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PROXY OPERATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: NATURE, PRINCIPLES AND EFFECTIVENESS INDICATORS

Abstract. *The relevance of the study is due to the growing role of proxy operations in modern conflicts, in particular in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, which is taking on the characteristics of a hybrid and asymmetric war. The proxy actions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine through non-state or puppet actors create significant challenges for national security and international stability. The purpose of the article is to understand systematically the nature of proxy operations, formulate the principles of their preparation and implementation, and determine indicators for assessing their effectiveness. The study uses methods of analysis and synthesis, a comparative-historical approach, a systems analysis, and the Saati hierarchy method to rank indicators for assessing the effectiveness of proxy operations. Among the main results: a refined definition of the concepts of “proxy operation” and “proxy war”, the basic principles of conducting proxy operations are formulated, a system of key indicators for assessing the effectiveness of proxy operations is proposed, and their weight coefficients are calculated in the general indicator for assessing the effectiveness of proxy operations. The materials of the article will be useful for the specialists in the field of national security, strategic communications, military affairs, analysts, specialists in international relations and scholars in the field of political and military sciences.*

Keywords: *proxy operations, proxy war, hybrid war, Russian-Ukrainian war, strategic destabilization, asymmetric actions, information and psychological influence, sponsoring states, non-state actors, effectiveness assessment, effectiveness assessment, national and military security of the state.*

Introduction

Statement of the problem. The Russian-Ukrainian war, that has been ongoing since 2014 and has become full-scale since February 2022, demonstrates the evolution of modern armed confrontation, proxy operations in which are playing an increasingly important role [1–3]. Russia actively uses indirect forms of influence, delegating some of its military-political, informational, and subversive functions to proxy actors – illegal armed groups, private military companies, puppet administrations in the occupied territories, as well as structures associated with it in neighboring states [4–7].

The main signs of proxy orientation in the ongoing war include: the use of Russian puppet formations in temporarily occupied territories (the so-called “DPR/LPR armies”, “volunteer battalions”), which perform the functions of combat units under Russian command; the use of military personnel from other countries as proxy forces during combat operations; information operations implemented through controlled media, “independent experts” and online networks outside the Russian Federation; the involvement of foreign mercenaries and private military companies (in particular “Wagner”) as tools for achieving strategic goals without the direct participation of the regular Russian armed forces; support for internal destructive elements in Ukraine in order to destabilize the situation, undermine trust in the authorities and create social tension. All this indicates the Russian military strategy high level of adaptation to the proxy format of warfare, which allows the aggressor to act under cover, minimizing political and reputational losses, while maintaining a constant level of threat to Ukrainian statehood. The main risks of further development of the proxy format in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war include: scaling of the conflict through new proxy channels – in particular, the activation of pro-Russian elements in adjacent regions (Belarus, Transnistria, the Balkans); strengthening of the hybrid component due to synergy between proxy forces, information and psychological operations and cyberattacks; blurring of the aggressor's responsibility, which complicates the international response, in particular in the legal sphere (war crimes, responsibility for aggression); possible imitation of proxy operations by other states or actors interested in destabilizing the region or seeking to weaken Ukraine through indirect intervention.

In this context, studying the nature, principles, and effectiveness of proxy operations is extremely important not only for a deeper understanding of the nature of modern warfare, but also for the formation of a national response model and proactive strategies to counter new threats. In addition, it opens up prospects for the formation of our own asymmetric solutions in the field of national security, defense, and foreign policy.

Analysis of recent research and publications. An analysis of recent research, publications, and a number of documents devoted to the issue of the article [1–17] indicates that in the current geopolitical conditions of world development, the issue of researching the theory of proxy wars and hybrid wars, as well as the development of forms and methods of waging them, is gaining momentum today.

A proxy war is a term that describes a war or conflict between two or more states where the conflicting parties do not wage direct war against each other, but use rebels, local factions, or other states as “proxies” to fight for their interests. Proxy wars can take many forms, including providing military support, arms supplies, financing, or political support [4], [6], [8], [13], [17].

The term “proxy war” comes from the English term and is used to describe conflicts in those two or more conflicting parties conduct hostilities through the mediation of a third party. The idea of using intermediaries in wars is not new and has been used throughout history. Ukraine today is the largest testing ground for proxy and hybrid warfare technologies in the world in the entire history of the 21st century.

However, the concept of “proxy war” gained widespread acceptance in political science and international relations in the second half of the 20th century. The term is believed to have been first used by American political scientist George Kennan in his article “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” published in 1947. In this article, Kennan used the term “proxy war” to describe a

conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union in which both sides compete for the support of regional allies.

Analyzing the abovementioned, we can say that today the principle of global proxy confrontation between these players also works, but over the past few decades there has been a transformation of both the main players of this confrontation and the geopolitical situation around them [10–17]. Today it is no longer possible to say exactly which country was the first to use proxy war, since this approach has been used in various conflicts around the world. However, well-known proxy wars include, for example, the involvement of the United States and the Soviet Union in the conflicts in Vietnam (1955-1975) and Afghanistan (1979-1989), where both conflicting parties supported the military operations of their allies, and elements of proxy war can also be traced in the hybrid war of Russia against Ukraine.

Proxy war and hybrid war are two different concepts that describe different types of conflicts. An analysis of the specifics of the resolution and conduct of these types of wars allows us to identify their main differences and similarities (Table 1).

It should be noted that both state actors and non-state actors, such as terrorist groups or cybercriminals, can participate in a hybrid war. The motivation for waging a hybrid war may be different - from achieving geopolitical goals and controlling the region to destabilizing the enemy, attracting its resources and distracting from other problems. In turn, a proxy war, as a rule, takes place between two conflicting forces or blocs of countries that seek to expand their spheres of influence or protect their interests. In this case, they support proxy forces that conduct military actions in their interests, often on the territory of third countries. A proxy war can be aimed at achieving specific territorial, political or strategic goals. In the structure of such wars, a key role is played by proxy operations - targeted actions carried out through trusted actors or controlled structures that are not formally associated with the sponsoring state. These operations can encompass a wide range of active actions: from armed struggle and sabotage to informational and psychological influence, economic pressure, or cyberattacks.

They allow achieving goals indirectly, reducing political responsibility, legitimizing intervention through local forces or structures, and at the same time creating the impression of internal conflict rather than external aggression.

Table 1

Features of proxy wars and hybrid wars

Proxy war	Hybrid war
Definition	
A proxy war is a conflict between two or more opposing forces in which the conflicting parties do not wage direct war against each other, but support proxy forces (trustees or rebels) who fight on their behalf	Hybrid warfare is a new concept of conflict management that combines various means and methods of warfare, including military, political, economic, informational, and cyber influences. The main feature of hybrid warfare is that it aims to achieve its goals not only through military operations, but also through endless combinations of strategies that include political and economic pressure, disinformation, cyberattacks, sabotage, hybrid and unconventional military actions, financial destabilization, and other methods
The main idea and direction of the war	
The basic idea is that proxy forces fight on behalf of their sponsors, receiving support, weapons, financial assistance, and other resources. Proxy wars can take many forms, such as	Hybrid warfare is aimed at undermining internal stability, changing geopolitical status, dominating the military, economic or political sphere, and achieving its goals without full-scale direct war. The main goal of hybrid warfare is to achieve strategic advantage and

financial support, the supply of weapons, training of combat units, the deployment of military advisors, or even direct intervention in the form of limited military operations. The main goal of a proxy war is confrontation between influential forces through their proxy agents	change the political landscape in its favor. Hybrid warfare often uses information operations and propaganda to manipulate public opinion and create disinformation in order to undermine trust in government or create internal conflicts. Cyberattacks and hacking attacks can also be a component of hybrid warfare aimed at destroying the enemy's information systems, economic structures or critical infrastructure
Examples	
Conflicts in Afghanistan (1979-1989), Vietnam (1955-1975), Syria (since 2011), partly Ukraine, activation from 2000 to the present.	The first and second wars in Chechnya, the conflict in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the conflict in Syria.
No.	Differences between wars
1	The main difference between proxy war and hybrid war is that proxy war involves conducting hostilities through proxy forces, while hybrid war is a comprehensive strategy that uses various means, including military and non-military, to achieve its political and strategic goals.
2	An important distinction between a proxy war and a hybrid war lies in the motivation and the parties involved. In a proxy war, the main parties to the conflict may be two large states or blocs of countries that support their proxy forces in fighting each other.
3	Proxy warfare typically involves fighting through proxy forces, while hybrid warfare uses a wide range of tools and methods that may include proxy warfare but go far beyond it, depending on the strategic goals and capabilities of the parties to the conflict.
4	Proxy warfare typically involves waging war through proxy forces supported by opposing forces. Hybrid warfare uses a variety of tools and methods, including military, political, economic, informational, and cyber influences, to achieve strategic advantage and alter the political landscape
Conclusion based on the results of the analysis of the theoretical features of wars	
Proxy war and hybrid war are two different approaches to conflict management. It is important to note that proxy war may be a component of hybrid war. For example, in a hybrid war, one side may maintain proxy forces as one of the influencing tools and conducting the conflict. A hybrid war may include several proxy wars, but also use other methods of influence and destabilization. In general, proxy war and hybrid war represent two different conflict strategies that may be used by states or actors to achieve their goals. In practical application, it is difficult to separate proxy war and hybrid war, as they can be intertwined and used together within the same conflict. For example, a hybrid war may begin with the use of proxy forces for initial destabilization, and then expand using other methods and tools	

Purpose of the article. The purpose of the article is to systematically understand the nature of proxy operations, formulate the principles of their preparation and implementation, and also determine indicators for assessing their effectiveness.

Presentation of the main material

Proxy operations (proxy wars) are a form of indirect armed conflict in which one or more states or non-state actors use third parties (other states, irregular armed groups, private military companies, etc.) to achieve their own strategic goals, avoiding direct involvement in hostilities.

A proxy operation refers to a situation where one country or organization engages a third party (proxy) to carry out military or political actions in another country or region. This third party may be an independent local group, rebels, national armies, or other military formations. The main

idea of a proxy operation is that the main actor wants to maintain its position and invisibility by using the proxy to influence the conflict.

Proxy warfare, on the other hand, is a form of conflict in which two or more conflicting parties fight through proxies, rather than directly engaging in military confrontation. This means that the parties do not engage in direct military conflict with each other, but use proxy forces to fight on their behalf. These can be local militias, rebel groups, national armies, or mercenary forces.

The main difference between a proxy war and a proxy operation is the nature of the conflict. A proxy war involves direct military combat between proxy forces acting on behalf of their sponsors. In a proxy operation, conversely, proxies act as agents or instruments to achieve the sponsor's goals, but may avoid direct confrontation with the adversary.

Proxy warfare and proxy operations share a common bond in that both concepts involve the use of proxies to achieve the political, military, or strategic goals of the sponsor. In both cases, proxies act as intermediaries, acting on behalf of their sponsors. An important distinction is that proxy warfare typically involves open warfare or armed conflict, while proxy operations can involve a variety of activities, such as intelligence, covert operations, financial support, political manipulation, and other forms of influence. The connection between proxy warfare and proxy operations is that in both cases, proxies are used to influence a conflict or situation. Proxies act on behalf of their sponsors, which provides them with a degree of protection or invisibility. In both cases, proxy forces are used to exert influence without directly confronting the sponsors. However, it is worth noting that the terms “proxy war” and “proxy operation” may have different variations in terminology and be used in different contexts, especially in political and military discourse, and a proxy war and a proxy operation may have different motivations and goals.

A proxy war is usually motivated by political, ideological, or territorial conflicts between states or groups. In such wars, proxy forces act on behalf of their sponsors, conducting hostilities, fighting, or supporting militants or rebels in another country or region. An example of a proxy war is the conflict in Syria, where various external powers support the opposition of local groups. On the other hand, a proxy operation can encompass a wide range of actions that are not necessarily related to war or armed conflict. These can include intelligence operations, economic sanctions, political manipulation, special operations, financial support, or even cyberattacks. Proxy operations are often used to achieve political or geostrategic goals, regime change, resources control, or influence the geopolitical situation in a particular region. It is important to note that proxy wars and proxy operations may have serious consequences for the security, stability, and geopolitical development of the region, and can also affect international relations. However, the level of transparency and openness of proxy actions may vary depending on the specific situation.

The nature of proxy operations is defined by their asymmetric, multilayered, flexible, and hybrid nature. They can encompass not only combat operations, but also information campaigns, subversion, economic pressure, cultural influence, and cyber operations.

The main principles of conducting proxy operations may be defined as:

indirect conduct and masking of participation (plausible deniability). A proxy operation is structured so that an external actor can deny or conceal its participation in the conflict, that reduces the risks of direct escalation or international sanctions;

delegation of armed influence functions. Actions involving the use of force are transferred to irregular formations, mercenaries, criminal or radical structures that operate within the defined coordinates of the interests of the sponsoring state;

asymmetry and economic efficiency. Proxy operations allow for significant strategic effects while minimizing direct costs. They are particularly effective for countries with limited resources or those wishing to avoid open conflict;

flexibility and adaptability. Proxy forces quickly adapt to changes in the theater of operations, often not limited by the norms of international law, that allows them to act unconventionally, creatively, and without rigid centralization;

complex (hybrid) nature. Proxy operations are combined with informational and psychological influence, economic pressure, political blackmail, and diplomatic manipulation;

control and manageability of proxy forces. The effectiveness of a proxy operation depends on the ability to maintain operational and strategic control over the actions of the proxy force, while avoiding excessive autonomy;

manipulative use of legitimacy. Proxy structures can cover themselves up with the “national liberation movement”, the “struggle for rights”, the “protection of the local population”, etc., to mislead the international community.

Below is a systematic list of the main indicators for assessing the effectiveness of proxy operations (Table 2), which allow for a comprehensive description of the achievement of the sponsoring state’s strategic goals, the level of secrecy and costs, as well as the impact on the enemy and the stability of the proxy force itself.

Table 2

Key indicators for assessing the effectiveness of proxy operations

Indicator	Definition and content	Direction of application
Achieving the strategic goals of the main actor	The extent to which a proxy operation ensures the realization of the political, military, economic, or informational interests of the customer (sponsoring state)	Assessing the success of implementing a geopolitical strategy without direct military intervention
Degree of deniability	The extent to which the client of the proxy operation can deny its involvement in the conflict or avoid responsibility in the international arena	Analysis of legal and political implications for the sponsoring state
Level of costs for the sponsoring state	The totality of resources (financial, military, diplomatic) that are spent on supporting a proxy force	Comparing the cost-effectiveness of proxy operations with alternative forms of armed intervention
Duration and stability of proxy power	The ability of a proxy structure to remain active, combat-ready, and politically loyal for a long time	Analysis of the viability of the operation in the long term
Impact on the enemy (destabilization, exhaustion)	The level of decline in the defense capability, political stability, or economic potential of an enemy state	Measuring the strategic effect on the target state or alliance
The level of domestic and international legitimacy of the proxy power	The extent to which the proxy power is recognized as legitimate among the local population and international actors	Determining the potential of a proxy structure for autonomous political existence or integration into the political landscape
Level of informational and psychological impact	The effectiveness of using proxy structures to shape the desired narrative, disorient society, or demoralize enemy forces	Measuring the effectiveness of information campaigns in combination with military actions
The level of dependency of the proxy force on the sponsoring state	The extent to which the proxy power is controlled, managed, and dependent in terms of resources, decisions, and actions	Analysis of the risks of autonomation of proxy structures or their transfer under the control of other actors
Ability to scale or move the model	Can this proxy model be replicated in other regions or conflict scenarios?	Strategic planning for long-term conflicts and zones of influence

Using the Saati hierarchy analysis method, a pairwise comparison of indicators was carried out, values were normalized and weights (the contribution of each indicator) were calculated in the overall assessment of the effectiveness of the proxy operation (Table 3). The results allow us to determine the priority of individual aspects in the planning, analysis and assessment of such operations. Table 3 is an example of a generalized average matrix of pairwise comparisons. The assessment was carried out by a group of eight experts who are specialists in the field of application of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Table 3

Generalized pairwise comparison matrix

	Achieving strategic goals	Degree of detachment	Cost level	Proxy duration	Impact on the enemy	Proxy legitimacy	IP impact	Proxy dependency	Scalability
Achieving strategic goals	1,000	2,745	4,507	3,320	2,798	3,911	2,821	5,291	4,730
Degree of detachment	0,364	1,000	1,186	1,377	1,059	1,320	2,804	1,738	1,540
Cost level	0,222	0,843	1,000	5,010	4,842	5,486	1,140	5,192	1,770
Proxy duration	0,301	0,726	0,200	1,000	4,422	3,161	1,260	1,267	3,183
Impact on the enemy	0,357	0,944	0,207	0,226	1,000	2,487	1,144	2,017	1,896
Proxy legitimacy	0,256	0,758	0,182	0,316	0,402	1,000	1,218	1,189	1,252
Informational and psychological impact	0,355	0,357	0,877	0,794	0,874	0,821	1,000	2,262	2,564
Proxy dependency	0,189	0,575	0,193	0,789	0,496	0,841	0,442	1,000	0,620
Scalability	0,211	0,649	0,565	0,314	0,527	0,798	0,390	1,613	1,000

Table 4 shows an example of a normalized matrix, a normalized assessment of the contribution of indicators to the overall assessment of the effectiveness of the proxy operation (Fig. 1), and the rating of these indicators in the overall defined group.

Table 4

Normalized matrix (priority vectors (weights))

No.	Indicator	Weight	Rating
1	Achieving the strategic goals of the main actor	0,216	1
2	Level of costs for the sponsoring state	0,153	2
3	Duration and stability of proxy power	0,113	3
4	Impact on the enemy (destabilization, exhaustion)	0,111	4
5	Informational and psychological impact	0,103	5
6	Degree of deniability	0,087	6

No.	Indicator	Weight	Rating
7	The level of domestic and international legitimacy of the proxy power	0,075	7
8	Scalability or portability of the model	0,072	8
9	The level of dependency of the proxy force on the sponsoring state	0,069	9

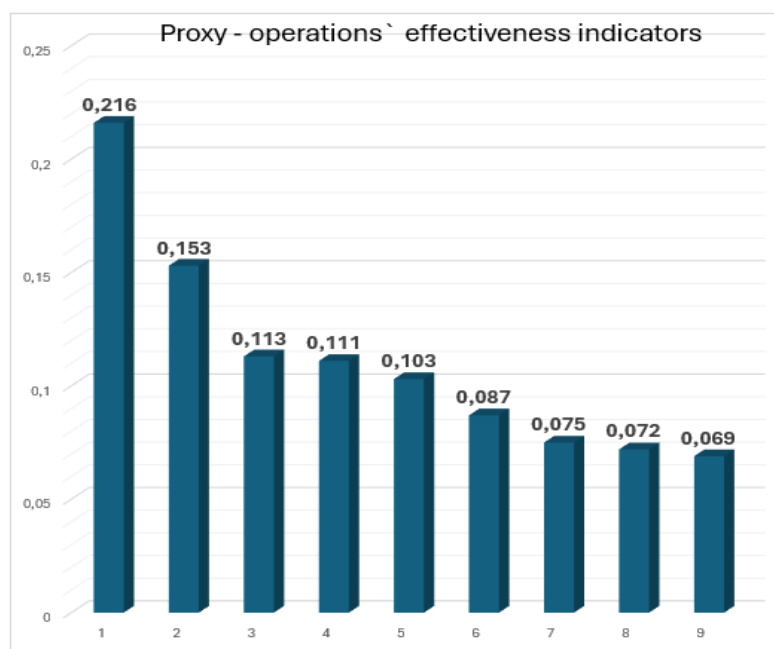


Fig.1. Normalized estimates of the indicators contribution to the overall assessment of the effectiveness of the proxy operation

The calculations show that the highest weight (0,216) was given to the criterion “Achievement of the strategic goals of the main actor”, which is logical, because the success of a proxy war is determined by its ability to realize the strategic interests of the sponsor. The second place is taken by the “Level of costs” (0,153) and also has a high weight, because a proxy war is attractive if it allows achieving goals with minimal costs. The third and fourth places are taken by the indicators “Duration and stability of proxy power” (0,113) and “Influence on the enemy” (0,111) – these indicators are important in terms of the longevity of the effect and the exhaustion of the enemy. The indicator “Information and psychological impact” (0,103) – confirms that a proxy war is not only about armed struggle, but also about media and psycho-emotional campaigns. The lowest values are “Proxy Dependence” (0,069) and “Model Scalability” (0,072), which may indicate their secondary importance or the difficulty of achieving autonomy.

Conclusions

Thus, proxy operations are a form of indirect military intervention in that a state or non-state actor uses a third party (proxy force) to achieve its own strategic goals, avoiding open participation in an armed conflict. In its classical form, the proxy warfare is an indirect conflict where an external actor delegates the functions of violence, influence, or destabilization to another actor, often an illegal or irregular one. Proxy operations, as a key tool of modern hybrid and asymmetric warfare, are increasingly influencing the course of armed conflicts, particularly in the context of the russian-Ukrainian war. Their essence lies in the use of proxy forces by sponsoring

states to achieve their own strategic goals with minimal risks of direct escalation or international liability. The study analyzed the nature of proxy operations, identified their basic principles, and also formed a system of key indicators for assessing the effectiveness of such operations. The application of the Saati method allowed us to rank these indicators and determine their relative contribution to the overall assessment of the success of proxy operations. The indicators of achieving strategic goals, the level of losses of resilience, and the duration of the proxy operation received the highest weight, reflecting the dominance of strategic expediency and concealment in modern proxy practice.

The research materials may be used as a methodological basis for training specialists in the field of national security, strategic planning, countering hybrid threats, and conducting military-political and strategic analysis. Taking into account the formulated approaches will allow Ukraine not only to more effectively identify and neutralize the enemy's proxy actions, but also, if necessary, to use proxy tools as an element of its own deterrence and asymmetric response strategy.

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