

# Over-the-Horizon and Under the Threshold: Bringing Unconventional Warfare to Ukraine

## Description

Hannah Lamb

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With the Russo-Ukrainian conflict now in its second year and devolving into a war of attrition, what direction should US policy in Ukraine take? While Congress seems, for now, [united in a collective purpose](#) and the Biden administration has been adamant in its support, US intervention has significant limitations. Escalation risk not only prevents the United States and its NATO partners from responding in a direct, conventional manner but also limits the types of external assistance the West is willing to provide. [Russian nuclear capabilities](#) are disconcerting, while policymakers seem fearful of overstepping an invisible line with an American public suffering from [War on Terror syndrome](#). But the war is at a critical juncture, with Ukrainian forces suffering [heavy casualties](#) while strained logistics and dwindling munitions increasingly pressure Kyiv's government. The urgent but sensitive nature of external Western intervention renders the challenge particularly conducive to a semi-doctrinal implementation of unconventional warfare (UW). An over-the-horizon UW campaign has potential to address the [National Defense Strategy](#) priority of limiting the expansion of adversarial spheres of influence, while simultaneously maintaining the Biden administration's promise that it [will not insert American soldiers into Ukraine](#). This approach would entail the training and equipping of irregular Ukrainian fighters outside Ukraine in order to subvert the occupying force and, potentially, create horizontal escalation opportunities in third states where Russia is vulnerable.

## Unconventional Warfare's Role in Great Power Conflict

Where there is strife between great powers, there is irregular war or proxy conflict in third states. Lingering Cold War tensions [manifest in Syria and Iraq](#) while China [puppets African infrastructure](#) policy to set roots of influence and bolsters its [presence in the South China Sea](#). Great power rivalry

lives in the [“gray zone”](#): states operate below the threshold of war, but aggressively compete to expand influence and control. Conventional war often first manifests in low-intensity conflict, where states seek to [undermine competitors’ interests](#) without the costs of direct action. The United States and France have extensive [special operations commitments in Africa](#). These efforts increasingly collide with expansive Chinese policies aimed at securing economic interests and Russian deployments of private military companies that usurp Western security relationships. Invading Ukraine, though foolhardy, was also a means for Russia to undermine the United States and NATO through actions in a non-allied state and to expand Russia’s strategic depth.

Unconventional warfare is a unique way to respond to this aggression, subverting Russia’s actions while avoiding the conventional escalation dilemma. Doctrine [defines unconventional warfare](#) as “operations conducted by, with, or through irregular forces in support of a resistance movement, an insurgency, or conventional military operations,” with the [intent of](#) “exploit[ing] a hostile power’s political, military, economic, and psychological vulnerability by developing and sustaining resistance forces to accomplish US strategic objectives.” UW is foundational to special operations, [rooted in World War II](#) with the training and equipping of resistance forces throughout Europe by the British Special Operations Executive and the American Office of Strategic Services. In Ukraine, a UW campaign could serve to combat Russia’s hegemonic intent without placing American soldiers into direct action.

Ukrainian resistance has shocked the international community with its defensive tenacity. The Ukrainian citizenry’s will to resist, a key component in UW doctrine, is laudable. The government in Kyiv, however, is very much aware that its military [requires more robust support](#) as fighting drags on. Advanced weaponry and other materiel provisions from allies [are making a difference](#). Unconventional warfare would supplement this assistance, leveraging the Ukrainian resistance to develop greater guerilla warfare, sabotage, and subversion capabilities to augment the considerable skills of Ukrainian special operations forces. This increased resistance capacity could be particularly valuable in Crimea or places that have come under Russian occupation. Historically, these types of efforts have effectively degraded the morale of an invading force [while disrupting its movements](#), communications, and control. Observers of this war are beginning to witness the psychological impact of [covert attacks deep into Russia-held territory](#).

### **Remote Unconventional Warfare: Over-the-Horizon and Under the Threshold**

From the 2014 invasion of Crimea [up to the recent Russian aggression](#), a cadre of 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group Green Berets worked to train Ukrainian special operators in all facets of warfare. US Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs elements formed additional partnerships to modernize the nation’s practices from Soviet-era doctrine and tactics. These efforts had positive impacts on both

the effectiveness of Ukrainian forces and the creation of [pipelines for funneling weapons and supplies](#) to Ukrainian formations. However, the physical threat of remaining in a Ukraine under siege resulted in a pullback of American involvement as Russia prepared its invasion. Today, reports vary on the existence of [US operators](#) and [NATO units inside Ukraine](#). At one point, officials [walked back the president's comments](#) on US involvement. Any training that is occurring in third countries seems largely [oriented on conventional forces](#). A robust program to train Ukrainian irregulars in third states is a viable alternative not likely underway. Importantly, irregulars should develop not only defensive capabilities but also those enabling an increase in sensational attacks in the Russian rear. Additionally, though downside risks require careful consideration, horizontal escalation of irregular efforts in geographies outside of Ukraine could reveal Russia's vulnerability, increase public scrutiny, and divert forces from the Ukraine fight.

The utilization of US special forces as trainers in neighboring states has potential to provide critical training in advanced weapon systems, resistance organization, sabotage, and guerrilla tactics. These training centers can be built in NATO nations like Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, where governmental support is likely and Russia is unlikely to strike due to the Kremlin's own fears of escalation. Existing US conventional units on rotation in Europe can provide logistical and intelligence support to the smaller special operations teams. US special operations forces (SOF) would be supplemented by allied organizations like the British Special Air Service and units from other NATO partners. Baltic special operations forces, for instance, could be particularly useful having spent a decade developing [total defense, resistance-based UW concepts](#) with US assistance. Ideally, regional teams could be formed and tied to existing social networks in different Ukrainian population centers.

There are some drawbacks to this potential approach. Training Ukrainian irregulars in neighboring countries will be logistically difficult and require successful coordination between the United States, Kyiv, and third states in volatile landscapes. For Ukraine, taking individuals away from the frontlines will come at a cost. Placing small operational detachments, like [Jedburgh](#) teams, forward in Ukraine would fix both problems but put American forces in harm's way. While challenging, making efforts to remove fighters only from regions not actively under siege could build capacity without sacrificing defensive capability. Politically, it is possible that large-scale training of Ukrainian forces would be perceived as escalation by Russia. If deemed politically necessary, this mission could be performed under Title 50 approvals, maintaining a covert profile as American personnel provide discrete support to counter Russian aggression.

### **Total UW: Expanding Unconventional Warfare to a Whole-of-SOF Effort**

War today is, of course, not won solely on the battlefield. The informational and civil spheres require more attention than previous conflicts: Ukraine is as much an arms race of influence as munitions.

Utilizing the full capabilities of American SOF will greatly benefit the Ukrainian cause. In concert with the coordinated economic and political efforts of Western governments, SOF capabilities can contribute greatly in these spaces.

In the modern era, the proliferation of strategic messaging through the internet is critical in shaping the narrative of conflict. [Ukrainian government agencies](#) actively push information campaigns to target disinformation and control international perception of the war. American psychological operations units frequently [use messaging to degrade enemy combat power](#). Remote use of this capability to complement physical training efforts could be particularly impactful in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict: more than ever war is partially [fought online](#). Stories of Ukrainian heroism rally a global audience, while Russia's messaging dominates its population's concept of the invasion. Weaponizing information is a tactic of great modern utility, one that US psychological operations support can supplement and further enable.

The war in Ukraine has left [over five million](#) refugees displaced in neighboring countries, while many more are internally displaced. Adjacent states have accepted refugees but struggle to accommodate the masses inside their borders. Civil affairs units are [equipped to aid](#) foreign humanitarian assistance, civil-military engagement, and populace control. These units can impact the broader unconventional warfare mission by assisting with the coordination and management of international efforts to address the refugee crisis, allowing Ukrainian manpower to maintain a singular focus on fighting the conflict. This consideration is increasingly important as the war becomes more resource intensive. Finally, efforts to stabilize the refugee diaspora could, in turn, bring more Ukrainians into an organized resistance.

External support to the Ukrainian resistance provides a chance to build critical partnerships in Eastern Europe, assert NATO unity after a period of fragmentation, and bruise Russia's military on the global stage. Western intervention thus far has received rare, broad-based social and political support. The United States and NATO partners should go further to demonstrate commitment to preserving the sovereignty of a friendly nation at risk. Though Ukraine was not an official ally at this war's onset, unwavering assistance will go a long way in shoring up member-nation confidence in the modern relevance of the alliance. It would also signal to other states that the West will not tolerate unwarranted breaches of sovereignty. States with territorial ambitions are taking notes on the US and NATO response to the Russo-Ukraine war. The implementation of a successful unconventional warfare campaign would increase the costs of this incursion to Russia and deter future malign actors. An investment now may well bear a compounding return for future global stability.

*Hannah Lamb is a cadet at the United States Military Academy in the Class of 2023. She studies civil engineering with a minor in counterterrorism. She is currently researching how flawed infrastructure*

*development policy in Iraq and Afghanistan fueled Islamist radicalization. She will commission as an Army aviation officer in May.*

Photo: Ukrainian special forces training in Germany, September 13, 2020. US Army photo by Sgt Patrik Orcutt.

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