> Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*; Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Vladimir Rauta, “‘Proxy War’ – A Reconceptualisation,” *Civil Wars*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2021).

policymakers are certainly not required to adopt Moscow’s perceptions, but they are well-advised to consider potential ramifications.

Second, research on proxy warfare over the past two decades has consistently highlighted the role of air power in assisting local forces.<sup>78</sup> According to Stephen Biddle, early proponents of the so-called “Afghan model” (i.e., the combination of airpower, small special forces detachments, and local proxies) even argued that it “could produce comparable results almost anywhere” against America’s enemies, with the sole exception being an “eventual Chinese superpower.”<sup>79</sup> However, the US balance sheet of supporting local partner forces over the past two decades has not only tempered such enthusiasm, but the conflict in Ukraine also indicates that compared to the active participation of Soviet pilots in the Korean war and the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1967 to 1973, such a mode of support has become infeasible in conventional high intensity warfare between peer rivals.<sup>80</sup> One potential exception to that may be the use of remotely-piloted aircraft as in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war during which Turkish drone operators allegedly controlled Azeri Bayraktar TB-2 UCAVs.<sup>81</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

As the war in Ukraine rages on and as neither its course, nor its outcome and the resulting ramifications can be determined with any certainty, it is nevertheless clear that external support by its international backers was, is, and will remain critical to Ukraine’s war effort. Instead of

---

<sup>78</sup> Richard B. Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas E. Griffith Jr. “Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2005/06); Vladimir Rauta and Andrew Mumford, “Proxy Wars and the Contemporary Security Environment,” in Robert Dover, Huw Dylan, and Michael S. Goodman, *The Palgrave Handbook of Security, Risk, and Intelligence* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 110-111; Dylan Maguire, “A Perfect Proxy? The United States–Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership” (PWP Conflict Studies, Blacksburg: Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs, 2020); Frank G. Hoffman and Andrew Orner, “Conceptualizing Proxy Wars in Strategic Competition,” Foreign Policy Research Initiative, August 30, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/08/dueling-dyads-conceptualizing-proxy-wars-in-strategic-competition/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

<sup>79</sup> Stephen Biddle, “Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2005/06), 161, 163.

<sup>80</sup> Austin Carson, “Facing Off and Saving Face: Covert Intervention and Escalation Management in the Korean War,” *International Organization*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (2016); Isabelle Ginor and Gideon Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967-1973: The USSR’s Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> David Hambling, “The ‘Magic Bullet’ Drones Behind Azerbaijan’s Victory Over Armenia,” *Forbes*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidhambling/2020/11/10/the-magic-bullet-drones-behind--azerbaijans-victory-over-armenia/> (accessed June 19, 2023).

engaging in a tedious debate about whether or not this makes the conflict a “proxy war of the West against Russia,” this paper has sought to demonstrate that applying a proxy warfare level-of-analysis framework adds value to the analysis of some of the war’s most pressing aspects and enables the systematic comparison with other cases. Its findings indicate that while the fundamental nature of proxy warfare remains constant, there are dynamics in the Russo-Ukrainian war that point to potential changes in its character, which include a shift toward conventional high-intensity war, the re-emergence of risk management as its predominant causal logic, and relatedly the potentially diminished role of air power in its conduct.

At the same time, two caveats apply. First, since reliable and, in particular, primary sources remain scarce, a reassessment of some of the paper’s findings and observations may be in order as new information will become available in the coming years.

Second, even as the US military and its allies shift their focus from counterinsurgency and stability operations toward a new era of great power competition, many military conflicts may continue to play out in a primarily irregular manner.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, both the war in Ukraine as well as the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war suggest that proxy dynamics could once again play an increasing role in interstate wars. Eschewing ahistorical notions of great powers moving hapless pawns on a “grand chessboard” at will, future research may well look both to current trends as well as past experiences to get a better sense of how the character of proxy warfare may be evolving toward the future.

---

<sup>82</sup> Kevin Bilms, “What’s in a Name? Reimagining Irregular Warfare Activities for Competition,” *War on the Rocks*, January 15, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/whats-in-a-name-reimagining-irregular-warfare-activities-for-competition/> (accessed June 19, 2023); Todd Harrison and Nicholas Harrington, “Bad Idea: Conflating Great Power Competition with High-Intensity Conflict,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 15, 2020, <https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-conflating-great-power-competition-with-high-intensity-conflict/> (accessed June 19, 2023); Tierny, “The Future of Sino-U.S. Proxy War.” The problem of rigid dichotomies between irregular/conventional warfare as well as interstate/intrastate conflict has long been recognized in the literature. See, for example, David E. Cunningham and Douglas E. Lemke, “Combining Civil and Interstate Wars,” *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (2013); Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Sandor Fabian, “Irregular vs. Conventional Warfare: A Dichotomous Misconception,” Modern War Institute, May 14, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/irregular-versus-conventional-warfare-a-dichotomous-misconception/> (accessed June 19, 2023).