

Reframing Proxy War Thinking: Temporal Advantage, Strategic Flexibility, and Attrition

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Despite superb efforts by a determined group of post-9/11 theorists, proxy war theory has stagnated in recent years. Most modern proxy war theory centers on the idea that actors use proxy strategies because those strategies allow the actor to maintain and launder their involvement behind a number of fronts, including intermediary forces and client governments. Further, by operating behind a façade, the proxy-dependent actor's strategy generates varying degrees of reasonable refutability regarding their involvement in the conflict. These two basic tenets of contemporary proxy war theory can be reduced to the ideas of indirect control and involvement, and plausible deniability.

Proxy wars in the post-9/11 period, however, have shown that the two core tenets of indirectness and plausible deniability no longer carry proxy strategy's water. The Russo-Ukrainian War provides an excellent case study to refute indirectness and plausible deniability's primacy in proxy war. Temporal advantage and strategic flexibility rise to supersede indirectness and plausible deniability as the two core tenets that drive why actors elect to conduct proxy strategies. Resultantly, proxy war theory should begin to use temporal advantage and strategic flexibility as its basic lens for making sense of modern, and future, proxy wars.

Lastly, proxy wars are inherently deadly and destructive, despite the real, and perceived, benefits afforded to the principal actor in principal-proxy dyads. The Russo-Ukrainian War, for instance, clearly illustrates that proxy wars are just as many wars of attrition, as they are anything else. Therefore, to appropriately account for the reality of proxy wars, and not remain anchored to feel-good conceptual myths, theorists must update their theories and analytical lens to account for the proxy war's association with wars of attrition.

Introduction

Russia began a long-running proxy war in Ukraine in the spring of 2014. The proxy war began with Russian forces, and Russian proxies, annexing Crimea, and large swaths of land in Ukraine's Donets River Basin (Donbas) region. Cynically attuned to the international community's values and norms, Russia's proxy strategy relied on both a political movement and a military action. Following several evolutions, Russia's two political proxies in the Donbas became known as Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), while the ostensible Republic of Crimea reflects Russian proxy governance. Similarly, Russia's military proxies in the Donbas congealed into entities

collectively referred to as the Donetsk People's Army (DPA) and Luhansk People's Army (LPA). As integrated elements of the Russian Army, the DPA and LPA are also often referred to as the 1st Army Corps and 2nd Army Corps, respectively.¹ Russia used its Donbas proxies to undercut Kyiv's power, control, and influence in eastern Ukraine, while weaponizing governance, citizenship, and visas to Russify the region.

Militarily, the Kremlin used the DPA and LPA to make territorial gains in the Donbas between the spring of 2014 and early 2015, capturing significant portions of sovereign Ukrainian land.² Moscow put a Ukrainian face on its aggressive behavior in the Donbas by using the DPR and LPR to parry

the international community's concerns regarding Russian meddling. Once overt hostilities ended in February 2015 with the Minsk II Agreement, the Donbas proxies insulated Moscow from outright international condemnation by providing a veneer of political legitimacy, regardless of the Kremlin's duplicity in Ukrainian domestic politics. Russia relied on the DPR and the LPR to govern its annexed regions in Donetsk and Luhansk and it used the DPA and LPA to maintain a credible deterrent along the contact line with the Ukrainian armed forces.³

Akin to an untreated ailment, the Donbas proxies – a Kremlin Trojan Horse, of sorts – served as a guise and policy time-bomb for Moscow, while presenting Kyiv with a dubious conundrum. Left alone, the Donbas proxies might provide Moscow with the excuse it needed to initiate a full-scale invasion at an undetermined future date, which hindsight has proven correct.⁴ Yet, if attacked militarily, the Kremlin might break from the obfuscated use of force vis-à-vis its proxies, and instead counter with a full-scale invasion with conventional forces, which happened through late 2014 and early 2015. Given the drubbing Ukraine's professional and volunteer forces took during the 2014-2015 Donbas campaign, inviting another conventional Russian assault appeared as a non-starter for Ukrainian policymakers.

The Kremlin's Trojan Horse policy came full circle in February 2022 when Russian military forces invaded Ukraine yet another time in the two states' long, intertwined history. The Donbas proxies formed the crux of Russia's justification for invading Ukraine. To be sure, Russian President Vladimir Putin repeatedly cited the need to defend the DPR and LPR against Ukrainian oppression as the impetus for armed conflict, resulting in Russia's instigation of

the largest European armed conflict since World War II.⁵

The outcome of Russia's Ukrainian policy gambit remains to be seen. A detailed examination of Russia's proxy strategy can nevertheless illuminate many blind spots in existing proxy war literature, conflict studies, and international relations theory. Russia's reliance on the DPR and LPR is relatively straightforward as it relates to political proxies – Moscow used intelligence and special forces operations to identify sympathetic individuals in eastern Ukraine, and then use those individuals to manufacture de facto regional governments in Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia's reliance on the DPR and LPR (i.e., the political entities) aligns neatly with most of proxy war theory.

Russia's use of proxy military forces nonetheless highlights a lacuna in proxy war theory. Most proxy war theory values indirectness and plausible deniability as keystone concepts. In most proxy war theory, indirectness is often referred to as Actor A's use of an intermediary (Actor B) to combat a third-party (Actor C).⁶ Moreover, proxy war theory suggests that in using Actor B, Actor A attempts to avoid direct, or physical, confrontation with Actor C.⁷ Plausible deniability, on the other hand, is the theory that Actor A can purposely generate doubt in external actors, and the international community, regarding their involvement in an armed conflict against Actor C.

A cursory examination of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014 – present), however, discredits indirectness and plausible deniability's recognized importance in proxy wars and proxy war theory. Contrary to contemporary theory, the Russo-Ukrainian War, and Russia's use of proxies throughout the conflict, point to the fact that temporal

advantage and strategic flexibility are of strategic importance in proxy war.

In this paper, I examine how Russia's proxy war strategy confounds contemporary proxy war theory by not adhering to the tenets of indirectness and plausible deniability. I analyze this problem by briefly examining a few of the leading voices in proxy war theory to emphasize the significance they place on indirectness and plausible deniability. As part of that review, I introduce definitions for time and strategic flexibility that are pertinent to proxy war theory. Next, I analyze the Russo-Ukrainian War to identify the importance, or lack thereof, that Moscow placed on indirectness, plausible deniability, time, and strategic flexibility. I then close with what these findings might portend for constructing a more robust and practical theory of proxy war.

I make four basic arguments in this paper. First, most proxy war theory incorrectly categorizes proxy conflict as the indirect activity of one actor, through another actor, against a third party. As my case study will demonstrate, however, indirectness was of passing importance to Russia's proxy strategy in Ukraine. Moreover, indirectness is an incompatible term vis-à-vis strategic competition and armed conflict. By virtue of any strategic actor employing a military strategy in which they are in any way complicit, they are directly involved or directly engaged in the conflict. What many theorists mean when using the term indirect, or indirectness, is obfuscation, or an actor's attempt to keep their involvement hidden.

Second, the Russo-Ukrainian War illustrates that plausible deniability is useful insofar as it provides a temporal strategic advantage. Obfuscation in proxy war matters only during the initial phase of a proxy war, or when the purveyor of a proxy strategy is

attempting to surprise its opponent or trigger a fait accompli. Once an actor's ability to stay a step ahead of its adversary, or the international community, has dissipated, plausible deniability is no longer an important or useful concept in proxy war theory. Thus, instead of speaking about the alleged importance of plausible deniability, proxy theory must emphasize the importance of temporal advantage to the purpose of a proxy war strategy.

Third, strategic flexibility, along with temporal advantage, is the second true reason proxy wars dominate strategic competition today. Proxy strategies provide strategic flexibility by offloading the political and domestic risks and costs an actor incurs when using their own armed forces in armed conflict. Further, when an actor uses proxies in conjunction with their own forces, it increases their strategic flexibility by creating a more robust and resilient force, which allows it to endure more readily the rigors of combat while continuing toward its political-military objectives.

Fourth, untreated external proxies (political and/or military) operating within another state's sovereign borders create a security conundrum for both parties. The external proxy's principal will likely use the proxy to create chaos within its opponent's borders. Over time, the principal will likely use its opponent's treatment of the proxy – regardless of reality – to justify hostile action at a later date. However, if the opponent attempts to excise the external proxy, that might invite hostile action from the principal.

Finally, proxy wars increase what can be characterized as attrition in armed conflict. Attrition increases in proxy war because the principal actor in a principal-proxy dyad is fundamentally disinterested, or less

interested, in the survival of its proxy than it would otherwise be if its own forces were at work. Conversely, the opposing actor is interested in its own survival and will attempt to eliminate the proxy no differently than it would the principal's own forces.

Moreover, proxies, such as the DPA, tend to be the lead forces in increasingly hazardous combat situations, and as a result, they suffer high casualty rates. David Axe, a correspondent with Forbes, reports that the DPA began the February 2022 campaign with roughly 20,000 soldiers organized into six brigades.⁸ By November 2022, the DPA incurred over 19,000 casualties – wounded and killed in action.⁹ As Axe flatly states, the DPA are used like cannon fodder.

I conclude this paper by making several recommendations to improve the ontology of proxy war. First, proxy war theory should begin to cashier its reliance on the ideas of indirectness and plausible deniability as its core tenets, and instead exchange those ideas with temporal advantage and strategic flexibility. Next, proxy theory should clearly communicate its relationship to attrition so that policymakers, academics, and practitioners are not caught off guard by the high casualties and collateral damage associated with employing proxy strategies. Lastly, proxy war theorists must begin to push their arguments from behind the dark confines of academia and engage on a broader front, including government policy and military circles, so that their important work can make a meaningful impact on the true praxis of war and warfare.

Research Methods and Limitations

My focal point – examining the efficacy of indirectness and plausible deniability in proxy war – necessitates using theory testing as this paper's theory-building research

objective. To that end, indirectness, plausible deniability, temporal advantage, and strategic flexibility are the independent variables I use to examine contemporary proxy war theory. The Russo-Ukrainian War serves as the case study I use to examine my independent variables and to support my new theoretical contributions to the general theories of proxy war and conflict studies.

The challenge in writing about the Russo-Ukrainian War is that much of the policy and strategy documents, plans, and other essential primary source information is still behind the secretive confines of each involved actor's respective information classification protocols and networks. As a result, I have defaulted toward secondary source information as the main documentation to support this work's case study. Acknowledging that bias is inherently built into my secondary source material, I do my best to parse that bias and focus on the verifiable information therein.

Press releases and other official government information are also handled with caution. This is because many of these documents serve dual purposes – not only are they to inform the public, but they are also often a tool of messaging strategies in which an actor attempts to advance its preferred narrative. As a result, I carefully evaluate the official government press releases before using them as a reference within this paper, regardless of the actor. In situations where the reliability of a document cannot be confirmed, it is discarded as a source.

Additionally, some primary source material within this paper is known to be patently inaccurate, or false. For example, I use Vladimir Putin's speech and treatise on Russo-Ukrainian history as a source within this work, despite the known factual inaccuracies therein. I consciously do this, however, because the falsity of Putin's

message is an important feature in the narrative that Putin and his attendants used to build their case for war with Ukraine. Therefore, it is a critical lie that helped pave the path from the *fait accompli* seizure of Crimea in the spring of 2014 to today.

Lastly, I use only one case study to support the argument that temporal advantage and strategic flexibility are the true benefits of proxy strategies. In most analytical studies, one data point might skew the data. However, in this situation, the Russo-Ukrainian War has been running in real-time for over eight years. Therefore, in my judgment, the conflict's duration is a sufficient substitute for multiple data points and thus legitimizes the research findings herein.

Case Study

Russia's use of proxies against Ukraine reflects Moscow's understanding of the rules-based international order. Instead of Russia playing by the international community's accepted rules, however, Russia simply used those rules as a handrail to provide a façade of legitimacy to illegitimate action. This case study validates the claim that Russia took advantage of the rules-based international order along three primary lines. First, the Kremlin weaponized social factors, such as ethnicity, language, religion, and a loose interpretation of history to both legitimize its actions, but to also cultivate and manufacture proxy movements in Crimea and the Donbas.¹⁰

Second, Russia's proxy strategy was not purely military. Aware that condemnation awaits those who operate outside the bounds of legitimacy, Russia used both political and military proxies in Crimea and the Donbas to maintain the appearance of political legitimacy.¹¹ The combination of political

and military proxies allowed Russia to point to the political proxy as the representative for repressed Russian minorities in both regions. In turn, this provided Vladimir Putin with the political cover, regardless of its dubiousness, to justify the action of its Ukrainian proxy strategy.

Crimean and Donbas Campaign (Spring 2014 – Spring 2015)

In February 2014, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin authorized the annexation of Crimea.¹² The use of force relied on the covert insertion of troops, proxies, and political figures ahead of time so that once the operation was given the green light, the results were a forgone conclusion.¹³ As will be seen more clearly in the Donbas, Russia manufactured an insurgency to help obfuscate Russian involvement and lend a degree of legitimacy to its action.

On 27 February, Russia moved forward with its plan to annex Crimea. A mix of unmarked Russian forces and proxy forces jumped into action, seizing the peninsula largely through *fait accompli*.¹⁴ Aware of the international communities' sensitivities to political legitimacy, Russia quickly installed a proxy government in Crimea.¹⁵ Russia's proxy handlers on the peninsula relied on transactional ties to govern the relationship with its contractual proxies, including the notorious Wagner Group. Further, Russian proxy handlers balanced transactional ties and kinship ties to govern the relationship with its political and military proxies on the peninsula.¹⁶ Based on the close ethnic link between Russians and the population of Crimea, the bond between the Kremlin and their Crimean proxy government was relatively strong and resulted in low agency costs for Moscow's cultural and contractual proxies.¹⁷

Following the success of the Crimean operation, Putin sanctioned covert operations in eastern Ukraine.¹⁸ A smattering of contractors, intelligence officers, and special forces led the effort to manufacture an insurgency in eastern Ukraine.¹⁹ A manufactured insurgency differs from a genuine insurgency in a few meaningful ways. First, a manufactured insurgency is a planned and curated response to an outside actor's political and strategic goals, whereas traditional insurgencies are often an organic response to deteriorating internal political, domestic, or economic conditions.²⁰ Second, manufactured insurgencies are a front for the intervening actor, but the insurgency is meant to appear as though it is the result of genuine internal strife. Language can help make this point apparent. The Donbas proxies were commonly referred to as 'separatists,' especially in the early post-2014 period, despite being a manufactured insurgency, composed of a variety of proxies, as part of the Kremlin's strategy relating to Ukraine.²¹

Moving from policy to the applied level, Russia hinged its strategy on disaffected locals, Russian volunteers, and contractual proxies to cobble together the political leadership and military forces required to bring its manufactured insurgency to life.²² In the Donbas, the manufactured insurgency materialized as a small, but formidable, proxy army in Donetsk and Luhansk.²³ In many cases, Russian army officers and reliable Wagner contractors commanded Moscow's Donbas proxy force, while local commanders possessed only nominal control.²⁴

The establishment of the DPR and the LPR came quickly on the heels of the DPA and LPA's formation. Through April and May of 2014, the DPA and LPA infested Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, carving out significant

holdings in each locale. In Donetsk, Russia's proxy land grab stretched as far west as Slovyansk, and Lysychansk in Luhansk oblast. In total (i.e., the Crimean annexation plus the Donbas annexation), the Kremlin's proxy strategy acquired nearly ten percent of Ukrainian territory.²⁵

Analyst Mark Galeotti notes that the Russian border town of Rostov-on-Don served as the springboard for Russia's proxy strategy in the Donbas.²⁶ Rostov served as the primary logistics node supplying the DPA, the LPA, and their Russian handlers.²⁷ Rostov also served as a recruit and training depot where volunteers and contract fighters were screened and trained before being sent to the front to link up with their respective units.²⁸

In May 2014, the DPR and LPR declared their independence from Ukraine and the government in Kyiv.²⁹ Shortly thereafter Kyiv's forces stepped up their effort to both retake the lost territory, defeat Moscow's proxy forces, and evict the Kremlin's proxy governments.³⁰ Notably, Ukrainian forces retook the Donetsk Airport in late May and were chipping away at retaking Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, and other towns through the late spring and early summer.³¹ By early July 2014, Ukraine had regained its strategic balance and was methodically pushing Russia's proxies toward the Russia-Ukraine border.³²

Recognizing that the balance was shifting in favor of Kyiv, the Kremlin authorized overt participation by Russian land forces in the conflict. Russia moved upwards of 40,000 soldiers close to its border with Ukraine.³³ The 11 July Russian rocket strike on Ukrainian forces at Zelenopillya was the first significant indication that the Kremlin's proxy strategy had shifted from one of obfuscation to one of speed and flexibility. By August 2014, Russian land forces were unabashedly participating alongside the

DPA and LPA in combat.³⁴ Unanimous Russian victories at the battles at Ilovaik and Luhansk Airport are the most well-known examples of Russian army participation during the summer of 2014 because of the visibility surrounding the movement of the hundreds of vehicles and thousands of soldiers that deployed from Rostov-on-Don to the Donbas.³⁵ Russian land forces, in turn, helped stave off proxy defeat and to preserve proxy territorial holdings in the Donbas. The summertime defeats at Luhansk Airport and Ilovaik brought Kyiv to the negotiating table and resulted in the ill-fated, and short-lived, Minsk ceasefire agreement.³⁶

Nevertheless, before the ink had dried on the Minsk Protocol, Moscow doubled down on its Donbas strategy and initiated the brutal battle for Donetsk Airport in September, commonly referred to as the *Second Battle of Donetsk Airport*. After four months of combat, which destroyed the airport, Ukrainian forces withdrew from the area and set up defensive positions along the city's outskirts.³⁷ Following the victory at Donetsk Airport, Russia shut the door on the Donbas campaign with a decisive military victory at Debal'tseve, which paved the way for the Minsk II agreement.³⁸

Throughout the Donbas campaign's fall and winter legs, the Kremlin used Russian army officers to command many of its Donbas proxy units due to the proxy's high agency costs. To be sure, the Russian military found the Donbas proxies unreliable, which generated high agency costs for the Russian armed forces. Further, the Donbas proxies' high agency costs forced the Russian military to place regular army units alongside the DPA and LPA because the Kremlin lacked confidence in the DPA and LPA's ability to conduct unilateral or complex military operations. In most cases, a shadow Russian command structure

paralleled, and guided, the proxy's unit commanders. Russian balanced legitimate and coerced power to manage its relationship with the DPR/DPA and the LPR/LPA during this period by tightly coupling its own forces, as well as combat and political advisors, with its proxy.

The Kremlin's relationship with the Wagner Group, however, was distinct from that with the Donbas proxies. The Kremlin used the Wagner Group solely for military operations. The Wagner Group, unlike the Donbas or Crimean proxies, played no part in governing Russia's confiscated territory in Ukraine. As a result, Moscow's relationship with the Wagner Group was contractual, which relied on a transactional bond and reward power to regulate the relationship. Because of the contractual nature of the relationship between the Wagner Group and the Kremlin, the bond between the two was strong, and Wagner's embrace of risk was (and remains) very high. Considering those factors, Wagner came with low agency costs which provided the group with a significant degree of autonomy. Because of the Wagner Group's low agency costs, high morale, and financial incentives, it was capable of unilateral operations of increasing difficulty.

Post-Donbas Campaign (March 2015 – July 2020)

In the intervening years, Moscow relied on its governmental proxy, the DPR and LPR, and their cultural symmetries with the Donbas' residents, to create a politically and domestically advantageous situation for future political and military action against Ukraine. During this period the Kremlin weaponized citizenship by providing passports and visas to the residents of Donetsk, Luhansk, Crimea, and other areas in eastern and southern Ukraine.³⁹ This move sought to solidify its political position

in the Donbas and manufacture a sympathetic domestic audience in occupied and non-occupied areas. Moreover, hindsight proves that this move was used to create additional pockets of ‘Russians’ in Ukraine which Moscow would use as a pretense to justify its February 2022 invasion.

From Minsk II through February 2022, sporadic conflict between the Donbas proxies and Ukraine’s armed forces flared up, but generally garnered scant interest outside of the region. Russia continued to use the Donbas proxies as a thorn in Kyiv’s side, but also as a strategic Trojan Horse. Using the inordinate number of Minsk ceasefire violations levied by the DPA and the LPA as an indicator of utility, the DPR and LPR provided Moscow with a useful vector to manipulate Kyiv and the domestic situation across the region.⁴⁰ The DPA and LPA also provided the muscle to enforce the DPR and LPR’s dictates, as well as deter any Ukrainian plans to retake the Donbas. Similarly, Crimea’s Russian proxy government kept the Kremlin’s policy at the fore of operations, while traditional Russian military forces garrisoned the peninsula.

Russia likely used this time to normalize Crimea’s annexation and its occupation of the Donbas with the international community. As a sign that the normalization effort was working, technology giant Apple changed Crimea’s designation from Ukrainian to Russian on all its map applications in April 2019.⁴¹ This explicit acknowledgment of Moscow’s hegemony over the peninsula lasted until shortly after Putin’s February 2022 invasion, after which time Apple quietly changed Crimea’s affiliation back to Ukraine.⁴²

The Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) meeting in Minsk in July 2020 was another clear sign that the international community

was gradually accepting Ukraine’s territorial losses and the primacy of Russian proxy governance in the region. During the meeting, the participants agreed on several key points. First, the DPR and LPR would remain the de facto governments in the occupied region – an unmitigated strategic win for Russia’s proxy strategy.⁴³ Second, the existing contact line would remain the demarcation line between sovereign Ukrainian territory and the occupied regions.⁴⁴ Third, Kyiv agreed to not attack across the demarcation line and attempt to retake its disputed territory.⁴⁵ In effect, the TCG’s July 2020 agreement all but ceded the occupied portions of the Donbas to the DPR and LPR, and in reality, to Russia’s sphere of influence – another colossal strategic victory for Moscow’s proxy strategy in Ukraine.

Renewed Hostilities (July 2020 – Present)

Not satisfied with its gains from the July 2020 TCG agreement, the Kremlin used the DPR and LPR as a pretense for further escalation. In late 2021 and early 2022, the Kremlin began to amplify Putin’s Ukraine narrative.⁴⁶ Putin and his acolytes routinely stated that Ukraine was not a separate or independent state, but instead a lost region of Russia. Moreover, Putin and his retinue forcefully asserted Kyiv was discriminating against Ukraine’s ethnic Russian population.⁴⁷ Consequently, Putin argued that as the hegemon of the Slavic world and protector of ethnic Russians and Russophones, Russia was obligated to intervene on behalf of the persecuted Russians in Ukraine.⁴⁸ Keenly aware of the international community’s aversion to interstate armed conflict, Putin cited the United Nations charter in his formal declaration of ‘war’ (though he stylized it as a *special military operation*) to legitimize his call for war.⁴⁹ Putin specifically referenced the charter’s Chapter VII, Article

51, which alludes to a state's right to conduct self-defense measures necessary to maintain peace and security.

Putin's 23 February declaration of war opened the belly of Moscow's Trojan Horse, bringing the Kremlin's proxy strategy in Ukraine full circle. The DPR and LPR were the fulcrum to Moscow's central argument for war and the DPA and LPA proved the anchors upon which Russia's operational plan pivoted.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the Donbas, replete with a host of Russian political and military proxies, also served as the springboard for Moscow's failed February 2022 assaults on Kyiv and Kharkiv. Meanwhile, Russia's successful thrust during the spring and summer of 2022 to create a land bridge to Crimea ran directly through the Donbas and linked its proxy governments in the region with those of Crimea. In effect, the DPR and LPR formed a chain link of proxy governments and proxy military forces from the Russian-Ukrainian border in Luhansk to Crimea, running all along the Azovian coast.

The DPA and LPA, for their part, played central roles in the combat that allowed Russia to create its land bridge to Crimea. The DPA was front and center in the struggle to capture Mariupol, serving as one of Russia's front-line organizations throughout the battle.⁵¹ In the wake of the siege of Mariupol, for instance, the DPR's president Denis Pushilin toured the front and provided combat awards to members of the DPA, including the infamous *Somali Battalion*.⁵²

After capturing the preponderance of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in the summer of 2022, Russia seated proxy governments in charge of each of those regions.⁵³ In September 2022, the Russian parliament voted in favor to annex the DPR, the LPR, and Kherson and Zaporizhzhia

oblasts.⁵⁴ Placing the legality of the issue aside for the moment, Russia's annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia constitutes the unprovoked seizure of approximately 90,000 square kilometers, or 15% of sovereign Ukrainian territory, all spurred by a proxy strategy which maximized the potential of coerced proxies, contractual proxies, and proxy governments.⁵⁵

In the ensuing weeks, the United Nations parried Russia's nefarious use of international law to legitimize its action in Ukraine. On 12 October 2022, the UN countered, stating that Russia's reliance on Chapter VII, Article X of the UN's charter mischaracterized the charter's purpose and intent, and the body urged its members to not vote in support of Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory, which it deemed felonious.⁵⁶ The measure passed by a vote of 135 members in favor of the measure, five voting against it, and 35 abstentions.

In the war's ensuing period, Russia used its Donbas proxies as a blunt force tool as part of its attrition strategy in Ukraine, serving as a bite-and-hold force in Donetsk and Luhansk, and a battering ram in places such as Mariupol and Bakhmut.⁵⁷ On the governance front, the Kremlin continues to rely on the DPR and LPR as fronts to govern its annexed territory to provide a veneer of international legitimacy to its unofficial occupation of the Donbas.

Wagner, Moscow's contractual proxy, on the other hand, has been used more broadly than the DPA or LPA.⁵⁸ Russian operational commanders have used Wagner to both supervise and support the DPA and LPA in the Donbas.⁵⁹ Beyond working alongside the DPA and LPA, Wagner proxies have played a significant role in augmenting Russian

land forces by spearheading combat in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol, and the Donbas.⁶⁰

Further, Russia began the war in February 2022 with approximately 190,000 soldiers, oriented along three major attack axes. The DPA and LPA provided Russia with an additional 10,000 soldiers and a ready-made command structure.⁶¹ Wagner's numbers are far less easy to discern. Nonetheless, reports indicated that Wagner started the conflict with approximately 1,000 fighters.⁶² By December 2022, reports indicate that Wagner has upwards of 20,000 fighters working alongside the Russian army.⁶³ If those numbers are correct, Wagner now makes up roughly twenty percent of Russia's fighting force in Ukraine.

Russia eclipsed 125,000 soldiers killed in action in January 2023.⁶⁴ It is unclear if those numbers reflect losses across the Russian military, including the DPA and LPA, Wagner Group, and lesser groups. Nevertheless, the Russian military does not report Wagner losses to its public the way that it does with service members.⁶⁵ As a result, contractual proxies, such as Wagner, provide a mass, attritable army that can plunge into destructive combat without fear of domestic and political unrest at home.

To be sure, in the wake of stalwart Ukrainian defense against Russia's Wagner, in turn, provides the Kremlin with a proxy actor that provides it both time and strategic flexibility to circumvent the slow, bi-annual mobilization and training of conscripts, and the strife associated with losing uniformed service members. The Kremlin's use of Wagner throughout the Russo-Ukrainian War, from 2014 to the present, provides an interesting wrinkle to proxy war that is often overlooked in the literature – plausible deniability and indirect involvement take a back seat to time sensitivity and strategic flexibility.

Finding: Indirectness in Proxy War

Indirectness engagement and indirect control reside at the heart of contemporary proxy war theory. For instance, Andrew Mumford, one of proxy war theory's prominent contributors, predicates his definition of proxy war on the idea of indirectness. Mumford states that "Proxy wars are defined...as the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome."⁶⁶ Additionally, he contends that proxy wars are the byproduct of armed conflict in which the principal actor does not directly commit its own military force.⁶⁷ Mumford also summons the ghost of B.H. Liddell Hart by creating a theoretical link between the purported salience of indirectness within proxy wars to Liddell Hart's idea of the indirect approach. Mumford contends that proxy warfare is one of the leading forms of indirect warfighting within a "New era of the indirect strategic approach."⁶⁸

Indirect engagement and indirect control are also central in Eli Berman and David Lake's perspective on proxy war.⁶⁹ Berman and Lake assert that state actors engage in proxy wars through the indirect control of non-state, and sometimes state, actors. Further, proxy wars provide state actors with the means to indirectly control political violence on behalf of their strategic interests and policy aims.

Frank Hoffman, a heavyweight in the study of armed conflict, and Andrew Orner use similar language discussing proxy war, describing the use of proxies as an indirect approach to fighting wars.⁷⁰ Hoffman and Orner continue, stating that proxy wars will continue to be significant features of strategic competition in the future because of the supposed value of avoiding direct action by supporting intermediaries on the ground.⁷¹

Candice Rondeaux and David Sterman, from the U.S. think tank *New America*, also base their portrayal of proxy war on indirectness. Rondeaux and Sterman state that “Proxy warfare is best defined as the direct or indirect sponsorship of third-party conventional or irregular forces that lie outside of the constitutional order of states engaged in armed conflict.”⁷²

What each of these theorists fails to account for, and the Russo-Ukrainian War makes clear, is that obfuscated participation in a conflict is useful so long as it provides advantages of time. Temporal advantages include the positive impacts an actor generates from strategic operations that occur ahead of an opponent, and/or the international community’s, ability to recognize, process, and respond to the first-mover use of proxy forces.

When the advantage of time passed, the purveyor of the proxy strategy is faced with a decision – carry on, despite their involvement being known; or discontinue their involvement. The Russo-Ukrainian War case study illustrates that once the temporal advantage of a proxy strategy dissipates, and obfuscation evaporates, carrying on with a proxy strategy still yields benefits because of the strategic flexibility provided by operating through intermediaries.

Moreover, the phrases ‘indirect involvement’, ‘indirect engagement’, and ‘indirect sponsorship’ do not clarify proxy war dynamics. These terms may, in fact, confuse policymakers, academics, and practitioners looking to understand and employ proxy strategies. By virtue of being involved at all, strategic actors are directly engaged in a proxy war. Indirectness, when the term is used, actually alludes to varying degrees of obfuscated participation. This

distinction might seem metatheoretical and pedantic, but the nuance is important.

Finding: Plausible Deniability in Proxy War

In addition to indirectness, plausible deniability is a core concept in contemporary proxy war theory. Mumford asserts that modern proxy wars reflect a principal actor’s desire for plausible deniability and lower political and domestic risk.⁷³

Strategic actors also use proxy strategies to create time asymmetry between them and their adversaries. Preeminent military theorist Robert Leonhard opines that:

“Time...is the first and primary dimension that commanders and leaders have had to struggle with since the dawn of history...Time pervades all decision-making in war...Time comes before, follows after, and orders the sequence and tempo of military operations.”⁷⁴

Time asymmetry allows an aggressor to move toward its strategic objectives at a faster clip than their opponent. Time is so important in war and warfare that Napoleon Bonaparte famously stated: “I may lose ground, but I shall never lose a minute...ground we may recover, time never.”⁷⁵

Think of time asymmetry as the aggressor operating at full speed, while the opponent is reactionary and operating at half-speed, at least in the preliminary period of a proxy war, because of the cognitive and decision advantages afforded to the aggressor by obfuscated involvement. The Crimean campaign and the Donbas campaign’s spring offensive also illustrate how time asymmetry allows the aggressor to gain strategic objectives at a faster rate than their opponent.

Modern proxy war theorists, however, seem stuck wrestling with first-order questions and dealing with topical issues which stand in the way of developing a tangible understanding of proxy wars. This development is important because a richer understanding of proxy war can prevent policymakers, academics, and practitioners from being oblivious to the range of options proxies provide an actor with hostile intentions buried within their foreign policy. The vast numbers of people, institutions, and governments issuing *mea culpas* for failing to connect Russia's Crimean and Donbas campaigns with larger foreign policy goals in the wake of Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reinforces this point.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Theory testing and analyzing proxy war concepts through the lens of the Russo-Ukrainian War through the lens of proxy war provides many insights that are both overlooked in proxy war studies. For starters, the conflict demonstrates that indirect involvement, indirect control, and plausible deniability played almost no part in Russia's use of proxies throughout the conflict. Instead, the war demonstrates that a proxy strategy's usefulness correlates to the dependency between a strategic actor and three elements – obfuscation, time, and opportunity. Strategic actors use obfuscated political and military activities to skirt the rules-based international system's norms and rules by temporarily generating plausible deniability to provide the time required to maximize situational opportunities. Russia's reliance on political and military proxies during the Crimea campaign and the 2014-2015 Donbas campaign's spring offensive are exemplars of this idea.⁷⁷ It therefore follows that indirect involvement, indirect control, and

plausible deniability are not core tenets of proxy war strategy, but are shibboleths of a bygone era. The following sections provide a set of critical ideas, as a result of this paper's theory testing, to supplant the shibboleths of indirectness and plausible deniability.

Time and the Art of Proxy War

Time is at the heart of proxy strategy. A proxy strategy works best when it provides its user the time it needs to a) gain a significant strategic foothold on its policy objectives, b) gain that foothold, not necessarily the entirety of its policy objectives, a step quicker than international recognition, condemnation, and counteraction, and c) do so while minimizing political and domestic risk. Put another way, strategic actors use proxy wars to manage external and internal risk. An aggressor manages external risk (i.e., international recognition, condemnation, and counteraction) by moving first and maintaining obfuscation to the degree and time needed to gain a foothold. An aggressor manages internal risk (i.e., lack of political and domestic support for aggressive foreign policy aims) by offloading the preponderance of close combat to surrogate forces.

Indirectness, on the other hand, does not account for the centrality of time to proxy war strategies. Further, indirectness describes a method, and mistakenly conflates the notion of not operating along the frontlines of combat and hidden involvement as the primary reasons for utilizing a proxy strategy. Russia's war strategy, however, turns the idea of the importance of indirectness on its head.

Russia's use of proxies in Crimea was a time-based decision. The use of 'little green men' – thinly disguised Russian soldiers –

and Wagner Group proxies focused on taking Crimea by force quicker than Kyiv, or the international community, could respond. Moscow's use of proxies had little to do with hiding the Kremlin's involvement and more to do with temporarily confusing Kyiv and the international community. Russia's reliance on confusion was to generate a strategic situation that allowed its military forces – traditional and proxy – to operate at a quicker pace than Ukraine and the international community's collective ability to recognize what was going on, who was doing it, what response options were available, and acting in response to the aggression.

Moreover, Russia's initial incursion into the Donbas in 2014 demonstrates that indirect involvement is not a helpful idea for understanding proxy war. Russian proxy forces took control of nearly all of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts during April – May 2014. Through May and July 2014, Ukrainian forces had momentum and reclaimed about one-third of Kyiv's stolen territory. Alarmed by the deteriorating situation regarding its proxy strategy in the Donbas, Moscow authorized the use of conventional Russian land forces to staunch the bleeding. In July 2022, Russian artillery forces delivered a devastating blow against Ukrainian forces at Zelenopillya. In August, regularly Russian forces were fully committed to combat at Luhansk Airport and Ilovaisk. Shortly thereafter, Russian land forces were committed, multiple times, to the long and hard-fought battle for Donetsk Airport.⁷⁸ Lastly, Russian land forces helped win a decisive victory at Debal'tseve in February 2015.⁷⁹ In each of the situations, the involvement of Russian land forces was not indirect, nor obscured. In almost real-time, reports were coming out in open-source reporting that thousands of Russian soldiers and hundreds of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and artillery were

pouring across the border from Rostov oblast and into eastern Ukraine.⁸⁰ Russia's reliance on proxy forces in the Donbas during 2014-2015 provided Putin with the strategic flexibility he needed to conduct a blistering campaign of territorial conquest and martial brutality, without causing much alarm in the Russian countryside or the halls of the Kremlin. That strategic flexibility provided Putin with the political currency he needed to double down in Ukraine in 2022.

Strategic Flexibility and Attrition

The Russo-Ukrainian War, from its inception in the spring of 2014 to today, clearly demonstrates that proxy wars are, and will continue to be, wars of attrition. Proxy force employment fuels wars of attrition for two primary reasons. First, an actor's use of a proxy is often a gambit to offset the high degrees of political and domestic risk that accompany an aggressive foreign policy. A proxy strategy allows the actor to offload the preponderance of death and dying to a surrogate, thereby decreasing much of the political and domestic risk inherently found in war.

Second, when comparing proxies with a strategic actor's own forces, the proxy is an expendable force, whereas the principal's force is a more valuable commodity. From the battlefield, this tends to result in the principal actor fighting at extended range, often with long-range fires and armed drones, while feeding the proxy force into the pulverizing reality of close combat. From a practical standpoint, the tactical employment of proxies fuels high combat casualties, high civilian casualties, significant collateral damage on civilian infrastructure, high numbers of internally displaced people, and depopulation of focal points of combat. Russia's casualty count – reportedly over 120,000 as of January 2023 – and the evisceration of Ukrainian cities,

such as Pisky, Sievierodonetsk, Mariupol, and Bahkmut, make this point self-evident.⁸¹

Third, the argument can be made that irregular force proxies care less about international humanitarian law (IHL) than uniformed soldiers, and therefore proxy strategies generate a more wanton and indiscriminate use of force. It logically follows then that civilian casualties, collateral damage, and violations of IHL are higher in proxy-laden wars.

Fourth, due to their ad hoc and temporal character, proxy forces are frequently less trained, and less proficient in the use of force, than regular soldiers. Professional militaries, especially those that do not rely on conscription, value training because it creates proficient forces. Professional militaries value proficiency because it increases their effectiveness and efficiency in warfighting. In turn, effective and efficient warfighting contributes to precise combat operations, less battlefield destruction, less collateral damage, and makes war less deadly, at least theoretically, for all its participants. In contrast, undertrained and untrained proxy force inefficiency fuels high casualties amongst the proxy force, high collateral damage, and high civilian casualties.⁸²

The 2014-2015 Donbas campaign's blistering battles of Luhansk Airport, Ilovaisk, Donetsk Airport, and Debal'tseve pulverized eastern Ukraine, killed upwards of 14,000 Ukrainians, displaced thousands, and reduced frontline towns like Pisky to double-digit populations.⁸³ The Donbas campaign bears witness to the brutality that accompanies outsourcing combat to surrogate forces. Further, the butchery of 2022's battles of Bucha, Kharkiv, and Mariupol, in which both the Donbas proxies and the Wagner Group played significant

roles, reinforces the findings from 2014-2015.

Lastly, opportunistic third parties can change the character of proxy wars. The United States, for instance, pragmatically enlisted Ukraine as a transactional proxy closely following Russia's February 2022 reinvasion.⁸⁴ Seeking to maximize its strategic flexibility within the conflict the United States opted for the technology diffusion model of proxy war to combat Russia.⁸⁵ Keeping in line with the importance of minimizing political and domestic risk by using another actor's force to do the fighting on one's behalf, the United States provided Ukraine with \$6.3 billion in security assistance in fiscal year 2022 and \$13 billion in military assistance since August 2021.⁸⁶ Collectively, those packages have included thirty-eight HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems), forty-five T-72B tanks, 1,600 Stinger Anti-Air Missiles, 8,500 Javelin Anti-Armor Systems, 142 155-millimeter howitzers, thirty-six 106-millimeter howitzers, and a vast array of other warfighting materiel.

To conclude, proxy theory must maintain pace with the realities of armed conflict. The Russo-Ukrainian War illustrates that indirect engagement, indirect control, and plausible deniability are outmoded principles of proxy war theory. Proxy wars are useful insofar as they provide a strategic actor with temporal advantages and strategic flexibility. Moving forward, proxy war theorists must account for these factors above all else in their theories to maintain pace with the reality of proxy war.

Proxy wars might make armed conflict appear as a less dangerous option for a principal actor. However, proxy war theorists and practitioners alike must move beyond this cynical, and fundamentally

mistaken, notion. If the Russo-Ukrainian War demonstrates one thing above all else, it is that proxy war is a savage game of butchery, and routinely falls well within the bounds of wars of attrition.

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