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The Changing Conceptual Landscape of the Russian War in Ukraine (2014-Present) and Syria (2011-Present)

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Abstract: *The main goal of this paper is to present and compare the main developments in the Russian wars in Ukraine and Syria by considering the main patterns, parallels, and changing trajectories that could shed more light onto both of these war zones, which are highly interlinked due to Russia's leading role in both. It analytically, comparatively, and contemplatively approaches those developments by highlighting multiple similarities and the main differences in global responses to these conflicts. Both conflicts should be seen as highly unpredictable, dynamic, and unnecessarily extended asymmetric proxy wars in which global powers test their new military doctrines and their competitors' responses to their unconventional actions and other unsolicited and indirect interferences in the local dynamism of both wars. Unlike in Syria, the Ukrainian war zone is wholly transformative and ready for the adoption of partial hybridization and the utilization of the new software-defined warfare in combination with conventional weapons.*

Keywords: *Ukraine; Russia; War; Syria; International Relations; Conflict Managmenet; Warfare*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conflicts change at breathtaking speed, yet the tools, methods, theories, and paradigms we use to capture and adequately describe these developments may not be available. "Civil war" and "humanitarian intervention" are prime examples of standard terms with such strong negative connotations that scholars avoid using them. Another example is the ideas of Balkanization and Finlandization, which, from a historical perspective, were useful but, after 2023, lost their original meaning. Surely, Brzezinski would think twice before writing about the Balkanization of the Middle East to add a pejorative meaning to these descriptions. Today, almost all Balkan countries are in NATO or the EU, while Finland and Sweden were recently admitted to NATO. However, some academics use those terms despite their connotations, emphasizing the competition between two superpowers locked in a Cold War military arms race that chose to avoid confrontation and used indirect proxy wars (Brzezinski 1997; Yiğit 2024).

This is just the tip of the iceberg, and the purpose of this paper is to change the narrative about the conflict in Ukraine by changing the way we approach IR theory itself, simply because the war in Ukraine (like the war in Syria) is not a conventional war between two parties. Its nature and internal dynamics have been constantly changing. To address this issue effectively, I propose launching a genuinely interdisciplinary debate comprising various themes from political philosophy, IR theory, social ontology, security studies, and just war theory to situate the current discussions on the ethical dimension of software-defined warfare. We need to approach those issues in the most holistic manner possible, for the war in Ukraine proves that humanity persists

in initiating wars despite their inherent immorality. It also proves that with few exceptions, the international community struggles not only to prevent wars but also fails to encourage the parties involved to adhere to *jus in bello* (justice in war) principles (Pietrzak 2023a; Shah 2024).

This paper is the result of almost two decades of careful research into the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, which has helped to capture various nuances and similarities. These highlight several exciting developments and patterns that could be useful to both experts and new adepts of IR theory and conflict management. These findings are shown in a new light that could save countless hours of research.

The primary focus of this analysis is the evolving nature of the conflict in Ukraine, which presents a compelling case for instigating the sixth great debate in IR theory. This paper suggests that the discussion should be kept primarily within the constraints of conflict management and conflict resolution endeavors, as these offer the most promise for reevaluating established paradigms and methodologies and challenging unhealthy dogmas and dysfunctional and inapplicable theories in an ongoing confrontation.

Generally, our work is to avoid speculating as to what will happen while finding the best way to describe such a complex conflict. To do so, IR scholars usually employ selected approaches to the theory of international relations, which can equip us with many relevant approaches to developments, dimensions, and methodological contradictions. These can present any issue from a realist, liberal, feminist, constructivist, postcolonialist, or rationalist perspective.

In such projects, we need to supplement our conceptual efforts with a wide array of theoretical foundations, methodologies, fields of inquiry, and knowledge from international law, political geography, military studies, foreign policy, conflict resolution strategies, disaster management, defense, peacebuilding processes, diplomacy, and political philosophy that can help us to envision applicable solutions to ongoing conflicts. Various philosophical approaches can equip the modern decision-maker with an open-minded paradigm that contributes to any deliberations with both speculative and creative functions, highlighting many significant developments in contemporary conflict resolution strategies and filling in temporary knowledge gaps on events that have not yet been adequately described in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

Michael Oakeshott once astutely pointed out that the convergence of theory and practice is an indispensable consideration in scholarly pursuits, which means that we need to have a solid theory to properly understand all the practical aspects of policymaking, decision-making, and global politics in general (Oakeshott 2001). In this respect, we should rely on Christopher S. Collins et al., who follow Oakeshott's advice in "The Central Role of Theory in Qualitative Research". They suggest that we rely on something other than a static theory that struggles to adjust to the ever-changing landscape of our scholarly pursuits. We need to embrace these developments. This short research paper is a testimony to the fact that utilizing a comparative method qualitatively makes sense. Ultimately, by following Przeworski and Tenue's (1970) suggestion that it "is most effective when examining countries with similar characteristics, as fewer differences allow for a more rigorous study design", we hope to employ this method not only to "identify similarities between two or more subjects" but also to supplement these

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comparative endeavors with a holistic approach that utilizes the experiences of leading scholars from such diverse disciplines as international relations theory, international law, geopolitics, geoeconomics, conflict management, and political philosophy (Bhaskar 1978, 1979; Pietrzak 2023e, 2024c, 2024d; Pinto and Martins 2001; Wendt 2006).

The prevailing notion in the literature is that social science can gain significant advantages by adopting an ad hoc comparative method (CM) to highlight essential aspects of two or more ongoing confrontations of regional or global significance. A well-implemented comparative analysis offers a unique opportunity to assess the applicability of various theories in given circumstances by highlighting both specific and holistic modes of analysis to capture any given phenomenon. Such a method promises profound insights into the intricacies of modern conflicts by using the best narrative to illuminate pathways toward comprehension and resolution, for every conflict has to end (Sartori 1991).

In his "Theory of Democracy Revisited, Part One: The Contemporary Debate" (1987), Sartori also points out that CM is not without its shortcomings, and its potential limitations are manifold: conceptual stretching (emphasizing the danger of applying broad and imprecise concepts across different cases without considering their contextual specificity), a lack of precision that may lead to various misclassifications (due to differences in definitions and the operationalization of concepts), the equivalence problem (researchers must ensure that the concepts and measures used are equivalent and meaningful in different contexts to adjust concepts to fit the specific attributes and nuances of each compared case), context sensitivity (researchers must be aware of the historical, cultural, and social contexts of the cases they study, and ignoring these contexts can lead to inappropriate generalizations and flawed comparisons), the ladder of abstraction (which relates to conceptual stretching and that researchers should carefully navigate between high levels of abstraction, broad concepts that apply to many cases but with less specificity, and low levels of abstraction, narrow concepts that apply to fewer cases but with greater detail), case selection (to avoid selection bias, select cases based on theoretical considerations rather than convenience or the availability of data), rigorous measurement validity (to accurately capture the concepts they intend to study), and standardizing measurements and scales (differences in how variables are measured and scaled across cases can lead to inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the analysis). Sartori believed that addressing these flaws is possible although challenging, even in the social sciences (Sartori 1987).

In this paper, CM is complemented with *in statu nascendi* ontology to consider the contextual specificities of both conflicts from a different perspective. This approach delves into ongoing conflicts' complexities, fluidity, and unpredictability. It navigates between high levels of abstraction (broad concepts that apply to many cases but with less specificity) and low levels of abstraction (narrow concepts that apply to fewer cases with greater detail) to ensure that the concepts and measures used are equivalent and meaningful in different contexts. This adjustment helps avoid selection bias by selecting cases based on theoretical considerations rather than convenience or data availability. Moreover, it aids in identifying differences in how variables are measured and scaled across cases, thus preventing inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the analysis. By addressing these issues, we aim to derive lessons from the analysis in a more contemplative manner.

In this respect, ontology *in statu nascendi* suggests that IR theory should not be used as a helpful catalog for the methodological cherry-picking of the most popular ideas, theories,

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paradigms, and approaches but instead should be used in a much more comprehensive, holistic, and contemplative manner that includes the element of constant change in the circular stream of becoming. It gives special attention to attaining broader clarity, accountability, and pluralism that thrives in situations requiring flexible adjustment to convey particular unpredictable trajectories, which are not evident initially. By scrutinizing the ontological foundations of conflicts in a more contemplative, albeit at times lengthy, manner, we can glean insights into their evolving nature and their current stage, which in turn foster a deeper understanding of the situation on the ground in the context of regional and global dynamics (Kavalski 2007, 435-454; Pietrzak 2024abcde).

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The global architecture of power is profoundly anarchic, and there is evidence that the incentives to wage wars remain more potent than the sanctions meant to prevent countries from waging wars (Mearsheimer 2014). The war in Ukraine is not a static, single-dimensional confrontation between just two parties supported by their allies. It could be seen as a full-blown war of aggression; for the majority of 2022, it was mostly on Ukrainian territory, but by the beginning of 2023, it had become a war of attrition by both sides to wear down their enemy by continuously attacking their forces and equipment until they become exhausted and cannot continue. Still, as much as the last two years have been intense, Russo-Ukrainian tension dates back to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas. Those tensions were triggered by Russian interference in Ukraine's internal affairs (Yiğit 2021).

Those hostile acts followed the Primakov doctrine, which advocated hybrid active attempts to destabilize Ukraine by using the Russian-speaking people there in a broader strategy of confrontation aimed at restoring Russian domination and hegemony at any cost. Some of those actions were benign, but the majority aimed at instigating an unprecedented, unpredictable, and uncontrollable series of events to intimidate Ukrainians. Those actions were used to cause chaos, mayhem, the disintegration of Ukraine, its abrupt replacement with several political units, and the subsequent annexation of those territories into Russia under the pretense of an alleged pre-existing unspecified, unverifiable political will to join the Russian Federation declared by an alleged majority of the Russian-speaking people in certain Ukrainian territories in the south and east of the country (Cohen 1997; Delong 2020; Primakov 1979 and 2004; Rumer 2019). The annexation of Crimea should be seen not as a cause of the problem but as an early culmination of various sociopolitical upheavals in Ukraine from 2004 (the Orange Revolution) to February 2014. In 2013, protests erupted due to President Yanukovich's refusal to sign an EU Association Agreement and choice to pursue closer ties with Russia. Despite harsh winter conditions, pro-Western protesters (representing most of the country's population) gathered at Independence Square in Kyiv to demand Yanukovich's resignation. Yanukovich's violent reaction, backed by the Kremlin, resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties and thousands of political arrests. Eventually, Yanukovich fled the country, but his departure did not end the state of emergency; it triggered unexpected political upheaval (Yiğit 2023).

The new Ukrainian government did not do enough to investigate the massacre of more than 60 Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Odesa in 2014. It failed to stop the civil war in the east, escalating tensions in the east and south of the country (Amos and Salem 2017). Ultimately,

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Yanukovich's departure, a popular move, temporarily halted further abuse of the pro-Western majority of the population by the Russian minority. However, it caused further instability, destabilizing the situation of the Russian-speaking minority, especially after they lost their political representation. This situation gave them every reason to expect some form of retaliation from those who had been victims. Despite being a minority in the country, pro-Russian factions had sought to control the political decisions of the pro-Western majority Western Ukrainian speakers since 1991 and vigorously sought to prevent them from pursuing their transatlantic aspirations even before the 2004 Orange Revolution (Dickinson 2020).

IR scholars should not hesitate to describe the sociopolitical situation in Ukraine from 2014 to 2022 as a civil war, even if it seems inappropriate to some. Although this term is controversial, it is descriptive and not offensive, given the circumstances. The ontological meaning of this term indicates that the nature of this conflict from the very beginning was not that of a traditional war, for it started without a declaration of war (the term hybrid warfare was used later) and without a single bullet being fired by the Russian Spetsnaz, the so-called "Little Green People," equipped with military-style uniforms without visible identifying insignia, who landed in Crimea, which Russia annexed.

Russia even denied having anything to do with this operation, even though everyone knew that the little green men came from Russia. Still, officially, they were there to protect the Russian minority from purely hypothetical harm; for years after, the conflict was framed not strictly as a confrontation between Ukraine and Russia but as between the Ukrainian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking Ukrainian minority whom Russia supported. The use of the term civil war is not pejorative; it simply better describes the nature of the political choices made at that time by the groups who were influenced by factors beyond their language, ethnic identity, cultural differences, and nationality. In this context, it is essential to note the occurrence of the broken sense of political belonging of some groups to a broader community that could have acted as a triggering factor, leading certain groups to escalate the confrontation.

Since 2014, Russia has accused Ukraine of the genocide of Russian speakers in the Donbas region; Russian President Vladimir Putin cited this propaganda to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a large-scale escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Following the invasion, Ukraine brought a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) concerning Russia's military activities in Ukraine. During the proceedings, the ICJ found no evidence to support the Russian accusation of genocide and ordered Russia to "immediately suspend the military operations" of the invasion (MENA Report 2022). Further reports by 30 legal and genocide scholars warned that Russian accusations against Ukraine are part of the "accusation in a mirror" technique, ultimately revealing Russian incitement to commit genocide against Ukrainians. Accusation in a mirror "is a technique where one falsely attributes to one's adversaries the intentions that one has for oneself or the actions that one is in the process of enacting" (Marcus 2012, 357-359; Pietrzak 2022a).

The early stage of the conflict in Ukraine, from 2014 to 2022, had very little to do with a traditional confrontation between countries, either from a military or policymaking perspective; on the military level, there are many similarities between the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Syria. Just as in Syria in 2013, the situation in Ukraine in 2024 dominates international media headlines, overshadowing other regional and global events (Pietrzak 2019).

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Despite conflicts in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Mali, Cameroon, Nigeria, Honduras, Haiti, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel, and Nagorno-Karabakh, global media outlets focus on the scale of destruction, abuse, and dehumanization in Ukraine, much as the Syrian Arab Spring was portrayed in 2013. These conflicts have produced a similar scale of human suffering, destruction, and instability, and they have also become proxy wars involving various agents operating in both theaters of war. The most notable difference is that the Free Syrian Army, which tried to oust Bashar al-Assad, was never recognized as a legitimate party or a state actor and, most probably for this reason, received only a tiny fraction of the Western support that is today offered to the embattled Ukrainian regime. Both the Free Syrian Army in Syria and the Ukrainian government in Ukraine fight against authoritarian regimes; the FSA fought against Assad, whom the Russians supported, while the Ukrainians directly fought the Russians (Pietrzak 2023b).

The way these authoritarian regimes wage their wars leaves much to be desired. Assad used indiscriminate warfare against his opposition, while the Russians used similar counterinsurgency methods in their campaign of conquest against Ukrainian cities, towns, and millions of civilians. While the Assad regime used chemical weapons for defensive purposes against the approaching Free Syrian Army near Damascus in 2013, Putin unleashed a campaign of conflict-related sexual violence and abuse of civilian populations for offensive purposes in what was planned as a blitzkrieg on the outskirts of Kyiv in the first days of the Russian invasion in March and April 2022. These events linked Assad's and Putin's regimes to war crimes against civilian populations. Also similar is that in 2013 and 2024, global audiences have become tired of the predictable stream of information from Syria and Ukraine. More often, they show a tendency to stay on the sidelines. In Ukraine, the generous equipment donations by Western countries in 2022 and 2023 arrived with a massive delay, while the Russians have crossed Western red lines with impunity (Mohnblatt 2022; Pietrzak 2019, 2021, 2022).

Under such circumstances, writing about the Ukraine conflict requires immense patience, perseverance, and attention to detail. It has been over ten years since the annexation of Crimea and more than two years since its escalation into a full-blown war. Thousands of articles have been written, but there is a sense of saturation with the material simply because we do not find the answer to the one fundamental question of the war. This war is a different conflict for each set of parties involved. For Ukrainians, it started as a defensive war, but now they are no longer merely seeking to end the conflict; they are striving to end Russia's influence in their country and Eastern Europe by extension, and they are determined to join NATO and the European Union because this is the only guarantee of their objective (Pietrzak 2024d, 133). They are led to believe that winning this war will secure their membership in NATO and the EU. From the perspective of the West, this expectation must be met on this occasion. Failing to fulfill promises made to the Ukrainians risks compromising their values by overpromising and underdelivering, just as in 2014.

This means that it is impossible to mitigate the hostilities between both parties and their allies, which is why it is predicted that the war in Ukraine will not end soon. This is not what civilian populations in the affected territories or military service members want to hear, for the current deadlock makes it difficult for either side to secure any significant strategic advantage.

Different considerations than those of democracies drive authoritarian regimes, but they are consistent. Sadly for Ukraine, Putin, who was just reelected, is not going anywhere; he is the

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most decisive Russian leader in generations and thinks he has a special responsibility to rebuild Russia's international prestige as one of the most unpredictable international actors. This may cause great fear in Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine, as most of his actions are met with international outrage. Still, he is the first Russian leader since Stalin who has single-handedly redrawn hundreds of kilometers of Europe's borders in Ukraine and Georgia and has caused the destabilization of large swathes of the Middle East, North Africa, and even Venezuela, as well as various ex-Soviet countries (Pietrzak 2022a).

Without questioning the motivations of either side, an objective analyst sees that neither is willing to compromise for a straightforward reason: they want to attain all of their goals. Even the most tragic war in human history, the Second World War, lasted only six years. However, neither side is willing to make any concessions and continues to promote maximalist plans. Ukraine demands that Russia withdraw from all controlled territories while Russia insists on the acceptance of its territorial gains. This is not an unusual situation. Gamaghelyan (2017) writes about a similar tendency after the first conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, where it was more advantageous for both the Azeris and Armenians to continue their war than to end it. A similar situation exists in Korea; Ivanov (2024) speaks here of the transformation of the conflict into a somewhat atypical example of the prisoner's dilemma resembling Catch-22 and Squid Game. Similar situations can be seen in Libya, Somalia, and Israel. Without one side or the other winning the war in Ukraine, we will be forced to deliberate about it for the next fifty years unless, of course, Ukraine and Russia come to a satisfactory accommodation, such as land swaps or agreeing to a civilized way of resolving their tensions.

Common to both conflicts is Russia, which shows a clear desire to extend its influence at all costs, and contrary to popular opinion, when it comes to Syria, this is not a new development. Russia helped Hafez al-Assad preserve power in the country for almost 30 years, and now it has extended the same support to Bashar al-Assad since 2000. This does not mean that this is a reliable alliance for Russia, for the civil war in this country is still raging, with more than 2000 people dying in 2023 alone. Still, Russia's antihumanitarian intervention in 2015 allowed Putin to prove that his modus operandi would be effective. We may make an educated guess that without his bold, reckless actions in Syria in 2015 that were ignored by the international community, he would have never dared to invade Ukraine in 2022.

Still, it is also essential to acknowledge that by the end of 2023, virtually every Western political commentator (except John Mearsheimer and his followers) thought that Putin had made a strategic mistake by escalating the conflict with Ukraine. He might have thought he would quickly take Ukraine, but the Ukrainians' exemplary resistance bogged him down. He did not expect that by attacking Ukraine, he attacked NATO's interests and the EU's values, which neither NATO nor the EU are willing to compromise on. Putin can win the war in Ukraine if the Western world ends its support. Russia was surprised by the Ukrainians' will to resist, which significantly strengthened the commitment of its Western allies to preserve Ukrainian statehood. It is undeniable that NATO's and the EU's political, military, logistical, material, and humanitarian assistance allowed Ukraine to defend itself from the aggression of a seemingly much stronger political actor throughout 2022 and prepare for a semi-successful counteroffensive launched in the spring of 2023 (Ilik 2020; Ilik and Karadjoski 2024).

This may not have been possible without the technological support that Ukraine has received from its allies, which ultimately made the conflict zone a testing ground for artificial

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intelligence-related warfare. AI has greatly helped change the course of this confrontation. The literature has yet to describe these developments (Mulchandani and Shanahan, 2022; Sprenger 2023).

HYBRIDIZATION OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

It was supposed to be an easy conquest of a much weaker state for Russia. However, it ended up as a costly quagmire showing the delusions of grandeur of their leader, who has overstayed his welcome at the Kremlin for over a decade. The Ukrainians have shown that they know how to utilize drones and unmanned vehicles to sabotage enemy logistics, military infrastructure, and industry. Their skillful use of network-centric warfare has effectively leveraged Ukrainian numerical disadvantage into an advantage by adopting today's information technology, using robust computer networking of geographically informed and dispersed forces that combine professional soldiers with skilled volunteers ready to utilize various AI advancements on the battlefield (Rosengren 2024).

The question is, can this lead them to a decisive victory against a former superpower? Time will tell, for Russia is also learning fast and has shown remarkable adaptability in integrating advanced warfare technologies. By the end of 2023, Russia had also been able to show an immense capacity to learn from its initial mistakes and adopt better strategy and tactics, catching up quickly and adopting the same software-related warfare methods that Ukraine did, thanks to suicide drones purchased in Iran and used indiscriminately in Ukraine and those that its military has been able to develop and produce domestically (Chulovand Sabbagh 2023; Yaron 2024). Paradoxically, however, this war may be decided not by who has the most sophisticated weaponry but by who has better access to military supplies and ammunition, and the recent developments on the ground suggest that even if Russia runs out of ammunition and military equipment, it can purchase them in North Korea (Eckel 2023), China, and India or produce them independently, which underscores their resilience and resourcefulness. The Russian army can order drones and ammunition from their industry, and the Ukrainians started thinking about such a possibility only in late 2023 when Western support had significantly decreased.

So, in essence, when we use the term hybridization regarding this conflict, we can see it as in the process of creation, not as a war zone inhabited by an army of moral zombies, once considered futuristic and explored in Hollywood blockbusters such as "Terminator" (1984), but a conflict in which a sophisticated technological invention can occasionally give one side an advantage. Still, the other side will likely come up with a completely unexpected retaliation the next day; the determination to inflict an ultimate defeat on the opponent is visible. By extension, when it comes to the war in Ukraine, we can plausibly claim that we are heading towards inevitable revolution towards a point close to the singularity of 2030, where things once deemed impossible are becoming everyday realities in modern warfare, but we simply cannot take conventional warfare out of the equation. Of course, the steady progress towards using some of the most sophisticated modern weaponry, such as artificial intelligence-controlled robot drones, in combat should not be ignored. However, the importance of conventional warfare in modern conflict should not be disregarded. A complete integration of both is still not feasible. While current technological progress has introduced machines capable of autonomous actions in

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restricted domains, such as UAVs and cyborgs, they are unable to assert complete control over military operations (Mulchandani and Shanahan 2022; Fontes and Kamminga 2023; Koumparoudis 2024).

Contrary to the opinions of futurologists, the subtypes of AI have yet to be connected, and it is unlikely that they will ever be adequately integrated. Even if narrow AI (weak AI), general AI (strong AI), artificial superintelligence, reactive machines, limited memory AI, theory of mind AI, and self-aware AI were somehow to merge into one, there is still time before artificial superintelligence takes over the chain of command in charge of an army of semi-automated robots, cyborgs, and deadly holograms. For humanity's collective well-being, this is for the best since we still have enough time to take the necessary precautions to prevent such a development, for it could create the threat that rogue regimes will be able to use devices that are dangerously close to an AI-driven super brain (Mucci and Stryker 2023; Mulchandani and Shanahan 2022).

In her recent work "The Weaponization of Artificial Intelligence: What the Public Needs to Be Aware Of", Birgitta Dresp-Langley (2023) suggests that "technological progress has brought about the emergence of machines that have the capacity to take human lives without human control. These represent an unprecedented threat to humankind" (p. 1). A particular ethical dimension has to be considered in this respect (and I will touch upon these considerations in my future work related to just war theory). These new developments in the modern conflict zone also offer opportunities for deepening geostrategic relations across multiple domains within NATO's multilevel governance, particularly between NATO member states (Dresp-Langley 2023).

Dresp-Langley also explains that the use of the term "hybridization" in the Ukrainian conflict cannot be fully justified, given that the confrontation relies on both traditional warfare and machines capable of only partial integration within a broader software-defined domain; conventional methods are still fundamental. It is still a dominant opinion in 2024 that a war cannot be won without armies of tanks, fighter jets, air defense missile systems, and human soldiers, which cannot be replaced by modern drones, cyborgs, or other AI-driven robots, even if they are produced en masse. Our main worry in Ukraine should still be about conventional warfare, for the scale of conventional hostilities between Russia and Ukraine has dangerously skyrocketed in recent months. In this respect, we can also identify examples of these technological advancements used as part of a broader hybrid war strategy in numerous modern conflicts. Examples include the second and third Nagorno-Karabakh wars between Azerbaijan and Armenia (Karwowski and Pietrzak 2023) and China's attempts to assert control over the South China Sea (Hadiyan and Pambayung 2024; Pietrzak 2024e; Yiğit 2024), but this is still work in progress.

When it comes to Ukraine, Dresp-Langley's claim is particularly valid because despite the popular opinion that machines will soon determine the outcome, the hybridization of the conflict in Ukraine is still unpredictable, and all sides are still benefiting from the rapid modernization of their military strategies. They are also preparing for a very long war in which they will try to gain a strategic advantage with offensive and defensive activity, software-defined warfare, drone operations, active measures, and hybrid warfare.

We need to be mindful of this when we continue our work on the main currents of the sixth great debate in international relations theory that was initiated in "Dealing with Regional

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Conflicts of Global Importance" (2024) and "Analyzing Global Responses to Contemporary Regional Conflicts" (2024). The sixth debate will likely continue until Ukraine is admitted to NATO or the European Union. The question is whether such an outcome would end this war for good or contribute to its further escalation. The voices of academics who have already taken part in this debate add a unique perspective to the primary current, which revolves around clarity in describing various stages of any given ongoing regional conflict of global importance, which in turn contributes to broader efforts to devise the most applicable solutions to ongoing confrontations and tensions between various countries and non-state actors.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this paper was to contribute to strengthening conflict management and resolution endeavors by drawing various parallels between the conflict dynamics in Ukraine and Syria. It highlighted various similarities and differences between these conflicts in an analytical and contemplative manner to contribute to the broader debate on the direction and scope of the evolving nature of contemporary conflict management within the context of highly unpredictable, dynamic, and unnecessarily extended asymmetric proxy wars. Both conflicts produce negative economic consequences in their regions and significantly detriment the stability of the global power architecture.

There is a clear link between the intensity of the conflict in Syria and Ukraine, which is related to Russia's presence in this conflict: in Syria, Russia supports an undemocratic regime responsible for crimes against humanity. In Ukraine, at first, Russia supported the members of the Russian-speaking minority against democratically elected pro-Western officials. When this policy failed, it launched a full-scale war against an internationally recognized regime, often resorting to crimes against humanity. Still, without his bold, reckless actions ignored by the international community in Syria in 2015, Putin would have never dared to launch a full-blown invasion of Ukraine in 2022; the Syrian war zone was a testbed for Russia's new military strategy.

Meanwhile, the Western powers unsuccessfully supported the Syrian opposition in their quest to remove Assad from power. They tried to help Ukrainian authorities de-escalate tensions with Russia between 2014 and 2022. When these endeavors failed, they supplied Kyiv with a wide range of traditional weaponry and new software-defined materials. This made Ukraine a testing ground for some of the West's rarest and newest inventions.

Unlike in Syria, the Ukrainian war zone is wholly transformative and more amenable to partial hybridization and the utilization of the new software-defined warfare in combination with conventional weapons. The process is well underway, necessitating a reevaluation of our theoretical frameworks to understand better and manage these evolving dynamics. It is undeniable, however, that those new developments are not as dynamic as is commonly believed. We are a long way before a full hybridized integration of network-centric warfare that would incorporate more sophisticated modern weaponry, integrating artificial intelligence-led robots into every domain of modern war zones; both Syrian and Ukrainian conflict zones show that no war can be won without tanks, fighter jets, air defense missile systems, and human soldiers.

Both conflicts have impacted not only the global architecture of power but also the main currents of IR theory and conflict management strategies, for they have necessitated the further re-compartmentalization of both disciplines in the context of the emerging sixth great debate in

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IR theory, impacting various methodological practices in the conceptual frameworks commonly used to convey the emerging dimensions of warfare dynamics more effectively. Still, on the conceptual level, we must remember that while all the analogies mentioned above provide context, they also risk oversimplifying the unique political, cultural, and strategic factors that distinguish each conflict.

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