

Interwar Adaptations: Leveraging Partner Experiences for Future Conflicts

Description

The War in Ukraine has precipitated massive shifts in warfighting methodologies, highlighting the utility of the [irregular approach](#) in peer-level combat. While waging a counterattack throughout last month, Ukrainian forces [relied on](#) reconnaissance capabilities and small group infantry assaults to develop an asymmetric advantage. This most recent battlefield activity builds on a trend that has emerged since the 2022 Russian invasion. Massed [mechanized assaults](#) have almost disappeared from the frontlines, while [drone warfare](#) and [electronic warfare](#) have become new nexuses of combat power. The Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) have become adept at [launching](#) long-range strategic strikes using Small Unmanned Aerial Systems (sUAS), [performing](#) Suppression of Enemy Air Defense, [targeting](#) Russian infrastructure in rear areas, and even [launching](#) social media campaigns as a form of Military Information Support Operations, among [other](#) notable irregular capabilities. Each of these tasks represents a capability crucial to the US Army's [vision](#) for Multi-Domain Operations. While the United States learns valuable lessons through its materiel support via security assistance programs, the fullest value of its partnership can only be realized by leveraging human programs that institutionalize knowledge exchange between the UAF and the Department of War (DoW). Successful programs during the American Revolution, the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terrorism have proven the benefits of personnel exchanges. Just as the United States has historically [implemented](#) lessons from its global allies, the DoW must leverage the experiences of its partners in the UAF via the DoW's [Military Personnel Exchange Program](#) (MPEP).

Historical Precedent

Since the American Revolution, foreign officers with combat experience and training in military theory have contributed to the United States's success on the battlefield. Notable figures [include](#) Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben and the Marquis de Lafayette. Von Steuben, a Prussian veteran of the Seven Years's War, went on to publish the Continental Army's ["Blue Book,"](#) a foundational text for all citizen-soldiers of the Continental Army. Today, the ["Blue Book"](#) still exists in various forms throughout the US Army. More specific to irregular warfare, the Marquis de Lafayette, another European aristocrat with a formal military education, was also a [key leader](#) of the Continental Army and led American soldiers to victory against British forces on several occasions. As a key advisor to Washington, he [orchestrated](#) ambush attacks, [led](#) reconnaissance forces, and even planned tentative [direct action raids](#) onto the British Isles.

During World War II, Major General William Donovan drew upon his experience as an observer in Spain to leverage foreign, combat-experienced veterans upon his founding of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The Spanish Civil War, spanning from 1936 to 1939, [provided](#) a proving ground for the Soviet and Axis powers with adversaries developing groundbreaking doctrine on combined arms operations, combat aviation, and irregular warfare. After the war, Donovan [remarked](#), "I looked at the situation in Spain, because it was very evident to anyone who could understand that the Civil War was a laboratory for testing out what was going to be done during the new war." Inspired by his Spanish experiences, Donovan sought out subject matter experts from diverse backgrounds, including [British colonial policemen](#), [Spanish Civil War guerrilla leaders](#), and [Tsarist Russian officers](#). These veterans [shared](#) lessons learned about Spanish sabotage techniques and Soviet guerrilla doctrine, and also [validated](#) OSS force structure as the United States prepared to enter the Second World War.

Veterans of foreign conflicts remained at the tip of the United States' clandestine and irregular warfare apparatuses into the Cold War, facilitated by the passage of the [Lodge-Philbin Act](#) in 1950. The Lodge-Philbin Act permitted the recruitment of foreign nationals into the United States Army in a bid to [leverage](#) Eastern Bloc and Central European citizens' cultural knowledge, language skills, and even previous battlefield experience characteristics that [play](#) a key role in irregular warfare. As a result, many of the soldiers who first joined Army Special Forces upon its foundation in 1952 were international enlistees from the Lodge Act, [institutionalizing](#) unique cultural and tactical knowledge that would not have been possible in a homogenous, American-only organization.

More recent efforts to integrate foreign battlefield and cultural experiences into the Army (such as [the MAVNI program](#)) have had mixed success due to concerns over [information security](#). Lessons from the MAVNI program, however, can help to mitigate information security risks during the integration of foreign MPEP personnel, who will have lower clearance requirements than MAVNI enlistees. In an era as dynamic and tumultuous as the 21st century, the DoW cannot afford to overlook the lessons our partners and competitors have already learned.

Policy Recommendation

In keeping with this legacy of cooperation and innovation, the Army should institute a formal exchange program for onboarding UAF veterans of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The Military Personnel Exchange Program is a promising candidate for such an effort, with MPEP allowing the US Army to exchange American officers/NCOs with foreign counterparts in both operational and generating force assignments. These personnel would serve as instructors and consultants at our Centers of Excellence, from the Navy's [Irregular Warfare Center of Excellence](#) to traditional Army Transformation and Training Command formations such as the Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fires Center of Excellence. Such an exchange would facilitate a knowledge transfer of the most

cutting-edge battlefield developments, ensure that existing curricula are relevant and applicable to modern challenges, and enable the rapid dissemination of that information into the operational Army. By incorporating the experience of Ukrainian combatants, the Army can improve the realism, practicality, and efficacy of its training and doctrine.

The implementation of MPEP personnel, however, does not have to end at training or doctrine development. MPEP personnel currently [serve](#) in a variety of operational assignments throughout our Army, particularly at many division headquarters. Onboarding foreign MPEP personnel at echelons below brigade provides an opportunity to enhance the exchange of tactics and doctrine at the tactical level and offers immense opportunities for mutual benefit:

- MPEP billets in US battalion-level formations will insert leaders with experience operating in modern, resource-constricted, and highly denied Operational Environments at points of friction.
- Partner nations will receive American officers and NCOs with extensive knowledge of operating and fighting with US equipment. As an example, US materiel now [makes up](#) approximately 30% of the Ukrainian arsenal.
- US officers embedded in NATO formations in Eastern Europe will have an opportunity to observe the constantly evolving nature of the modern Operational Environment and return to their units with a better understanding of how to adapt to new battlefield developments.
- UAF officers on exchange with American units will have an opportunity to observe US modernization initiatives (such as [Transformation in Contact](#)), which they can draw inspiration from following their return home.
- In newly raised American UAS or Multi-Domain Task Force formations, embedded Ukrainians will be able to [impart](#) some of their experience developing targeting processes and share best practices.

At the company level, the benefits of these exchanges become even more potent. American junior officers undergoing training at Basic Officer Leader Course or Captains Career Course already encounter [International Military Student Officers](#) with extensive combat experience. They may encounter Jordanian Special Forces lieutenants who had conducted Direct Action raids against militant groups weeks prior to reporting to the Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course, Ukrainian border guard officers who were manning trenches mere months before coming to Fort Benning, or Korean infantry captains who had spent years leading patrols on the DMZ before attending the Maneuver Captains Career Course. While exposure to these individuals in a training environment is beneficial, there could be even greater value in distributing them throughout the operational force. Lower echelon exchanges would enable partner forces to identify features of US platoons and companies they would like to implement back home and would act as sounding boards for our own doctrine and best practices.

For Special Operations Forces, the same benefits of personnel exchange exist today as they did for [Detachment A](#) in 1950s West Berlin: training on the most cutting-edge TTPs, absorbing firsthand cultural and language knowledge, and building unparalleled interoperability with partner forces. Special Operations Command writ large already maintains exchanges, both via regular Joint Combined Exchange Trainings, ongoing MPEP exchanges, and even their own Special Operations Liaisons that [embed](#) within allied SOF formations. While SOCOM is already far ahead of the conventional force in facilitating knowledge transfer with partners, it too could be well served by deepening existing exchanges and dispersing partner servicemembers down to the Operational Detachments-A, Platoon, or Team levels.

The Army's sister services stand to gain even more through MPEP exchanges. Lacking its own navy, the UAF has come close to crippling one of the most powerful naval forces in the world, [inflicting](#) immense losses with innovative new anti-ship drones and munitions. The US Air Force, having recently completed training a cohort of Ukrainian F-16 pilots, is already [learning](#) from the UAF's fielding efforts of US fixed-wing platforms on its battlefields. The Marine Corps, like the Army, also stands to benefit from the tactics, techniques, and procedures that Ukrainian servicemembers have [developed](#) through their own amphibious operations. Because of the expansive scope of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict, the benefits of personnel exchanges have the potential to be of immense value to each of the services.

While commanders and senior leaders may be hesitant to give foreign personnel access to leadership roles in their formations or to send our capable officers/NCOs on assignment to foreign militaries interoperability has always been a core tenet of the American way of war. The vast majority of our engagements over the past century have been conducted with allies and the United States [remains](#) the only member of NATO to invoke Article 5. Expanding MPEP is not only an operational necessity, but [serves](#) as a tribute to the United States Armed Forces' historic legacy and status as an international partner of choice.

Conclusion

As tactics and doctrine continue to [evolve](#) in Europe, the Department of War should institutionalize lessons learned in Ukraine in order to maintain a competitive edge over potential adversaries. The advantages of MPEP are comprehensive and bidirectional. An opportunity exists for both nations to leverage partner experience and address knowledge gaps that would otherwise remain undiscovered. As the US Army institutes its Transformation Initiative and sister services conduct their own modernization efforts, they may find that there is no substitute for hard-earned combat experience.

Department of War leaders should remember that interoperability has long been a cornerstone of the American way of war. If the United States expects to fight and win alongside its allies in future conflicts, it must be prepared to seamlessly integrate these allies into its Warfighting Functions through shared doctrine and training. While the adage goes that “experience is the best teacher,” it does not have to be our own blood that pays tuition. By embedding Ukrainian veterans through MPEP, the United States can ensure the US Army learns the right lessons now—before the next war comes to test us.

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Main Image: Ukrainian special forces wave to pilots from the 101st Combat Aviation Brigade during Exercise Combined Resolve 14 at Hohenfels, Germany, September 24, 2020. Courtesy of [DVIDS](#).

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