Why Putin's proxy war was an abject failure

By Christopher Preble

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Vladimir Putin is having a bad week.

Someone among the pro-Russian groups in Eastern Ukraine that he has been supporting is likely responsible for the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 with 298 innocent civilians onboard. The grim details that have emerged since Thursday have merely added to his shame.

Putin's response, so far, has been to 1) ostentatiously mourn the tragic loss of life, 2) deflect attention, and 3) obfuscate.

It isn't working. As the evidence mounts that Putin's proxy war has resulted in an atrocity of epic proportions, so too does Putin's foray into Ukrainian politics appear to be a blunder of epic proportions. As Alec MacGillis observes, the shine truly has come off Putin's supposed strategic genius. Commentators who hailed *maskirovka* (masked warfare) as the wave of the future may wish to reconsider.

But satisfying though it may be to take pleasure in Putin's disgrace, we should also ponder a deeper truth: proxy wars often end badly. Though, admittedly, few turn out as badly as this one, one wonders why supposedly sensible leaders *ever* entertain the idea of entrusting their foreign policy objectives to unreliable and unaccountable rebels and ne'er-do-wells.

Consider, for example, the proxy war that many in the U.S. foreign policy community were anxious to start against Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Hawks on both the political left and the political right urged President Obama to arm the Syrian opposition in its bid to overthrow Assad.

Thankfully, the idea never really got off the ground. The American people, anxious to avoid being drawn into yet another civil war in the Middle East, were lukewarm on the idea. Plus, the Obama administration had trouble identifying moderate Syrians who could be trusted with American arms and money. (Not so John McCain, who even had his picture taken with some supposed Syrian moderates.)

But screening would-be proxies isn't the only problem. As Erica Borghard pointed out in a paper for the Cato Institute last year: "The unique characteristics of alliances between states and armed nonstate groups, in particular their informal nature and secrecy about the existence of

the alliance or its specific provisions, create conditions for states to become locked into unpalatable obligations."

It can be difficult for a state to moderate its commitment—or, in the extreme, walk away—if the proxy behaves in ways that are harmful to the state sponsor's interests. Rather than risk being accused of abandoning an ally, a leader is more inclined to double down on a bad bet than to cut his or her losses.

Then there is the not insignificant problem that proxies can change their allegiance, and use their weapons in ways that you didn't intend. Perhaps they'll even use them against you?

The United States generally wasn't willing to engage in open warfare with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but Washington was happy to funnel arms to proxies—for example, warlords fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.

When the CIA grew worried that some of these weapons—especially Stinger surface-to-air missiles—might someday pose a threat to civilians, it initiated a program to buy them back. But the agency discovered that some of its former allies were in no mood to sell.

The *New Yorker*'s Jon Lee Anderson describes an interaction in 1989 with a mujahideen commander who mistook him for a CIA field agent. "Tell your people I am not giving them back, ever," the man said.

So why do countries wage wars by proxy, instead of trusting the men and women of their own military? These are, after all, trained professionals, and their sole mission is to serve the interests of the state and its people.

Plausible deniability is the most obvious answer. Some countries don't want to attract the attention of other states, who might visit retaliation on the sponsor. Others want to minimize their level of involvement, generally, believing a particular goal worth pursuing, but not worth the blood, sweat, and tears of their own troops.

Joshua Rovner explains that shadowy armed groups can provide a weak country, such as Pakistan, with "strategic depth." Though Islamabad would prefer not to face off directly with India's military, they have been more than happy to fund terrorist groups there, as well as in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Leaders also lie about support for foreign fighters to conceal what they're doing from a skeptical or reluctant public at home. But perhaps the public is skeptical for a reason? And if a particular foreign policy goal—e.g. deposing a foreign leader we don't like—isn't worth risking open warfare with another nation-state, then it probably isn't worth risking a war started surreptitiously, and waged poorly, by proxies.

Vladimir Putin may have learned this lesson too late. Here's hoping that others aren't so obtuse.

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