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On Proxy Wars

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Summary

Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov recently claimed that NATO is fighting a proxy war with Russia. This prompted some pushback from commentators and politicians in NATO member states who evidently disliked the assertion. So, was Lavrov right to invoke proxy war?

Lavrov, speaking to Russian state media (Channel One), said that the supply of weapons to Ukraine by NATO members made those weapons and any warehouses storing them legitimate targets for the Russian armed forces. He added: 'If NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy – being at war means being at war.'

Clearly NATO member states have supplied a considerable volume of military aid to Ukraine. In the first two months of the conflict (taking 24 February as the beginning) the US provided nearly $3.5bn in support, including small arms, drones, anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, radar and body armour. American helicopters, pledged, appear not to have been delivered as yet. The US has also acknowledged sharing intelligence with Ukraine. Many other NATO members have supplied similar kinds of equipment and support.

Riposte

In reply to Lavrov's remarks, a number of western commentators and politicians hit back and disputed the claim. The doyen of British strategic studies, Lawrence Freedman, wrote a series of posts on Twitter. His dislike of the label 'proxy war' boils down to the argument that NATO is not fighting a proxy war because Ukrainians are fighting for themselves and not for NATO. In his words, the proxy war label 'suggests that local forces are there to serve the interests of foreigners. In practice it [is] likely to be the other way round.' This line of argument has been picked up by various politicians in NATO member states.

> It is surely correct to say that Ukrainians are fighting for themselves.

But it is a weak argument against applying the label of proxy war. In all proxy wars those fighting are, in the first instance, fighting for their homes, land or political power. If one looks at the Vietnam War, then the North and South Vietnamese were fighting for their own material goals during and after France's withdrawal from the country. The Soviets and Chinese supported the North Vietnamese in their efforts to overthrow the colonial French, while the Americans increasingly supported the South Vietnamese after the French withdrawal. But people took up arms because they wanted power for themselves not for the agenda of outside powers.

The US initially sent military advisers to South Vietnam as its government grappled with Viet Cong insurgents. The Viet Cong may have instrumentally endorsed Soviet aims but their soldiers' revolutionary goals in the south were as often motivated by private concerns and a wish that foreign powers would leave the Vietnamese to what they perceived as self-determination. Many in the South genuinely disliked their government. Likewise, other South Vietnamese did not need to share wider US goals of containing China or the Soviet Union to serve as its proxies, although the government under Ngo Dinh Diem was admittedly increasingly unpopular.

The US eventually deployed troops of its own to Vietnam. At this point, the US was directly engaged in war in any conventional sense – despite never issuing a formal declaration of war – but since it never fought directly against Soviet or Chinese troops the literature still refers to the conflict as a proxy war. (Military personnel of both communist powers were deployed to the North.)

As in other Cold War-era proxy wars, the ideological divide between communism and capitalism motivated superpower involvement to a far larger degree than today in Ukraine. But there is clearly ideational content in both sides' claims about the current conflict: Russia has long protested about 'western' values and NATO allies' support for Ukraine is partly motivated by the belief that core liberal and democratic values are at stake.

> The US and its allies are not supplying weapons and advice to Ukraine solely out of altruism.

Rather they express concern about the precedent that might be established if they do not support Ukraine in defending itself. And Ukrainian officials have sought to persuade NATO members to provide more support by arguing that they are indeed fighting for

liberal and democratic values – an argument that has been reasonably effective judging by the number of western politicians who have echoed that view.

Or Feint?

In this sense, then, NATO is fighting a proxy war and there is little benefit to its members of pretending otherwise. Denying it may actually prove counterproductive for NATO members given their need to keep up popular support for sending military aid to Ukraine. US defence secretary Lloyd Austin has more or less confirmed that the US now sees the Ukrainians as proxies. Speaking in Germany recently he said: 'We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't [in the future] do the kinds of things it has done in invading Ukraine.'

> Austin's remark expresses a clear war aim for America and, by extension, NATO.

The US, despite not deploying troops of its own, has a war aim which equates US support to wider ends than what happens in Ukraine alone. While NATO member states rightly claim that they are supporting Ukraine in its defence, they are also concerned for the implications of the war for the international order. In one US senator's words, 'Ukraine is a test for the west, it's a test for the international order.'

Still, the conflict is not a war in which Russia is using proxies since its own soldiers are fighting directly in a foreign country and it is feeble to argue they are supporting local forces. Perhaps a paragon proxy war would require both sides to be using proxies, but the war is as much a proxy war as the Soviet-Afghan war was in the 1980s, and Lavrov's comment was surely correct.

It was also a slightly odd remark given that the Russian state continues to insist the conflict in Ukraine is a 'special military operation' and not a war. Surely both sides must be fighting a war for the remark to make any sense – for being at war to mean being at war? This rather suggests the comment was somewhat off the cuff. Something Lavrov, usually consummate before an audience, needs to keep a check on.

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