

# Snakes, Stamps, and Javelins: How Ukrainian Information and Influence Operations Brought the Fight to Russia

## Description

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On the cusp of a springtime counteroffensive, Ukraine has defied expectations in its defense against Russia's invasion. From predictions of an imminent Ukrainian collapse on the eve of invasion to a Ukrainian army that is now set to receive Abrams tanks, foreign aid has bolstered Ukrainian forces who have shown remarkable bravery. But behind this coalition of support stands an unsung hero: Ukraine's effective information operations.

Ukrainian efforts highlight that information and influence operations, when targeted at neutral or sympathetic nations, are invaluable to securing international support and military assistance. Amplifying events such as the defiant stand of Ukrainian soldiers at Snake Island in February 2022 has helped Ukraine secure and retain the support of foreign publics and leaders. Ukraine's whole-of-government information efforts should reignite the debate of how the United States conceptualizes and organizes its information capabilities. From military information operations to public diplomacy, Ukraine has shown that these capabilities are an important tool of national power.

The United States should use the lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War to reorient, reprioritize, and reinvigorate its information efforts focused on friendly nations. This would include a national strategy for public diplomacy and information—one fit for this era of strategic competition. Such a strategy would allow the United States to better engage with allies and partners in building support against adversaries and threats. Further, increasing funding for information operations would help the US government keep pace with peer and near-peer competitors, like China, who aggressively fund and propagate their worldview. This threat has significant implications for US partners—particularly Taiwan—who face formidable challenges in effective messaging. Finally, the US must standardize and coordinate information operations across the whole-of-government. In the United States, public diplomacy and military information operations should work in tandem to achieve the government's objectives.

## Understanding Information Operations

Information Operations, broadly, are the use of information to gain competitive advantage for influence and effective decision-making by one's own side, relative to potential adversaries. Two main actors – the Department of Defense and the State Department – oversee most of these operations; yet their definitions of what they comprise differ greatly. The US has [no consistent definition](#) of what, exactly, these operations are.

[According to the Defense Department](#), information operations – influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own. • In contrast, the State Department's wider public diplomacy mandate attempts to – [advance national interests by seeking to engage, inform, and understand the perspectives of foreign audiences](#). • Unlike traditional diplomacy between government officials, the emphasis here is on public engagement.

Not only do these diverging definitions reveal a disjointed approach to information operations within the US government, but these narrow views are also limiting: the military's emphasis on adversary-driven operations fails to acknowledge the role of information operations among friendly nations. Not all information operations are malicious, and the information environment, even among allies, is a contested space. The State Department is less discriminating between friend and foe in its public diplomacy efforts. However, the notion of either overt or covert attempts at influence is generally viewed as [detrimental to its](#) mission. Unsurprisingly, the word – influence – is missing from its public diplomacy mandate.

The struggle to better coordinate information operations isn't new. Military information efforts have traditionally been [sidelined after major conflicts](#), and DoD remains embroiled in an [ever-constant debate about what information warfare entails](#). Information efforts in friendly nations were historically the purview of the US Information Agency, which was established in the early years of the Cold War to integrate information capabilities and – [to understand, inform, and influence foreign communities](#) – in line with national foreign policy objectives. However, the end of the Cold War expedited the demise of the vast infrastructure and budget of the USIA. By 1999 the agency was disbanded, and the State Department assumed control of most public diplomacy efforts. Once absorbed, public diplomacy lost priority. Because of tensions ranging from shared budgets to cultural differences, the merging of the two entities reduced resourcing for US information efforts around the world. Since the agency's closure, information operations have seen a steady decline in funding. When adjusted for inflation, the [peak USIA budget of \\$1.5 billion in the mid-1990s](#) would be closer to \$3 billion today. By contrast, the most recent report from 2021 had the [US public diplomacy budget at just \\$2.1 billion](#), and the budget estimate for military information operations in 2023 is [approximately \\$250 million](#).

These efforts also suffer from a lack of leadership. For example, the position of Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has been [vacant for roughly 40 percent of the time](#) since the State Department took the lead in 1999. Without consistent leadership to guide the agency through challenges and controversies during the War on Terror, US public diplomacy has lacked the clear mission and consistent support required for strategic competition.

## Ukraine's Use of Information

Ukrainian operations underscore the importance of maintaining robust information capabilities in neutral or friendly states. Since the beginning of the war last year, the Ukrainian government has deftly used compelling narratives, such as that of the [Snake Island](#) defenders and the [sinking of the Russian warship Moskva](#), to showcase the country's existential struggle and to shape the narrative that it's a worthy partner, deserving of international support.

### From Postage Stamps to Missiles

On the first day of the invasion last year, Ukraine's small military contingent on the island of *Zmiinyi*, or Snake Island, found itself in the crosshairs of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Surrounded, the Ukrainian defenders received an ultimatum from the Russian vessels, including the Black Sea Fleet's flagship *Moskva*, to surrender or be bombed to submission. The Ukrainian defenders replied succinctly, with a phrase roughly translating to, ["Russian warship, go f--- yourself."](#)• The story and Hollywood-esque one-liner not only galvanized the Ukrainian people but also became an influential message used to build international support.

In the early days of the war, Russian propaganda fueled speculation that [President Zelensky had fled Kyiv](#), and US intelligence expected the government to [collapse within days](#). US officials were already preparing plans to [support an insurgency](#) after the fall of Ukraine. This Western pessimism frustrated Ukrainian officials who understood their position was [untenable without international support](#).

Achieving success in information environments was, therefore, critical to minimizing despair and projecting an image of resilience, which in turn were critical to resisting Russia's invasion. With the Snake Island story, the Ukrainian government transformed a strategic loss in the initial stages of the conflict into a powerful informational tool. Ukrainian officials posted the defiantly crass words of the soldiers on social media platforms, racking up thousands of likes and shares. The [audio recording would eventually go viral, garnering millions of views](#). [Other official channels](#), including the [Ukrainian Strategic Communications Centre](#) and a [cadre of embassies around the world](#), supplemented this guerilla marketing campaign. The message of Ukrainian resolve resonated with international partners.

[Senior US defense officials](#), [members of Congress](#), [foreign ambassadors](#), and, more recently, a [Latvian MP at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly](#) have all used the tale of Snake Island to inspire support for Ukraine.

The sinking of the Battlecruiser *Moskva* by two Neptune anti-ship missiles in the Black Sea in April of last year was similarly leveraged by Ukrainian [defense officials](#) and [news media](#) as evidence of Ukraine's military prowess and resilience. Memes depicting the attack were [tweeted by Ukraine's defense forces](#) and a stamp depicting the incident was [given to the UK Defence Secretary](#). The *Moskva* sinking not only tarnished the image of the Russian navy, but also shattered the myth of Russian supremacy in the Black Sea. Hailed as karmic justice, Ukrainian information operations amplified the victory in its messaging. Reinforcing this narrative shift, in turn, fueled political support and became a powerful symbol that resonated with the international community.

These information campaigns and stories spurred the growth of critical support networks for Ukraine that have helped purchase [equipment and training for soldiers](#), [along with drones](#) and [medical supplies](#). For example, Ukraine put the imagery of Snake Island to use in crowdfunding efforts around the world. [Marketed on Twitter by the government](#), signed stamps showcasing the incident were auctioned, ultimately garnering [\\$170,000 from international bids](#). [Flags, hats](#), and [other memorabilia](#) adorned with Snake Island are part of a wider campaign that has raised millions of dollars for Ukraine and these efforts show no signs of slowing. Support has not been limited to funding, either. Using the Snake Island defenders' last words, an inspired [Georgian maintenance ship even refused to refuel a Russian ship](#).

While it is difficult to measure the impact of information operations on high-level decision-making, the Ukrainian government has widely employed stories such as that of Snake Island and the *Moskva* in its messaging to allies. The success of the country's information campaign in generating awareness and developing pro-Ukrainian sentiment is meaningful, and likely has contributed to the scale of foreign aid received thus far. The United States alone has [provided over \\$75 billion in aid, while E.U. Institutions and member states have contributed around \\$60 billion as of February 2023](#). Ukraine's partners have also provided weaponry ranging from US High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and Javelin anti-tank missiles to the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone. The delivery of modern equipment and weapons helped turn a Ukrainian military built from Soviet surplus into one with the ability to challenge Russian military might.

## Reimagining Influence for Defense and Diplomacy

Ukraine's success in influencing public opinion in friendly nations should act as a catalyst for the United States to reinvigorate its own information capabilities. While the United States has helped sway other states in support of Ukraine, this level of influence is not guaranteed in the long term. Even within NATO, [there has been debate](#) and [dissent among member states](#) regarding their role in the conflict. Domestic political concerns, economic pressures, and a variety of other factors have a significant impact on how nations perceive even shared threats. Outside of NATO, this is even more pronounced, as can be seen with the [coordination of Chinese and Russian propaganda](#) on Ukraine and its sometimes favorable reception in [Latin America](#) and [Africa](#).

There is [little doubt that US information efforts could benefit from better coordination, reprioritization, and focus](#) on the issues facing the United States in the 21st century. [Information capabilities are at least as important now as they were during the Cold War](#). Reminiscent of this bygone era of systemic competition, the Biden Administration's [2022 National Security Strategy](#) identifies authoritarian powers as "the most pressing strategic challenge" facing the United States and the rules-based international order. Effective messaging will prove consequential as the United States contends with capable competitors that weaponize information to undermine international security and weaken democracy worldwide.

Efforts to address this challenge should be open and honest. Ukrainian information operations show that informational engagement with allies and partners is one of the best ways to counter these malign powers. While adversaries promote false narratives, the United States should transparently leverage and expand its information apparatus to inform and build support for US policies.

The United States already has proof that targeted information campaigns work. The Biden Administration [released intelligence prior](#) to the Russian invasion last year that showed significant build-ups of Russian forces along Ukraine's borders, which established a powerful narrative of Russian aggression. The DoD and State Department should build on this proven success. Competitors, such as China, see information warfare as an essential component of international relations. The United States should take a similar view if it wants to effectively compete for influence in the information domain. To do this, the US government should develop a national strategy for public diplomacy and the information domain to align and amplify interagency efforts to inform, influence, and coalesce support among allies. This will be critical to forming the "strongest possible coalitions," outlined in the National Security Strategy.

Once the United States develops a cohesive strategy for information operations, its information infrastructure should be revitalized. Coordination could take place within the National Security Council, which would help to better integrate these efforts across the US government. Oversight of government information operations in a multi-agency forum could also ensure better alignment between policies

and the information strategy needed to support them. [As others have suggested](#), multi-agency groups such as the State Department's Global Engagement Center, which currently [focus on countering malign adversary influence](#), could also support US efforts in friendly information environments.

As Ukraine has shown, military information operations and public diplomacy efforts require close coordination, as these efforts increasingly engage with similar audiences. And the impact of social media cannot be understated. From viral videos of Russian war crimes to TikToks of soldiers dancing, military operations and stories are increasingly available and influential to the public. Learning from Ukraine, the US military could create a cadre of [content-creating](#) soldiers, for example, to influence and inform friendly audiences of US policy and feed content across the US government using institutionalized information-sharing pipelines. The synchronization of military and diplomatic information operations is a potent feature of Ukraine's efforts. It should shape the United States' own information campaigns going forward.

The United States' ability to revamp its information operations will have significant impact on potential future conflicts, such as in Taiwan. Adversaries like China are watching closely and learning from both Russia's costly mistakes and Ukraine's effective innovations. Granted, Ukraine benefits from its proximity to NATO and the European Union, while Taiwan suffers from a stronger adversary and a weaker regional support network. However, these differences only make the role of information more important. For example, China, at present, is significantly more capable than Taiwan at influencing regional actors. The ability of Taiwan and the United States to muster international support in the face of Chinese aggression will be essential. The Chinese Communist Party will, no doubt, try to exploit divisions and weaken international resolve in support of Taiwan. Learning from Ukraine's informational success will allow the United States to broaden international understanding and support for democratic partners, like Taiwan, who are under threat.

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