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**PROS AND CONS OF PROXY WARFARE (2022-2026):
A CASE STUDY OF THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA WAR**

Ufaruna Sarah Azi, PhD; Ilemona John, PhD & Isibor Eniola Esther
Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria, Department of History and International Relations
sarahu@veritas.edu.ng, ilemonaj@veritas.edu.ng, onewithennie@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the role of Proxy warfare, which has become an important feature of the 21st century; it allows external states to pursue strategic aims while avoiding direct military confrontation. The aim of the paper is to examine the advantages and disadvantages of proxy war through a case study of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The paper draws on textbooks, journals, and online sources and analyzes them using a narrative-analytic method to assess the military, economic, humanitarian, and diplomatic dimensions. Neorealism theory was used in the understanding of the dynamics and impacts of proxy interference in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The findings show that for sponsoring states, proxy war offers strategic gains. However, the cons are substantial: prolonged civilian suffering, mass displacement, infrastructure destruction, economic instability, and the risk of regional escalation. The paper argues that while proxy war may serve state interests in the short term, its long-term consequences undermine stability and sovereignty. The study concludes that policy recommendations for managing proxy conflicts will limit humanitarian costs in future geopolitical rivalries.

Keywords: Aid, Conflict, Geopolitics, Humanitarian, Military, Proxy.

Introduction

Proxy war is a military battle in which third parties directly or indirectly support one or more states in a conflict in an effort to influence the conflict's outcome and thereby advance their strategic interests or to undermine those of their opponents. It is a conflict whereby either side is supported by major world powers without the major powers directly engaging in the combat. It is the aggregate effort of third parties in a proxy war; this means that the third party is not to participate in the actual fighting, but it enables the major powers to avoid confrontation with each other as they compete for

influence and resources. Apparently, this kind of support consists of military aid and training, economic assistance, and sometimes limited military operations with surrogate forces. Moreover, indirect means of support have included blockades, sanctions, trade embargoes, and other strategies designed to thwart a rival's ambitions, Baugh (2025).

Historically, Proxy wars has its foot-print in world affairs; historians have chronicled that these approaches were employed by nations and empires as both military and foreign policy strategies to influence and pacify neighboring states. In the 4th century, the Byzantine Empire (330–1453) engaged in what could be described as predecessor strategies to proxy warfare, even though the word proxy was yet to be coined. The Byzantines deliberately instigated hostilities between different groups within rival nations and then backed the strongest side whenever war broke out. Furthermore, during World War I, Britain and France used a similar strategy by supporting the Arab Revolt (1916–18) against the Ottoman Empire. Also, the Korean War of 1950-1953 was widely considered a proxy war during the Cold War, because North Korea was supported by the Soviet Union and China while South Korea was backed by the United Nations, primarily the United States.

Accordingly, whatever gains were made in the act of engaging in proxy, the menace of the war filters them away. It is of note that the involvement of third parties, most especially super powers to the combat would lead to prolonged conflicts, escalating risks of unintended consequences vis-à-vis financial cost. Thus, the combat may not be in the interest of the nation, since most of the time it is an avenue for superpowers to settle geopolitical tensions. The conflict is mostly considered a limited war because the superpowers avoided confrontation, fearing a potential nuclear war.

The 21st century has witnessed a resurgence of proxy warfare as a preferred instrument of statecraft. Defined as a conflict in which major powers support third parties to advance strategic objectives without direct military engagement, proxy war allows states to compete for influence while mitigating the risks and costs of confrontation. From Syria and Yemen to Afghanistan, the pattern is clear: geopolitical rivalry is increasingly fought through intermediaries, with devastating consequences for local populations, Byman (2013)

The Russia-Ukraine war, which intensified in February 2022, characterizes one of the most significant examples of a hybrid war involving proxy warfare elements in our contemporary era. While Russia and Ukraine are the principal antagonists, the conflict has drawn in a broad network of external actors providing military, financial, intelligence, diplomatic support and much more. For Western states led by the United States and NATO, aid to Ukraine has served to contain Russian expansionism, test defense systems, and reassert alliance cohesion. For Ukraine, external assistance has been critical to national survival, yet the war has also produced immense humanitarian suffering, economic disruption, and the risk of escalation beyond Eastern Europe (Kofman et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study argues that while proxy war may deliver short-term strategic advantages to external powers, its long-term effects undermine stability, sovereignty, and human security. By examining both the pros and cons, this research contributes to ongoing debates on the ethics, effectiveness, and future of proxy conflict.

Statement of Problem

Despite extensive literature on proxy wars, there is limited empirical analysis of how prolonged external funding in the 2022-2026 Ukraine war has simultaneously preserved and undermined Ukrainian sovereignty. Most studies focus either on military outcomes, NATO strategy, or humanitarian impacts in isolation, but do not assess the costs of proxy warfare within one analytical framework using evidence from 2022–2026

Although this existing literature recognizes that proxy warfare allows supporter states to achieve strategic objectives at lower direct cost, there is another school of thought that states that there is limited consensus on the overall balance of benefits and harms. The fact remains that proxy warfare inflicts devastating humanitarian, economic, and political costs on the proxy state and civilian populations.

Despite the centrality of the Ukraine case to contemporary debates on security, alliance politics, and war, there is a gap in systematically analyzing both the costs and the pros of proxy warfare within a single framework. Therefore, this study seeks to address the problem, the costs, and how are they showed in the case of the Russia-Ukraine war from 2022 to 2026.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of proxy involvement in the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war?
2. What are the measurable humanitarian and economic impacts on both countries?
3. How does prolonged external funding affect Ukraine's long-term sovereignty?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the nature of proxy involvement in the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine Warfare
2. To evaluate the measurable humanitarian and economic impacts on both countries
3. To determine the effect of the prolonged external funding on Ukraine's sovereignty

Literature Review

Concept of Proxy

Proxy comes from a contracted form of the Middle English word *procuracie* (meaning "procuration"). A proxy may refer to a person who is authorized to act for another, or it may designate the function or authority of serving in another's stead.

According to Mumford (2013), he defines proxy war as "an international conflict between two states or non-state actors, which is fought by surrogates on behalf of external powers. This definition emphasizes the indirect nature of involvement and the delegation of combat to third parties.

Salehyan (2010) expands this by noting that external support can take multiple forms, including military aid, training, intelligence, and financial resources. The principal-agent framework has also been applied to proxy relationships, highlighting issues of control, divergence of interests, and agency loss between the sponsor and the proxy (Byman, 2013).

Scholars agree that proxy warfare allows great powers to pursue strategic goals while avoiding direct costs and escalation risks (Hughes, 2014). However, the relationship is rarely symmetrical. As Groh (2019) argues, proxies often develop their own objectives, which may not fully align with those of their sponsors, leading to prolonged and intractable conflicts.

For realism theory, it provides the dominant explanation for proxy wars. Realist perspectives explain that States use proxies to balance power, weaken rivals, and expand influence without triggering direct war (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Reiterating that during the Cold War, proxy conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Angola served as battlegrounds for US-Soviet competition (Westad, 2005), thus, in the 21st century, the logic persists; Byman (2018) notes that modern sponsors benefit from plausible deniability, cost externalization, and the ability to test weapons and doctrine in real combat conditions.

Cunningham et al. (2017), the literature is equally clear on the disadvantages associated with Proxy warfare, because proxy interferences tend to be longer, deadlier, and more destructive for civilian populations than direct wars find that external intervention increases both the duration and intensity

of civil conflicts. In Ukraine, this has manifested in mass displacement, infrastructure destruction, and food/energy insecurity with global spillovers (UNHCR, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Ayoob (1999) argues that heavy reliance on external actors can compromise a proxy state's decision-making autonomy and create long-term dependency. Others warn of escalation risks. Lieber & Press (2023) caution that the flow of advanced weapons and intelligence in Ukraine increases the probability of miscalculation between nuclear powers.

Snegovaya et al, (2023). In a recent scholarship, Comparative Perspective described the Russia-Ukraine war as a new model of "hybrid proxy war" combining conventional fighting, cyber operations, and information warfare compared to Syria or Afghanistan; this case involves a sovereign state with high levels of state capacity, massive conventional aid, and direct economic warfare through sanctions (Galeotti, 2022).

Nevertheless, gaps remain because few studies have systematically weighed the strategic gains against humanitarian and economic costs using empirical data from 2022-2026; this paper pursues to fill that gap.

Analytical Framework

This paper is built around the Neorealism theory, propounded by Kenneth Waltz in 1979. This theory is dominant in international relations for explaining war, alliances, and power politics. It emphasizes the role of power politics; Sagan (2004) and Waltz argued that states' behavior is shaped by the structure of the international system, which is anarchy. This paper is built around these Neorealist ideas, which postulate that great powers avoid paying the cost of balancing themselves; rather, they get others to do it. Apparently, the Neorealist perspective best describes the United States' support for Ukraine in the ongoing war; the US and NATO aim to degrade Russian power without incurring direct war costs (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study research design; the case study of the Russia-Ukraine conflict 2022-2026 represented a bounded, contemporary instance of an interstate war with proxy characteristics between a great power and its supported state (Yin, 2018). The study used process tracing to examine how external aid and balancing behavior translated into military outcomes and civilian costs. The work was guided by Neorealism as the theoretical framework, specifically concepts of offshore balancing, buck-passing, and self-help in anarchy (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Neorealist propositions are tested against empirical evidence from the Ukraine-Russia war.

Data Sources

Data were drawn exclusively from secondary sources due to the ongoing nature of the conflict and access constraints. Three categories of sources were used, namely:

1. Official Documents & Reports: Congressional Research Service Reports, like the World Bank RDNA Reports, EU aid reports, UN OCHA, and WFP reports to quantify aid, reconstruction costs, and humanitarian impact
2. Academic Literature: Books and journal articles on Neorealism, proxy war theory, and the Russia-Ukraine war to establish theoretical framework and preceding findings
3. Policy/ Think Tank Analysis: Kiel institute in Ukraine reports, American Affairs Journals, to capture strategic assessments of pros and cons from their perspectives

Sampling Technique

This study used purposive sampling to select documents and events relevant to the research question (Palys, 2008). Sampling Criteria were: Time-bound; Relevance; Credibility; Perspective Balance.

Thus, a total of 45 documents were sampled: 12 official reports, 18 academic articles/books, 15 policy analyses.

Analytical Techniques

Data were analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis and Neorealist Frame Analysis.

Historical Analyzes of the Russia-Ukraine War

Ukraine is a country in Eastern Europe; it is the second-largest country in the European continent after Russia. It shares borders with seven countries: Russia to the east and northeast, Belarus to the north, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary to the west, and Romania and Moldova to the southwest. Ukraine's total area is approximately 603,628 square kilometers (233,062 square miles), though this figure became disputed following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent territorial changes.

Before the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, relations between Russia and Ukraine were shaped by long-standing imperial domination and unequal political authority. Ukrainian territories developed under different imperial systems, with western regions influenced by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Ukrainian cultural and political life experienced relative freedom, while central and eastern regions were ruled by the Russian Empire, which pursued policies of Russification and suppressed Ukrainian nationalism.

Throughout the Soviet period, policies of centralization and cultural control limited Ukrainian autonomy and reinforced tensions between Ukrainian national aspirations and Russian dominance. As a result, Ukraine's independence in 1991 emerged from this historical context marked by contested identity and unresolved power imbalances, which continued to influence post-Soviet relations between the two states.

After gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine sought to consolidate its sovereignty and redefine its foreign policy orientation. However, relations with Russia remained strained by disputes over security, energy dependence, territorial integrity, and Ukraine's growing cooperation with Western institutions like the European Union and NATO. Russia increasingly viewed these developments as a threat to its regional influence and strategic interests, while many Ukrainians saw Western integration as essential for political reform and economic stability.

These tensions reached a breaking point in late 2013, when mass protests erupted in Kyiv following President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to suspend the signing of an Association Agreement with the European Union. The protests, known as the Euromaidan, expanded into a nationwide demand for political reform and closer ties with the West. Russia interpreted the eventual removal of Yanukovich as a Western-backed challenge to its influence in Ukraine.

Russia responded by annexing Crimea in 2014 and providing support to separatist movements in eastern Ukraine. These actions transformed what had initially been a domestic political crisis into an international conflict. Western states responded by imposing sanctions on Russia and offering political, economic, and military assistance to Ukraine. Between 2015 and 2021, the conflict settled into a "politically frozen, yet militarily hot" phase, characterized by indirect confrontation, hybrid warfare tactics, and competing external interests.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further exposed the conflict's globalized character, turning it into Europe's largest war since 1945. The proxy dimensions remained visible. While Russia engaged directly with Ukrainian forces, Western involvement remained indirect, consisting of arms transfers, intelligence support, economic sanctions, and diplomatic backing. At the same time, Russia

relied on non-state actors, private military companies, and information campaigns to advance its objectives.

The humanitarian cost of the conflict has been incredibly devastating. Millions of Ukrainians have been displaced, cities destroyed, and critical civilian infrastructure damaged. Yet the persistence of Ukrainian resistance, alongside sustained international support, shows the evolving nature of proxy relationships.

The immediate roots of the Russia-Ukraine conflict can be traced to political developments in Ukraine in late 2013. At the time, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was expected to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, which aimed to deepen political cooperation and economic integration between Ukraine and the EU (Watts et al., 2023).

However, on 21 November 2013, the Ukrainian government announced that it would suspend preparations for signing the agreement. The decision was officially justified on economic grounds, with the government arguing that Ukraine required stronger trade relations with Russia and additional financial support. Some school of thought opined that Russia played a central role in shaping this decision. The Russian government opposed the EU Association Agreement, regarding it as a threat to its political influence in the post-Soviet space. In response, Russian President Vladimir Putin offered Ukraine an alternative: a \$15 billion financial package and substantial discounts on natural gas, provided Ukraine joined the Russian-led Customs Union. Faced with economic pressure and competing geopolitical interests, Yanukovich opted for Russia's proposal.

On the same night the suspension was announced, protests began in Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti). Initially small, the demonstrations rapidly expanded into a nationwide movement known as the Euromaidan or the "Revolution of Dignity". Protesters demanded not only the resumption of the EU agreement but also broader political reforms and an end to corruption. Faced with economic pressure and competing geopolitical interests, Yanukovich opted for Russia's proposal.

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Implication of the Russia-Ukraine War

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war has deeply affected the world economy; some countries like Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, Italy, Czech Republic that depend on Russian energy imports are in an energy crisis at this time. More so, with the increase in demand for weapons and equipment, the war stimulated the development of Russian military-industrial complexes.

Agriculturally, the world is said to have benefitted immensely from Ukraine's fertile black soil; reports have it that Ukraine has fed four million people around the world, popularly described as the breadbasket, Tridge (2024). However, as the war escalated, wheat cultivation in Ukraine was also deeply affected, endangering the security of the global food supply chain; countries like Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, and Nigeria were badly affected.

The damage this conflict has done to the relationship between Russia and the West is not something that will be easily repaired, and findings of this work reveal that people closest to the conflict understand this better than most; however, the conflict, and the proxy war dynamics surrounding it, has not broken Ukrainian society. Instead, they have hardened it, sharpened its sense of national

identity, and produced a population that understands itself in fundamentally different terms than it did before 2014.

Discussions

- **The Nature of Proxy Involvement in Russia-Ukraine Warfare**

Succeeding the data and analytical findings surrounding the nature of the Ukraine and Russian interstate war with proxy characteristics, data revealed that external sponsoring states, particularly the US and EU member states and North Korea. The conflict has yielded measurable strategic benefits with limited direct costs to external actors.

Byman's (2013) stated that this proxy war allows great powers to pursue rivalry while maintaining plausible deniability and cost externalization. Moreover, economically, defense industries in sponsor states like the USA have also benefited from increased procurement, turning the conflict into both a geopolitical.

Accordingly, the expenses have been tremendously intense on Ukraine and the civilian population; US aid to Ukraine is estimated at over \$ 175 B and the war has become protracted, with an estimated \$486B reconstruction bill, massive displacement, and critical infrastructure damage, UN Report (2024).

Cunningham et al.'s (2017) finding posits that external intervention tends to extend conflict duration and intensity; moreover, Ukraine's growing dependency on foreign aid has raised questions about long-term sovereignty and decision-making autonomy, a classic principal-agent problem identified in proxy relationships. Therefore, in line with this narrative, it is evident that there was a collective bloc sponsorship by the European Union that produced both cohesion and fragmentation.

The Humanitarian and Economic Impacts on both Countries

Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine 2022-2026 Ukraine:

Following the exclusively secondary-sourced data drawn from three (3) categories that made up the forty-five (45) documents that were sampled, result shown that humanitarian and civilian assistance to Ukraine totaled over \$140 billion between 2022 and 2026, with approximately \$27 billion specifically designated as humanitarian aid delivered through UN agencies, NGOs, and bilateral channels. Also, a report from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (2025) documented that the money was used basically as follows: food security 40%, Health 20%, Shelter 15%, water and sanitation 10%, and protection 10% (UN OCHA, 2025).

Humanitarian Aid to Russia 2022-2026 Ukraine:

Western States and international organizations did not provide humanitarian aid to Russia during the period under review; apparently, aid flows went overwhelmingly to Ukraine and refugees, not to Russia.

- **The Effect of the Prolonged External Funding on Ukraine's Sovereignty**

Waitz (1979) argues survival is the first goal of states. External aid allowed Ukraine to remain an internationally recognized sovereign state. It avoided becoming a failed state or occupied territory. In a neorealist interpretation, the \$327 billion USD in external aid over 4 years created a trade-off: it preserved Ukraine's legal sovereignty, but the negative effect is that this could lead to fiscal dependency. Accordingly, the World Bank's position on sustaining state capacity is essential to preserving Ukraine's sovereignty. Budget support to pay public wages and social benefits has been critical to maintaining governance during war and it has continued to equate to the fiscal survival of Ukraine's sovereignty (World Bank et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyze the pros and cons of proxy warfare through a case study of the Russia-Ukraine war from 2022 to 2026. Focusing on cost and effect, it was discovered that the civilian casualties are enormous are over 12,000 plus 27,000 killed (UN OHCHR, 2025). The findings reveal a clear asymmetry in how costs and benefits are distributed. For sponsoring states, proxy warfare has delivered tangible strategic gains: the degradation of an adversary's military capacity, the reinforcement of alliance structures such as NATO, and the ability to pursue geopolitical objectives without direct military engagement or casualties.

Ukraine has continued to enjoy external support, which has been essential to national defense vis-à-vis tenacity, although the costs have been severe. The war has resulted in extensive civilian casualties, mass displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and an estimated reconstruction burden of \$486 billion. The conflict has produced both alliance cohesion in the West and deeper global polarization, alongside food and energy insecurity beyond the immediate battlefield.

The Russia-Ukraine case therefore supports the argument that while proxy war may be an effective tool for short-term strategic competition, its long-term consequences undermine human security, state sovereignty, and international stability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this paper offers the following recommendations:

1. The State Sponsors should establish clear exit strategies for their involvement in aid to avoid escalation and indefinite entanglement. There is a need to tie the assistance packages not only to military objectives but also to post-conflict governance and reconstruction planning.
2. International Organizations like the UN, World Bank, and regional bodies should strengthen mechanisms for civilian protection and humanitarian corridors in proxy conflicts. Thus, early funding for reconstruction must begin during conflict, not after.
3. Policymakers should display greater transparency regarding the objectives, costs, and duration of proxy involvement.
4. Sponsor states should weigh strategic gains against humanitarian consequences to ensure democratic accountability.
5. Research Scholars should conduct comparative studies of 21st-century proxy wars to develop a framework for minimizing civilian harm while managing great power competition.

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