



Student Paper

Shadow Frontlines

Assessing the Impact of Russian Special Operations on Ukrainian Irregular Warfare and the Strategic Calculus for U.S. Policy in Eastern Europe

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Executive Summary

This assessment examines the complex role of Russian Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the ongoing Ukrainian conflict and its ramifications for U.S. strategic interests in Eastern Europe. It explores their complex tactics – psychological operations, electronic warfare, and use of irregular combat units – which have altered Ukrainian military tactics and presented significant obstacles for NATO defense and security strategies.

This paper delves deeper into Russia's strategic objectives for using SOF in Ukraine. It demonstrates how Russian SOF operations form part of their wider strategy to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and challenge Western dominance in the region, with serious ramifications for NATO's ability to respond effectively while maintaining alliance cohesion.

From a U.S. aperture, recent developments compel reevaluating support for Ukraine. This paper proposes an integrated approach, which includes providing greater military and intelligence assistance and taking more vigorous steps against Russian aggression. Furthermore, this paper emphasizes the significance of developing coordinated responses

aligned with NATO strategic goals while meeting this region's evolving nature of warfare.

This analysis presents scenarios that could play out over the next six to twelve months. It evaluates U.S. and NATO options that might play out over that time frame, considering the potential outcomes of different policy choices and their consequences. Such an examination provides a critical context for adapting and responding appropriately to future developments in the region.

This paper emphasizes the necessity of an inclusive U.S. strategy in Eastern Europe. Such an approach should incorporate military and economic components, information warfare tactics, and diplomatic issues. Ultimately, the goal should be a robust policy framework that promotes U.S. interests while contributing to regional stability against Russian aggression.

INTELLIGENCE GAPS

- 1. Russian SOF Long-Term Goals:** Beyond their immediate tactics, the broader strategic intentions of Russian SOF in Ukraine are opaque. While Bukkvoll¹ and Watling & Reynolds² provide insights into Russian operations, they don't fully unravel the long-term Russian aspirations, such as whether these tactics aim at territorial expansion, political destabilization, or merely maintaining a frozen conflict.
- 2. Adaptability and Future Tactics:** There is uncertainty about how Russian SOF will evolve their tactics in response to changing battlefield dynamics and Ukrainian countermeasures. While insights from sources like Lamb³ and RAND Corporation⁴

1. Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas," *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (2016), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2917. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2917&context=parameters>.

2. Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds. "Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022–February 2023." <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-russias-unconventional-operations-during-russo-ukrainian-war-february-2022> or see "Special Report" <https://static.rusi.org/202303-SR-Unconventional-Operations-Russo-Ukrainian-War-web-final.pdf>

3. Hannah Lamb. 2023. "Over-The-Horizon and under the Threshold: Bringing Unconventional Warfare to Ukraine – Irregular Warfare Initiative." Irregular Warfare Initiative. <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/over-the-horizon-and-under-the-threshold-bringing-unconventional-warfare-to-ukraine/>.

4. Bryan Frederick, Mark Cozad, and Alexandra Stark. "Understanding the Risk of Escalation in the War in Ukraine." *RAND.org*.

suggest adaptability, detailed predictions on future tactical shifts are speculative.

3. **Impact on NATO and U.S. Strategy:** The effects of Russian unconventional warfare on NATO's strategic coherence and U.S. policy are still evolving. Sources like Jones et al. and the U.S. Department of State highlight the challenges but offer limited foresight on long-term strategic impacts.⁵
4. **Cyber Operations and Information Warfare:** The extent and effectiveness of Russian cyber operations and information warfare in the conflict are not fully understood. The potential for escalation in these domains poses a significant unknown, as detailed in reports by RAND Corporation and others.⁶ Each gap represents a critical area for ongoing research and analysis, as understanding these elements is crucial for formulating effective U.S. and NATO responses.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- **Emergence of the Conflict:** The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict (dating back to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea), represents an integral moment in European geopolitics. Widely considered illegal by most nations, its implementation marked a radical departure from the post-Cold War *modus operandi*. Russian actions in Crimea included the use of "little green men," soldiers without uniform or insignia, and an array of conventional and unconventional tactics that set a precedence for further operations in Eastern Ukraine.
- **Evolution in Warfare Tactics:** The conflict in Eastern Ukraine, especially in the Donbas region, saw a significant evolution in warfare tactics. Kagan et al.⁷ and the RAND

RAND Corporation. September 21, 2023. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA2807-1.html.

5. Seth G Jones, Riley McCabe, and Alexander Palmer. 2023. "Seizing the Initiative in Ukraine: Waging War in a Defense Dominant World." CSIS.org. 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/seizing-initiative-ukraine-waging-war-defense-dominant-world>.

6. Frederick, et al. "Understanding the Risk of Escalation in the War in Ukraine." RAND.

7. Frederick Kagan, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Karolina Hird. n.d. "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment Special Edition: Russian Military Capabilities Assessments." <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Operations%20Assessments%20April%2009.pdf>.

Corporation⁸ discuss Russia's deployment of hybrid warfare strategies, which combine conventional military power with cyber operations and information warfare. This new form of warfare was about controlling territory and influencing perceptions and political outcomes, marking a shift from traditional military engagements.

- **Geopolitical Implications:** The increasing intensity and new forms of warfare have had profound repercussions for NATO and the U.S. As noted by both Secretary of State Blinken⁹ and Jones et al.,¹⁰ this crisis has forced NATO to reconsider its defense posture in Eastern Europe; moreover, America, in particular, must carefully consider how best to simultaneously uphold Ukrainian sovereignty without risking confrontation directly with Russia.

ANALYSIS RUSSIAN WARFARE TECHNIQUES

- **Hybrid Warfare:** Russia has employed hybrid warfare strategies, blending conventional, irregular, and cyber warfare tactics. This approach creates uncertainty between adversaries, making it unclear whether a state of war exists or who are the combatants. In the context of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, Russia utilized irregular and proxy fighters, along with information and psychological warfare, to justify its actions. The use of hybrid warfare is not limited to the conflict in Ukraine but is a stand-alone strategy to pressure adversaries without the use of brute force.¹¹
- **Psychological Warfare:** Russian information campaigns have had a significant impact on Ukrainian morale and international perceptions. These campaigns, including information and psychological warfare,

8. Frederick, et al. "Understanding the Risk of Escalation in the War in Ukraine." RAND.

9. Antony Blinken "Russia's Strategic Failure and Ukraine's Secure Future – United States Department of State." 2023. United States Department of State. June 2, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/russias-strategic-failure-and-ukraines-secure-future/>.

10. Jones, et al. "Seizing the Initiative in Ukraine..." CSIS.

11. Lev Topor and Alexander Tabachnik "Russian Cyber Information Warfare." 2015. <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu-j.20211201005>, <https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCU-Journal/JAMS-vol-12-no-1/Russian-Cyber-Information-Warfare/>.

have shaped the mindset of foreign societies and policymakers.¹²

- **Use of Proxies:** Russia and its proxy forces have used terror as part of their hybrid warfare strategy, making the involvement of Russian SOF in supporting separatist forces a central feature in this conflict.¹³
- **Hybrid Warfare Repercussions:** Russia's employment of hybrid warfare tactics, including conventional, irregular, and cyber war, as well as proxy combatants, has had profound repercussions for Ukraine and U.S./NATO interests alike. A better understanding of these tactics is crucial to assessing the implications of modern warfare on international security and stability.

UKRAINIAN RESPONSE & TACTICS

- **Conventional Military Response:** Ukraine's conventional military strategies against Russian aggression have been crucial to the conflict. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 saw the return of conventional warfighting to Europe, providing an opportunity to assess Russia's military capabilities and the impacts of modern weapons on the battlefield. Ukraine's planning and preparations, including deploying maneuver brigades, special forces, and territorial defense, played a significant role in denying Russia a quick victory. The Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) prioritized offensive operations, counter-mobilization, and the defense of critical infrastructure, demonstrating their ability to adapt to the evolving conflict dynamics.¹⁴ When Ukrainian forces launched offensives, they demonstrated tactical agility, wise operational planning, and international material support, inflicting significant casualties and persistent battlefield disappointment on their Rus-

sian adversaries. Ukrainian troops relied on speed, surprise, and mobility, using reconnaissance units and avoiding static and concentrated formations. Ukraine's use of combined arms operations and training, including the effective deployment of SOF, has been identified as essential for countering Russian aggression and maintaining a resilient defense.¹⁵

- **Irregular Warfare and Civilian Resistance:** Ukraine has adapted to Russian tactics, including the use of civilian volunteer battalions and irregular warfare. The Ukrainian SOF has focused on missions such as ambush, reconnaissance, and raid, using a crawl, walk, run method. Additionally, Ukraine has leveraged civilian volunteer battalions to support its military efforts. The will of the Ukrainian people to support high casualty rates is significant but not infinite. Combined arms operations and training have been identified as essential to change the equation in Ukraine's favor, as history has shown the impact of a well-trained and properly led military in asymmetric conflicts.¹⁶
- **Ukraine's conventional military response and its adaptation to Russian tactics through irregular warfare and civilian resistance** have been critical in the conflict. The Ukrainian Armed Forces' ability to deny Russia its initial theory of victory, combined with their tactical agility and effective use of combined arms operations, has demonstrated their resilience and determination in the face of Russian aggression. Understanding these responses and tactics is essential for assessing the evolving nature of the conflict and its implications for international security and stability.

12. Ibid.

13. Victoria Barber, Andrew Koch, and Kaitlyn Neuberger. n.d. "Capstone Russian Hybrid Warfare Capstone Project Prepared for United States Special Operations Command," Accessed December 9, 2023. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1123177.pdf>.

14. Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022 Special Report." <https://static.rusi.org/359-SR-Ukraine-Preliminary-Lessons-Feb-July-2022-web-final.pdf>.

15. Randy Noorman, "The Russian Way of War in Ukraine: A Military Approach Nine Decades in the Making – Modern War Institute." Modern War Institute. June 15, 2023. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-russian-way-of-war-in-ukraine-a-military-approach-nine-decades-in-the-making/>.

16. Erik Kramer and Paul Schneider, "What the Ukrainian Armed Forces Need to Do to Win", War on the Rocks. June 2, 2023. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/06/what-the-ukrainian-armed-forces-need-to-do-to-win/>.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO AND THE U.S.

- **Strategic Reassessment:** NATO's defense posture has changed in response to Russian tactics in Ukraine's ongoing civil war, prompting a strategic review of NATO's deterrence and defense posture to improve security while assuring allies. NATO has significantly strengthened its deterrence and defense posture through an effective mix of nuclear, conventional, and missile defense and space and cyber capabilities. NATO has activated and enhanced its response forces. It is more prepared than ever to deal with threats coming from all directions, from tripwire defenses to more modest forward defense postures – demonstrating NATO's unambiguous pledge to defend alliance territory and deter aggression.¹⁷
- **U.S. Policy Adjustments:** U.S. officials have made several notable adjustments in their approach toward Ukraine, such as providing military aid and diplomatic initiatives. The U.S. has strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has been an integral component of NATO efforts to strengthen defense and deterrence measures as part of their response. The United States has provided unprecedented military aid to Ukraine, reflecting its pledge to uphold Ukraine's fundamental right to self-defense. U.S. has made substantial diplomatic efforts to address Ukraine's ongoing war and to strengthen international response efforts¹⁸ against it, showing its strong support for Ukraine as well as its commitment to address any security implications of conflict there.¹⁹
- **The Ukraine conflict has forced NATO and the US to make substantial adjustments in defense strategy and policy responses, including military aid and diplomatic efforts, to meet this crisis.** Analyzing these developments is essential in understanding Europe's evolving security environment and

its ramifications on international stability and peace.

FUTURE SCENARIOS AND STRATEGIC CHOICES

- **Escalation Risks:** The war in Ukraine presents significant escalation risks with potential implications for U.S. and NATO policymakers. The conflict has highlighted the persistence of inadvertent escalation, emphasizing the value of maintaining open lines of military and diplomatic communications with Russia to disrupt such spirals. The involvement of nuclear-armed states in the conflict has raised concerns about the potential for nuclear escalation, prompting a review of crisis stability and arms race stability. Analysis has focused heavily on interactions between conventional warfare and potential nuclear use as part of U.S./NATO-Russian strategic stability considerations. The potential for inadvertent escalation will likely persist, underscoring the need for robust crisis management and arms control measures.²⁰
- **Diplomatic Solutions:** Prospects and challenges associated with diplomatic solutions for Ukraine's conflict are significant. The war has caused humanitarian suffering while raising questions over potential settlement agreements. The ultimate impact of the conflict remains uncertain, and its diplomatic resolution remains complex. Russia, Ukraine, the U.S., and NATO are all stakeholders involved in this conflict, thus underscoring the necessity of sustained diplomatic efforts to address its root causes and forge a peaceful resolution. Gaining an understanding of possible negotiated settlement outcomes as well as any risks of wider warfare between these actors is imperative for shaping policy responses and mitigating the humanitarian and security impacts of this conflict.²¹

17. NATO, "Deterrence and Defence." NATO. 2023. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_133127.htm.

18. Ibid.

19. NATO, "NATO's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." NATO. 2023. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm#.

20. Mary Chestnut, "US/NATO-Russian Strategic Stability and the War in Ukraine." @CNA_org. <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/06/us-nato-russian-strategic-stability-in-ukraine>.

21. "Russia's War in Ukraine: Insights from RAND." RAND.org. 2022. <https://www.rand.org/latest/russia-ukraine.html>.

- **The war in Ukraine presents significant escalation risks** and underlines the necessity of sustained diplomatic efforts to address it. With nuclear-armed states potentially involved, its inadvertent escalation underlines the importance of robust crisis management, arms control measures, and sustained diplomatic engagement efforts to address it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

U.S. interests in Europe are being affected by the Ukraine conflict through U.S. engagement across its entirety, from military assistance and engagement to economic engagement. While Europe remains safe, prosperous, and free, its security environment and balance of power may be altered due to this dispute. The United States has a vested interest in preventing the rise of an adversarial hegemonic rival in Europe and protecting access to prosperous markets. The conflict has also necessitated a comprehensive assessment of NATO's defense posture with an eye toward strengthening security while assuaging alliance members' worries. The U.S. remains deeply committed to upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its European allies, with Ukraine serving as an illustration of this commitment.²² Additionally, recent events in Ukraine have demonstrated the need for an aggressive forward defense posture to deter aggression and maintain stability across Europe.²³

Based on this analysis, the following are possible policy suggestions for the United States:

- **Maintain a Strong and Forward Defense Posture:** The U.S. should prioritize maintaining a robust defense posture in Europe in order to reassure its allies and deter aggression, with particular attention paid to strengthening NATO's defense and deterrence capabilities through appropriate combinations of nuclear, conventional, and missile defense capabilities.

- **Maintain Diplomatic Efforts:** The U.S. should sustain diplomatic efforts in Ukraine in order to resolve it peacefully and address its causes, engaging key players like Russia, Ukraine, and European allies as needed in order to understand underlying causes and mitigate war risk and nuclear escalation risks.
- **Foster European Autonomy:** To facilitate European autonomy, the U.S. should encourage its European allies to share in their defense burden and build up their military capabilities equitably within NATO. This includes addressing weaknesses in defense spending and encouraging a more equitable distribution of defensive responsibilities within NATO.

These policy recommendations are informed by the strategic significance of this conflict for U.S. interests in Europe and its implications for international security and stability.

CONCLUSION

The conflict in Ukraine holds substantial strategic repercussions for U.S. interests as it directly threatens European and global stability. The U.S. has an interest in keeping the conflict within Ukraine to prevent wider regional destabilization; furthermore it supports upholding territorial integrity as an international norm; additionally the conflict acts as a test case to show that aggression doesn't pay, further reinforcing U.S. commitments to norms and stability.²⁴

Following these findings, it is suggested that the United States maintain a strong and forward defense posture in Europe to reassure allies and deter further aggression. Sustained diplomatic efforts should also be maintained to address Ukraine's conflict peacefully; furthermore, Europe allies should be encouraged to share in their defense efforts by increasing military capabilities for mutual defense, thus creating more equitable distribution of defense responsibilities within NATO.²⁵

22. Europe, "Defense Priorities." Defense Priorities. 2019. <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/us-interests-in-europe-and-the-future-of-nato>.

23. O'Hanlon, Michael E., "Strengthening the US and NATO Defense Postures in Europe after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." Brookings. June 21, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/strengthening-the-us-and-nato-defense-postures-in-europe-after-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

24. Joshua Shiffrin, "What Is America's Interest in the Ukraine War?" MIT Center for International Studies." MIT.edu, <https://cis.mit.edu/publications/analysis-opinion/2022/what-americas-interest-ukraine-war>.

25. Jagannath Panda, "Preserving Europe's Interests amid U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry – Institute for Security and Development Policy." Institute for Security and Development Policy. October 18, 2023. <https://www.isdp.eu/preserving-europes-interests-amid-u-s-china-strategic-rivalry/>.

The Ukrainian crisis highlights the intersection between U.S. and European strategic interests, especially regarding stability and security in the region, as well as strengthening transatlantic partnerships. By upholding shared interests and reinforcing transatlantic partnerships, the United States can ensure its European allies continue to be secure while also furthering its larger strategic objectives in an ever-evolving international system.

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